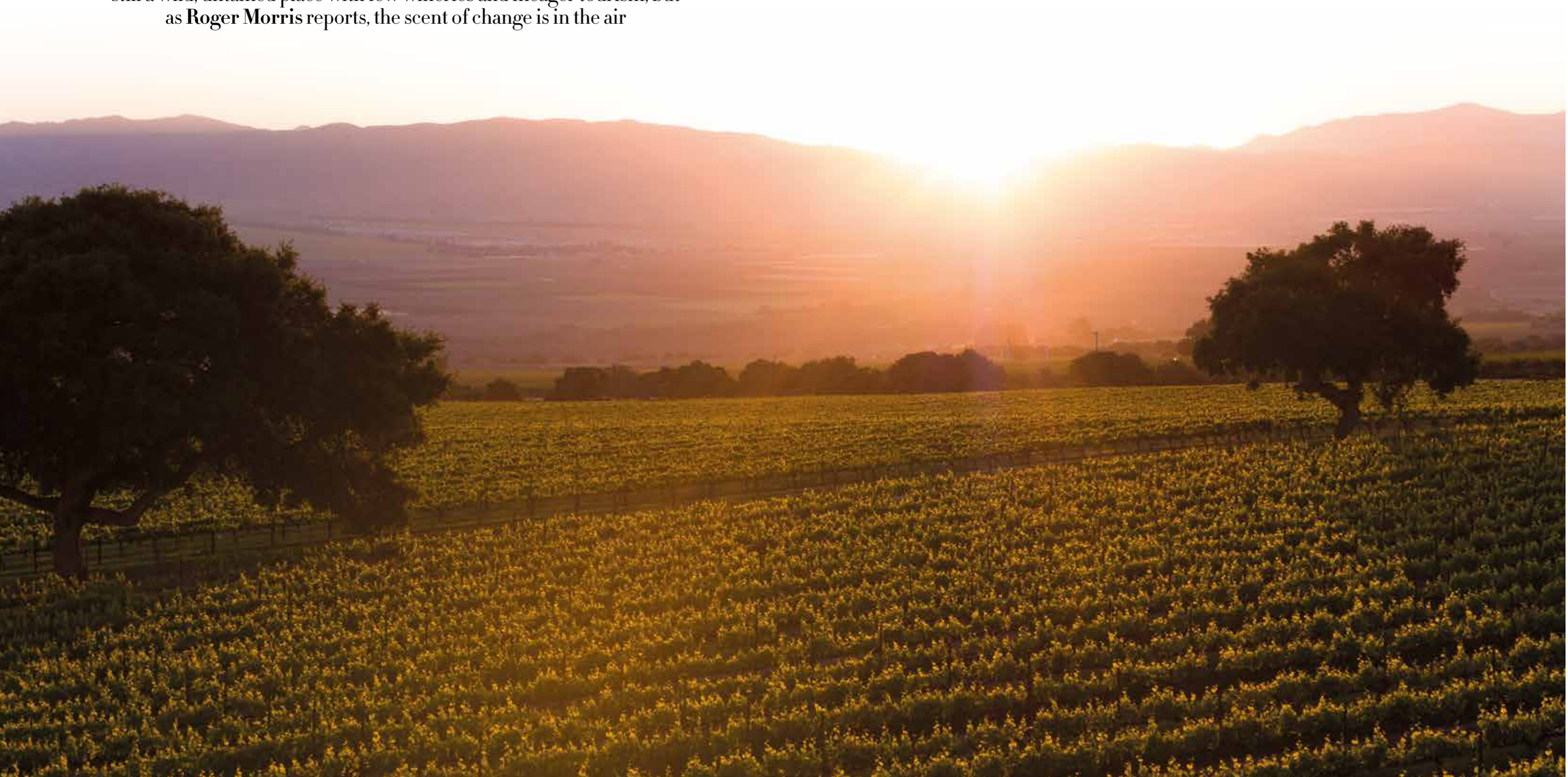


feature / **Roger Morris** / **Santa Lucia Highlands**

# AT THE TIPPING POINT: THE SANTA LUCIA HIGHLANDS

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California's Santa Lucia Highlands is an exotic region whose grapes produce some of America's greatest single-vineyard Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays. It is still a wild, untamed place with few wineries and meager tourism, but as **Roger Morris** reports, the scent of change is in the air





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California's Santa Lucia Highlands is an 18-mile (30km) stretch of rolling benchland at the eastern base of the Santa Lucia Mountains, a wild, untamed coastal range that runs south from Monterey Bay to the town of San Luis Obispo. Although the vineyards that populate the highlands in places slope downward to kiss the table-flat Salinas Valley, the highlands remain almost as wild as the mountains behind them. Every few hundred yards, the vineyards are bisected top to bottom by large gullies, or arroyos—raw gashes filled with tangled bushes and stunted trees that hark back to an ancient era when pounding rains drenched this now-dry region.

