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San Francisco Chronicle

There's wine in them thar hills Santa Cruz Mountain wineries harbor undiscovered treasure

Stett Holbrook, Special to The Chronicle
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Peter Bargetto's tiny Soquel Vineyards winery is a world apart from the better-known Napa Valley.

It's about 10 minutes from the town of Soquel and is blessed with a sweeping ocean view. The impish co-owner of the boutique winery pours wine for visitors from behind a small wooden bar; red wine stains dot his ragged T-shirt.

Just outside, his golden retriever romps with a visitor's dog in a field of spring grass, tongues lolling from their mouths like scarves as they clamber into the tasting room. A home winemaker stops in with a sample of his wine to ask for advice. Later, a question from a wine-sipping customer prompts Bargetto to lead to an impromptu tour of the cellar and a barrel tasting.

"We don't get the visitors all day long like they do in the Napa Valley, and it makes it special for us when people come out," Bargetto said.

Welcome to the back-road wineries of the Santa Cruz Mountains, home to nearly 50 mostly small wineries that are big on quirky hospitality and luscious, award-winning wines. The low-key wineries of the mountain appellation offer an alternative to the bigger wineries on the Napa Valley tourist circuit. Here, where coastal fog swirls around towering redwood trees, winemakers craft wine within a challenging climate and rugged topography.

And there's no better time than tomorrow to get acquainted with some of these wineries. From 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., the Santa Cruz Mountains Winegrowers Association will hold its quarterly passport program. For \$20, visitors get access to 26 wineries, many of them not usually open to the public.

"The roads are all small and windy, and the wineries hard to find, but that's part of the fun," said Shannon Blank, operations manager for the winegrowers association. "There's a whole different feel here."

A trip to some of these aerialike wineries takes as little as 30 minutes from the hubbub of Silicon Valley below. The wineries' charm comes from the fact many are intimate and

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off the beaten path. But the sylvan setting and the distinct Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and other varietals produced here make the region a hidden gem.

The Santa Cruz Mountain appellation runs the length of the rugged Coastal Range from Mount Madonna in the south to Half Moon Bay in the north and includes parts of Santa Cruz, Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. On the warmer eastern slope of the mountains, the appellation begins at 800 feet; at 400 feet on the ocean-cooled west side. Winegrowers produce wine from generally low-yielding vineyards on small plots of land. The results are wines with full, intense flavors and aromas.

Wine has been produced in the Santa Cruz Mountains since the 1800s. The region was once known as the chaine d'or (golden chain) for its high-quality fruit, but few of the original wineries survived Prohibition. Today, the region is populated with a few big-name standouts such as Ridge Vineyards, David Bruce Winery and Bonny Doon Vineyard, but most are small, family-owned wineries like Soquel Vineyards.

SOQUEL

Fourteen-year-old Soquel Vineyards just opened a new facility on hilltop land once owned by Bargetto's Italian-born grandfather, John Bargetto. The new winery is stunning. Step outside the tasting room and look down a narrow valley to the ocean. The winery is topped with terra-cotta roof tiles salvaged from a 251-year-old building in Lucca, Italy. The tiles were made by craftsmen who formed them on their thighs. The 300-pound cellar doors come from the staves of a wine tank made of 1,800-year-old first-growth redwood once owned by John Bargetto.

"People here have a real passion for winemaking, and it really shows," said Bargetto, who owns the winery with his twin brother, Peter, and business partner, Jon Morgan.

They plan to plant 4 acres of vineyards on the site to supplement grapes they get from elsewhere in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Many of the area's wineries don't grow their own grapes. Because of expensive land prices and hilly terrain, there are only about 800 acres of vineyards in production.

CINNABAR

The road to Cinnabar Vineyards and Winery is definitely less traveled. The dirt driveway is 2 miles long. Some delivery truck drivers won't make the trek,

but for the adventurous wine lover, the drive is worth it. Perched 1,650 feet above the Santa Clara Valley on a verdant hilltop above Saratoga off Highway 9,

the 15-acre winery has won fistful of awards for its Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Syrah.

"It's like climbing a mountain," said Ron Mosley, Cinnabar's vineyard and estate manager. "You get to the top as it's like, 'Wow, this is great.' "

Because the mountain wineries have to contend with difficult terrain, vine-munching deer and gophers, fast-moving Pacific storms, and isolation from other wineries, the region produces a unique individual, Mosley said.

"You have to be a rugged person," he said. "It takes two or three times as much effort to do anything."

But just as vines that struggle produce the best wine, the labors of Santa Cruz Mountains winemakers have their rewards too, he said.

"It's harder to make a great wine out of the grapes we get here but when we do it goes beyond," he said. "It's spiritually worth it."

