

The Crying Winds

ACCOUNTING FOR THE TERROIR-DRIVEN CHARACTER OF **SANTA LUCIA HIGHLANDS PINOT NOIR**

story and photo by Randy Caparoso

One of the higher-elevation plantings in the blustery Santa Lucia Highlands AVA.

“AND THE WIND,” Jimi Hendrix famously sang, “cries Mary.” I’ve never figured out exactly what that song was about—in college during the 1970s, I got off on wine, not substances—but this I knew: You could *feel* every Hendrix song, like electricity jolting every nerve.

When *The SOMM Journal* began bringing sommeliers on field trips to the Santa Lucia Highlands, I think every participant knew all too well the almost jarring impact of the region’s Pinot Noirs. These wines can only be described as extraordinarily extravagant in both fruit character and acidity, yet they’re amazingly well-balanced despite invariably high levels of alcohol typically in the 14% range.

But to fully understand the phenomena in the glass, a sommelier must first step onto the slopes of the Santa Lucia Highlands AVA itself. Once you do, you can clearly see you are on a bench looking eastward, down upon the flats of Salinas Valley and toward the jagged peaks of the Pinnacles on the opposite side. The slopes are not atypically high—starting at an elevation of 200 feet above sea level and reaching 1,200 at the highest points—but the differences in aspect and soil (rocky or sandy loams as opposed to deep clay alluviums) are stark enough to explain why the cultivation of concentrated wine grapes, as opposed to vegetables, is favorable to this part of Monterey County.

Then there is the wind—the whistling, howling, physically violent wind—that kicks up daily by mid-afternoon as it pushes down from the deep, cold waters of Monterey Bay. It then ventures northward toward the hotter pockets of Paso Robles to the south, not unlike a theater crowd racing to the exits after someone hollers, “Fire!” Everyone here cusses at the wind,” says Joe Alarid, Owner/Grower of Santa Lucia Highlands’ Tondre Grapefield, “but we wouldn’t be able to grow grapes like this without it.”

High winds and marine air account for the AVA’s cold-climate viticulture (ranking it as a Region I on the Winkler Scale), but these factors also explain a particular Pinot Noir structure. With limitations posed on active photosynthesis, growing seasons in the region are typically a good 120 days, rather than the usual 100 days experienced practically everywhere else in the world. Grape skins thickened by wind result in higher phenolics—hence, deeper flavors—and during harvest, it’s a matter of waiting for acids to drop to acceptable levels rather than waiting for sugars to rise.

In short, this explains the deliriously-rich, billowing aromas—as well as the full-scaled, acid-driven structure—of Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir. Not only that, it also accounts for the intense, distinctly-mineral, and citrus-imbued Chardonnays of the region; Chardonnay, in fact, is typically picked several weeks *after* Pinot Noir in the Santa Lucia Highlands. This longer hang-time produces deeper, European-style wines.

In the classic manner of speaking, this is *terroir* at its best and most distinctive: There is, like a “Mary,” nothing else in the world like a Santa Lucia Highlands wine. S