Nevertheless, over the past 30 years, the Santa Lucia Highlands has become world-famous for its single-vineyard Pinot Noirs and, to a somewhat lesser extent, its Chardonnays, some made into wine by the farmers who grow the grapes, but many produced at prestige wineries farther north in Napa Valley and Sonoma County. Among these sought-after Pinot Noirs are Kosta Browne Garys' Vineyard, Siduri Pisoni Vineyard, Hahn Family Lucienne Doctor's Vineyard, Roar Rosella's Vineyard, and Miner Family Sierra Mar Vineyard.

There is a temptation to draw parallels between the highlands and Burgundy's Côte d'Or, not just because both primarily grow the same grapes. Distinctively, not all of the wineries in either region are located adjacent to their vineyards. The grapes may be grown here but made into wine someplace else. And like the Côte d'Or, wines from the highlands are known as much by the names of the vineyards as for the vintners who produce them, the single-vineyard wines commanding high prices from collectors and connoisseurs alike. Further, the highlands face the morning sun, just as does the Côte d'Or.

But from there, similarities crumble. Unlike Burgundy, where many of the most famous vineyards have several owners, each cultivating small parcels of vines, almost all of the highlands vineyards are monopolies, the owners selling the right to print vineyard names on the labels to whoever buys the grapes. Additionally, most vines in the arid highlands are fed water by drip irrigation, while Burgundy has a surfeit of precipitation.

But the primary feature that makes the Santa Lucia Highlands different from the Côte d'Or—or any other significant wine region—is that its topography has severely stunted the highlands' commercial and cultural growth. There is only one primary two-lane highway that directly accesses the region—River Road, running north-south along the foot of the highlands. Unusually, there are few public roads within the highlands that connect one group of vineyards to another, mainly just farm lanes and driveways leading to individual plots.

As a result of this lack of easy access and interconnectivity, not only are there few wineries within the highlands, there are no consumer businesses or services there or along the River Road—no gas stations, no motels, no convenience stores, no postal offices, no rest stops, nothing to lure the lucrative tourist dollar that Santa Lucia Highlands wine growers so desperately desire. Even the owners and workers mostly live elsewhere and shop elsewhere. At the end of the day, as the evening shadows come down from the mountains, the vineyards of the highlands are virtually deserted.

But perhaps even the wild boar, venturing out of the woods into the night air, can sniff the coming changes.

### A tale of two cultures

"When I was growing up, there weren't very many vineyards on the highlands," says Bill Brosseau, the ruggedly handsome, Gallic-jawed director of winemaking for Testarossa Winery. Founded in 1993, Testarossa sources grapes from ten different vineyards on the highlands, but its winery is located more than 60 miles (100km) north at Los Gatos in Silicon Valley, the place where Testarossa's owners made their fortunes in the tech industry.

Today, there are about 50 individually owned vineyards on the highlands comprising 6,400 acres (2,600ha) of vines, primarily planted to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. The first of these vineyards was established in 1973, and the region was officially recognized as an American Viticultural Area (AVA) in 1991. Although highlands Chardonnay is higher regarded, it does not fetch the same prices or get the same attention from the media as Pinot Noir.

"Many of the first people to establish vineyards in the highlands were row-crop farmers from the valley, and most of them are still involved with both produce and vineyards," Brosseau says over a bottle of Testarossa Fogstone Pinot Noir during dinner at Fandango, a French-style restaurant on a side street in Pacific Grove, a town long regarded as the Monterey region's Bohemia.