BONNY DOON

Bonny Doon Vineyard, located about 10 miles north of Santa Cruz off Highway 1, is the largest winery in the appellation. Its production dwarfs the other mountain wineries. But in spite of its size, Bonny Doon Vineyard remains distinctly Santa Cruz. The winery is the court jester of the wine world, slipping enological whoopee cushions under an industry known

for its staid public image. With its fanciful label artwork and pun-filled wine names such as Critique of Pure Riesling and Cardinal Zin, the winery fits in well with Santa Cruz's different-drummer reputation.

The woody tasting room feels more like a party than a place for pompous glass swirling. One employee plays a tune on his didgeridoo each time a customer signs up for the winery's wine club. Once, a visitor wearing a Scottish kilt and with bagpipes in tow ended up behind the bar playing for a happy crowd.

"It's a very relaxed atmosphere, even playful," said winery spokesman John Locke, whose business card refers to him as "vinarchist."

"When people come to Santa Cruz, they expect a different experience."

San Francisco resident Nicole Samarron came to the winery recently with her mother, Roxelle Samarron, for that experience. Nicole Samarron said wine tasting in the Napa Valley can be a little stuffy at times.

"It's more young and fun here," she said as she and her mother scribbled down tasting notes about wines they tried. "You don't see a didgeridoo when you go there."

In spite of its laid-back style, Bonny Doon takes its wines seriously. The winery has built its reputation on lesser-known varietals from France, Germany and Italy and works with small grape producers from all over the world.

OBESTER

Half Moon Bay's Obester Winery is the northernmost of the mountain wineries.

It's right off Highway 92, just east of the city limits. Paul and Sandy Obester owned the winery for 25 years, but decided they had earned a rest and sold it to 36-year-old Kendyl Kellogg last month. Kellogg had grown tired of her career as a Silicon Valley marketing executive and decided owning a winery was the perfect antidote. She has thrown herself into her new life with exuberance, doing everything from driving a truck to hosing out wine tanks.

While ownership of the winery has changed, the beloved "bring your own bottle" event has not. Several times a year, the winery throws open its cellar doors to the public with an irresistible offer: cheap wine. Wine lovers line up with empty bottles, and the winery fills them with low-cost but good wine. At this month's event it was Cabernet Franc, \$3.95 a bottle.

"The first person in line was Paul (Obester)," Kellogg said. "I told him, 'I can tell this is your first time here because you only brought one bottle.'"

Redwood City resident Stacey Ringham queued up for wine in the dank cellar, watching the bottles get filled, corked and labeled. She has been coming to the event for about five years.

"It's really a family atmosphere," she said, pushing her 20-month-old son, Charles, in a stroller. "People bring their dogs, and they cruise around. It's nice after you've come for a while and people start to recognize you."

Kellogg said she never considered doing away with the event, which has been held for about 16 years.

"People are amazed to see the winemaking process," she said. "It's fun for them to participate."

AHLGREN

Twenty-six-year-old Ahlgren Vineyard's rustic beauty is emblematic of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Located on Highway 9 about 7 miles west of Skyline Boulevard, the winery sits below Dexter and Valerie Ahlgren's redwood-hewn home. Fermentation tanks and grape crushers stand at the edge of the driveway. Inside the cozy cellar, the heady smell of oak barrels and wine greet visitors.

The "tasting room" is a white tablecloth draped over a piece of plywood atop a grape crusher. The table is a lot like Santa

Cruz Mountains wines: an unpretentious setting topped with great wine.

In a testament to the Ahlgren's independent mountain spirit, the winery and house are not connected to a municipal water system. They get water from the approximately 50 inches of rain that falls each year, catching runoff from the roof.

Sunnyvale residents Joseph and Judy Muchowski have been trekking to Ahlgren Vineyard for years. They prefer it to the tourist-laden Napa Valley.

"The most important difference is it's not wall-to-wall people," said Joseph Muchowski.

As the producer of first-rate Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, Valerie Ahlgren has made it something of a mission to educate flatlanders that the Santa Cruz Mountains is their wine country.

"When people come up here, they say they're never going to go to Napa again," she said. "Silicon Valley has to really come see this as their wine area."

Getting a passport

For more information about Santa Cruz Mountains wine or the passport program, call the Santa Cruz Mountains Winegrowers Association at (831) 479- 9463.

1 Soquel Vineyards: 7880 Glen Haven Rd., Soquel. Open for tasting and sales 10:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. on Saturday. (831) 462-9045.

2 Cinnabar Vineyard and Winery: 23000 Congress Springs Rd., Saratoga. Open to public only on passport days. (408) 741-5858.

3 Bonny Doon Vineyard: 10 Pine Flat Rd., Santa Cruz. Open daily from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. (831) 425-4518.

4 Ahlgren Vineyard: 20320 Highway 9, Boulder Creek. Open noon to 4 p.m. Saturday. (831) 338-6071. . Chronicle Graphic

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