Monterey County, first made famous during the 1930s and '40s by a native son, novelist John Steinbeck, is a land of two cultures, and the Santa Lucia Highlands is a blend of both. One culture revolves around the town of Monterey on fog-enshrouded Monterey Bay, nearby Carmel-by-the-Sea, picturesque Carmel Valley, which winds into the mountains between the highlands and the Pacific, and the golfing mecca of Pebble Beach. A former fishing and canning village, Monterey has morphed into a major tourist destination, with its giant aquarium and championship golf courses carved out of rugged Pacific coastline. The area is also the habitat of the rich and famous, many of whom own second or third residences along the rugged, semi-rural Monterey coastline.

The second culture revolves around row-crop farming—quick-growing berries and vegetables cultivated close to the ground—that spreads south from the city of Salinas up-valley for several miles past the mostly featureless farm towns of Gonzales and Soledad. With its sunny weather, rich, flat fields are kept moist from a plentiful aquifer that pumps up irrigation water, and the farms are crisscrossed by straight-line rows that stretch for hundreds of yards, only interrupted occasionally by the riverbed. Here, Monterey's Salinas Valley supplies 61 percent of America's leaf lettuce, 57 percent of its celery, 56 percent of head lettuce, and 48 percent of its broccoli. Taken altogether, farming in Monterey County is a \$4-billion business. In the scheme of things, wine grapes may have more cachet and higher social standing than lettuce and broccoli, but it is row-crop farming that economically rules the valley.

Italian-Americans, many of whose grandparents or great-grandparents migrated here in the 19th century from

Opposite: Gary Francioni, who, along with his friend Gary Pisoni, has "probably done more than anyone else to bring wine-producing fame to the highlands."



Italian-speaking sections of Switzerland, own many of these produce businesses, while most of the farm workers who plant, tend, and harvest these crops are Mexican-American citizens whose parents and grandparents came north to seek opportunities.

"I like dealing with grape growers who are farmers first," says Brosseau, who grew up on a farm in the mountains on the east side of the valley. "But those who are recent row-crop farmers face different challenges in growing grapes." As Brosseau notes, vegetable farming accentuates yield, while grape farming limits yields for better quality. "I'm sure the next generation will prefer farming grapes over raising lettuce," he says.

### Up from the valley floor

Gary Francioni detests having to use a cane, but with two hips recently replaced by mechanical joints, he has little choice but to lean on it as he climbs into a pickup truck for a tour of his vineyards. It is a chilly morning in the highlands, and Francioni wears a blue zip-up vest over a blue shirt. His hair, slightly curly and edging over the ears, is now more salt than pepper. As he turns the truck around in the driveway and heads down to River Road, he sits slightly hunched over the wheel, his left hand steering and his right hand talking.

"We're the Salad Bowl of the world, but we're also the Mildew Capital of California," Francioni says as he points to his split canopy trellising in the vines to his right. "We want the sun to get in and to keep the clusters apart, so we use canopy management instead of chemicals."

Even though both men are graying, it's still easy to imagine the two Garys as wild-ass kids out to conquer the world. The other Gary is, of course, Gary Pisoni, and these two childhood friends, who will always be linked together by people who know California wine, have probably done more than anyone else to bring wine-producing fame to the highlands.

Both men grew up in row-crop farming families on the valley floor but took to the mountainsides to grow grapes for making fine wine and, ultimately, making it themselves.

They are certainly the odd couple—Francioni the more conservative of the two and Pisoni the more rebellious, his wavy, shoulder-length hair tumbling down over his trademark Hawaiian shirt like Bette Midler's on days she uses a curling iron. Francioni is still on the job every morning, even though his two grown sons and a daughter in theory oversee the family wine business. Pisoni's two sons actually do run the family farm, vineyards, and winemaking, although—as a colleague notes—"the kids welcome it when Gary decides to show up."

"As a kid, I got to go back and forth between the two of them," says Mark Pisoni, who now heads the Pisoni businesses and lives with his wife and children in the old family farmhouse. "Gary Francioni was always the farmer, but my dad was sort of the visionary." Interestingly, the Francionis are one of the few grower families from the valley to build a home on the highlands, while the Pisonis still live on the valley floor and commute to their vineyard.

Driving south toward his Sierra Mar vineyard at the southern end of the highlands, Francioni tells a story similar to that of many other families in the valley. The Francionis have been here since the late 1880s, part of a diaspora of farmers mainly from the Swiss Alpine canton of Ticino who settled throughout northern California in the mid-19th century, many of them as dairy farmers.

In the post-Depression, postwar years, Italian-American farming families began sending their sons to college, and Francioni became a food sciences major at the University of California at San Luis Obispo. It was during a 1976 field trip to Napa Valley that he fell in love with growing wine grapes. But it was a love long deferred. "I finally got enough money together to plant our first vineyard—Rosella's—in 1996," he says.





Meanwhile, Gary Pisoni had a head start. He wasn't too interested in row crops and had the idea, which his father vigorously opposed, of growing grapes at the family's ranch in the highlands, which was then used mainly to graze horses and cattle. According to family lore, Pisoni's mother secretly financed her son as he drilled five dry holes before finally hitting water for irrigation. In 1982, Gary Pisoni planted his first vineyard in the highlands.

Once Francioni became a vineyard owner, the two childhood friends decided in 1996 to jointly buy property and plant Garys' Vineyard, which they continue to operate together more than 20 years later. "We wanted a cooler site than the Pisoni vineyard," Francioni says as he turns off to his right on a dirt road past a weather-beaten utility building. "We planted Pinot Noir and a little Syrah, but what was different was that we decided to market the vineyard by its name, which was unheard of at the time," he continues. "Gary and I discussed everything together, but I took the development side, and he went to the marketplace."

The wines made from Garys' Vineyard grapes were almost an immediate success, and today Garys' Vineyard wines produced by Miner Family, Testarossa, Pisoni's Lucia and Francioni's Roar all sell for €60 or more per bottle.

After a tortuous drive up a winding dirt path, Francioni pulls up at the edge of a large, deep arroyo. "You can see the vineyards better from here," he says. One parcel, perhaps 200 yards (200m) away and somewhat lower, is a green jewel on a small promontory rising up from the middle of the gully, looking tantalizingly like a golf green at Pebble Beach, just a three-iron away. It is part of the Sierra Mar Vineyard, one of five vineyards that the Francionis and the Pisonis farm singly or jointly, most of whose grapes go to other wineries, who buy them both for their quality and for the vineyard designation. "We sell grapes to about 30 different wineries," Francioni says. "We work on one-year contracts,

and we sell only if we like the people, we like their wines, and they pay on time."

Winemaker Julien Howsepian of Sonoma County's highly regarded Kosta Browne winery checks all those boxes and may know the highlands vineyards as well as some of the growers. "Rosella's is the northernmost and makes elegant wines, lighter in color and structure, more feminine in style," he says. "Garys' is distinguishable on the palate, very broad. I describe it as being like a jumbo jet. Pisoni's is the southernmost, but at the highest elevation. It has the richness and depth of Garys', but with more finesse. Sierra Mar is the richest and the deepest, but it also has more acidity, while Sobranna has great structure and does a phenomenal job in whole-cluster fermentation."

As with other premium buyers, Kosta Browne's crews check the progress of the grapes monthly during the season and more frequently as harvest approaches, Howsepian says. Grapes are harvested at night in small bins and arrive fresh the next morning at the Kosta Browne winery in Sebastopol 170 miles (275km) north. "We buy about 70 tons of fruit from them a year," he says, "and I tell them, 'Whenever you guys have more fruit, we want it.'"

#### Forces of nature—and man

There is a reason for the mildew that Francioni is constantly trying to ward off. The Monterey Canyon that starts its plunge into the deep just off the coast is one of the largest underwater canyons in the world, a rich breeding ground for fish and other marine animals. Its origins are debated, since it is unusual for such a huge canyon to feed off such a small river as the Salinas: Did the mighty Colorado River once flow this way before the Gulf of California was formed, or did

Above: Dan Morgan Lee, whose Double L vineyard is in the northern highlands. Opposite: Santa Lucia Highlands Wine Artisans enjoying some of their Pinot Noirs.



the nearby San Andreas Fault and the shifting tectonic plates have something to do with it? Whatever the cause, cold Pacific waters often cause morning fogs in the valley.

But an even larger weather factor is the highlands' patented and highly predictable winds. Starting in the early afternoon, they flow north to south up valley at 9–15mph (15–25km/h), with occasional higher gusts and continue into the evening hours. This affects the grapes' skins, resulting in higher phenolics, and the wind also slows development, providing a shorter daily growth cycle and thus a more protracted ripening season than most cool-climate regions. Soils in the highlands are well drained, of low fertility, and primarily alluvial.

Dan Morgan Lee has been making Morgan wines since 1982, first with purchased fruit but since 1996 at his Double L vineyard at the northern end of the highlands. He has slowly been converting his 50 acres (20ha) of vineyards to organic viticulture and is also going against the grain of the region, he says, in planting his vineyard rows north-south rather than according to the terrain for proper sun exposure and to take advantage of the afternoon winds. Lee is also dry farming—no irrigation—five of those acres. "But we are sitting on an aquifer as big as Lake Tahoe," he says, "and we could still grow grapes if it didn't rain for 25 years."

Lee—whose tinted glasses, fuzzy mustache, and shaggy, double-cordoned hair give him a bit of an owlish look—also points out a symbiotic relationship between row-crop farmers and vineyardists. "Farm laborers here are mostly permanent residents," Lee says, "so when we need people for harvest, it's when the row-crop growing season is winding down. And it's real easy to get a crew while we're doing winter pruning."

Although the Lees, Pisonis, and Francionis are relatively small, family-owned operations, there are also larger growers in the highlands. One, Nicky Hahn of Hahn Family Wines, was a pioneer in the highlands in the 1970s, along with Rich and Claudia Smith at Paraiso, the McFarland family at Sleepy

Hollow, and Phil Johnson at La Estancia. Today, Hahn has 650 acres (263ha) of vines spread across the highlands, including Lone Oak, Smith, Doctor's, and Hook vineyards, and more vineyards in the nearby Arroyo Seco AVA.

In August 2015, E&J Gallo acquired Talbott Vineyards, founded in 1972 by Robert Talbott, a producer of luxury men's ties. "We have been producing vines that are in their eighth leaf and their 40th leaf," says Talbott winemaker David Coventry. "Our mantra when we got started was, 'Go slow,' but when we're in full production, we will have 550 acres [222ha] yielding about 4 tons per acre. So, that's about 154,000 cases of high-end wine." In early 2019, Gallo also agreed to purchase the regional Estancia wine business from Constellation Brands.

The Napa Valley-based Wagner Family of Wines, which includes the well-known Caymus brand, owns the northernmost vineyard in the highlands, Mer Soleil, as well as the smaller Las Alturas at the southern end. "People told my father [Chuck Wagner] that Pinot Noir wouldn't survive at Mer Soleil, but it actually has a growing season that is one and a half months longer than Napa," says Charlie Wagner, who manages the property. In addition to growing Pinot Noir, Mer Soleil also produces Rhône varieties, "including Viognier for our Conundrum," Wagner says. Unlike the other vineyard owners in the highlands, Wagner uses almost all of its fruit in its own brands, selling only a small portion of Rhône varieties to longtime colleague Austin Hope of Hope Family Wines in Paso Robles.

There are also a few growers who believe Syrah has a future among the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, including two located at the northern end of the highlands—Dan Lee and neighbor Scott Caraccioli, a fourth-generation Salinas Valley farmer whose family's main livelihood is still row crops. In 2008, the Caracciolis began planting their Escolle Vineyard, and today they sell about 70 percent of their grapes.



Part of the 30 percent they keep is made into elegant sparkling wine sold under the Caraccioli Cellars brand. “We make only a few hundred cases right now, because we wanted to start direct-to-consumer before branching out,” Caraccioli says. “Several other wineries are interested in producing sparkling wines, but they don’t want to do the work.” Michel Salgues, former head of Louis Roederer’s California operations, consulted during the startup years. Caraccioli also says that some Champagne houses, noted for their willingness to make bubbly wherever Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grow well, have been looking around the highlands—but he declines to name names.

### The road to Paraiso

Even with its success in the marketplace, there are still only nine wineries and seven tasting rooms located in the highlands or along River Road. By contrast, individual members of the association that manages the AVA—Santa Lucia Highlands Wine Artisans—operate 18 tasting rooms in the high-volume tourist areas of the Monterey Peninsula and the Carmel Valley. Another 22 outlets line Highway 101, the artery that splits Salinas Valley and is a major route between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

“Remote tasting rooms are bad for the Santa Lucia Highlands brand,” argues Tony Baldini, the personable head of the highlands organization and president of Hahn Family wines. “Not having tasting areas in the Santa Lucia Highlands AVA is not good business, because we need people to drive by the vineyards and kick the dirt. We are still developing a highlands wine culture.”

Baldini, whose father was a vineyard manager in Napa Valley, is also of a mixed mind about calling attention to the interrelationship between the successful highlands wine business and the equally successful but vastly different lettuce and cauliflower farming on the valley floor. He laughs: “You could argue that it’s not a glamorous entry to the AVA.” Baldini’s contention is that it’s not just a matter of one type of farming being considered glamorous and the other more pedestrian. “It’s not as though you have gourmet farm-to-table restaurants lining 101” to draw tourism, he says. “And I don’t think there’s a single farmers’ market in Salinas. People locally buy their produce at the supermarkets.”

Although, as Lee points out, there is a perfect synergy in produce farmers and grape farmers sharing the same pool of farm workers (sometimes by the same employers), there is little or no match between the hospitality aspirations of the highlands and what the valley floor has to offer. Valley towns are geared to the needs of produce farmers, as well as thousands of travelers daily along Route 101 trying to get to their destinations as quickly as possible, only pausing for fast food, gasoline, and perhaps a night’s rest, while the highlands grape growers aspire to something that more resembles what Napa or Sonoma have to offer.

Indeed, at present, there is no commercial center—no “there”—for the Santa Lucia Highlands. When Napa Valley began its modern tourism development in the 1980s, there were already a few “wine towns” such as Calistoga and St Helena to attract tourists. Eventually, previously overlooked Yountville somewhat surprisingly became the gourmet dining center for the whole wine region, while the town of Napa itself

slowly evolved into a destination for day-trippers who don’t want to fight traffic by actually visiting wineries, instead shopping at Napa city’s multiple walk-around tasting rooms.

By contrast, even those highland growers whose families have farmed in the Salinas Valley for generations and who still live on the valley floor can’t imagine the nearby farming towns of Gonzales and Soledad—bustling, friendly, but not much to look at—ever becoming a Beaune to the highlands’ Côte d’Or.

Additionally, Testarossa’s Brosseau says county ordinances that have kept high-density housing developments from gobbling up the area’s vineyards have also discouraged growth of a garagiste culture of independent wine growers, a segment that played a major role in other ascending wine regions. On the subject of developing a highlands wine hospitality culture, Gary Francioni says, “Yeah, we want it, yeah, we need it, but it’s going to take some time to get it.”

Still, has this wine wilderness, for better or worse, reached its tipping point?

Steve and Kimberly McIntyre own McIntyre Vineyards just off of River Road and also operate Monterey Pacific, a firm that manages more than 12,000 acres (4,850ha) of other people’s vineyards throughout Monterey County. As with most highlands producers, the McIntyres’ tasting room is somewhere else, a shopping center just off of busy Highway 1 in Carmel.

But, during the summer of 2019, earth-moving equipment began carving out a space on the McIntyre estate for a winery, tasting room, and events center. Like Dan Lee—who plans, after 15 years, to relocate his winery soon from Salinas to his Double L ranch—McIntyre has decided it is finally time to have consumers get to know personally where the grapes are grown. “We expect to have the first phase open in the spring of 2020,” he says, “when we begin hosting weddings.” Exchanging vows in vineyards is extremely popular with couples across the United States and a lucrative side business for wine growers.

McIntyre is also one of the highlands property owners who lobbied county government to approve renovation and reopening of an abandoned spa in the Paraiso Springs area of the southern highlands. After 15 years of planning and delays—occasioned in part by the developers, Thompson Holdings of Pennsylvania, knocking down some historic structures without first seeking permission—the Paraiso Springs resort project was unanimously approved by the Monterey County Planning Commission in November 2019.

When finished, the destination resort will have a 103-room hotel, 73 timeshare units, spa facilities, and a restaurant, as well as various recreational opportunities. It is expected to have 300 full-time employees and pay more than \$2 million to the county in tourism taxes—a destination that will almost certainly result in the establishment of pre-destination small businesses en route where none now exists.

In Tibetan culture, *bardo* is the state between death in one life and rebirth in another. Perhaps 20 years from today, the old-timers on the highlands and down in the valley will look back and smile. “Remember how quiet things were back then, when we had to drive to Monterey to get a good meal, and when there were no traffic lights or bars along River Road?”

Or perhaps instead they will ask, “Remember before we spoiled everything?” ■

