

Frontier fever

With its dramatic vistas Monterey may seem like the Wild West, and its lack of rules and remarkable terrain are responsible for some of California's most exhilarating – and often inexpensive – wines, reports Jane Anson

'Monterey just might be the biggest wine region no one has heard of'

'I COULD OPEN a good business selling sweaters to people who arrive in Monterey expecting it to be hotter than it is,' Scott Caraccioli of Caraccioli Cellars tells me as we taste through his range of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. This coolness is key, he says, to understanding why Monterey can produce excellent quality sparkling wines despite being three hours north of Santa Barbara and that endless southern Californian sunshine.

Monterey just might be the biggest wine region that no one has heard of. It has almost exactly the same hectareage of grapes planted as Napa, is the largest producer of Gewürztraminer, Riesling and Pinot Noir in California, and the second largest of Chardonnay. Not that you'd know it. Over 50% of grapes grown in Monterey go out of state, usually to Napa or Texas, ending up in someone else's bottle.

But things are changing – a few years ago that figure was 65%, and it continues to drop. There has been a rapid growth of smaller winemakers bottling their own labels, as with Caraccioli Cellars, a fourth-generation family of Swiss-Italian farmers and ranchers who in 2006 began to first buy and then grow their own grapes. We are talking in their tasting room in the town of Carmel on the Monterey coast – one of the dozens that have opened up here over the past few years.

'It took longer for Monterey to embrace the wine industry than other parts of California, perhaps because it had other industries, notably tourism,' says Caraccioli, who quit his job in the high-tech industries in Silicon Valley in 2009 to join the family business. You just have to look at the gleaming rows of art galleries and casually expensive restaurants around Carmel to see that this is true.

One of the first articles that I edited in magazine journalism, back in 1994, was about a road trip down Highway 1 from San Francisco to LA, an open-top car purring between whale watching off



Monterey at a glance

Vineyards 200
Brands 125
Independent grower-vintners 85
Area under vine 2013 18,765ha

Big Sur and tracing the footsteps of William Randolph Hearst at Hearst Castle. I got to take the same drive myself around 10 years later, heading along the famous coast road from Marin City to the town of Carmel where Clint Eastwood was mayor at the time. The region was recently voted Best Wine Tourism destination in America, but it's clear that plenty of the winemakers here are not content with simply that title, and feel they have something to prove in the glass.

Variety show

There are issues; notably that, as with much of California, too much choice can be dangerous. Even with the creation of AVAs (nine in Monterey County, see box and map overleaf), there are no rules as to what can and cannot be grown in any of them, meaning that there are around 57 varieties on offer. Even Monterey's marketing material proudly states that it is a 'viticultrual laboratory'. Couple that with the host of different climates, from the baking floor of

the Salinas Valley where winemakers will irrigate for volume and push yields to 95-120 hectolitres/hectare, to the cooler mountainous areas that are perfectly suited to varieties such as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, and you have a tough time creating an identity.

There are around 200 vineyards, but just 85 that make their own wine on site, as most people grow the grapes and sell them on. This number is up from 20 in 1990, but compare this to Napa, which is home to 500 wineries for 18,210ha of vines.

And yet this area has long been sought after – internally, within the Californian wine industry – for the quality of its grapes. Vines were first planted here by Spanish missionaries at the turn of the 19th century, and the region's Chalone Vineyard Estate has just been recognised by California's Historic Vineyard Society for its 1919 plot of Chenin Blanc vines, one of the oldest in California. Chalone was also the only winery outside of Napa to make it into the 1976 Judgement of Paris tasting that

turned the world on to Californian wine. That recognition of talent is now radiating out, with wineries not just opening up, but restructuring to focus on quality not quantity. One of the leading names, Hahn Estates, was until recently producing eight or nine brands and 60 to 70 different labels. It has now narrowed the focus specifically to its SLH Estate Chardonnay and Estate Pinot Noir, and a few other Chardonnays and Pinots from other vineyards that they either own or farm. And its neighbour, Paraiso Vineyards is doing the same thing; moving from numerous entry-level brands to fewer boutique wines.

'One of the deepest valleys in Monterey [Bay] is close to the shoreline in the Pacific Ocean,' says Hahn's director of winemaking, Paul Clifton, who trained in New Zealand. 'It's why there are around 2,000 humpback whales just off the shore here, and why we were once famed for our sardine industry. It's also why we get such a diverse range of climates, because that submarine canyon, 60 miles long >

Above: California's Chalone Vineyard Estate produces some of the state's most exciting wines from some of its oldest vines

Monterey AVAs by numbers

Ranging from around 120 hectares (ha) under vine upwards to over 16,000ha, Monterey's first AVA was approved in the 1980s, while its most recent didn't appear until 2004.

Arroyo Seco

Approved 1983
c. 2,830ha
First vineyard 1962

Carmel Valley

Approved 1983
c. 120ha
First vineyard 1968

Chalone

Approved 1982
c. 120ha
First vineyard 1919

Hames Valley

Approved 1994
c. 890ha
First vineyard 1971

Monterey

Approved 1984
c. 16,190ha (includes land from other AVAs, except Carmel Valley and Chalone)
First vineyard 1961

San Antonio Valley

Approved 2006
c. 2,400ha
First vineyard 1996

San Bernabe

Approved 2004
c. 1,740ha
First vineyard 1972

San Lucas

Approved: 1987
c. 3,240ha
First vineyard 1970

Santa Lucia Highlands

Approved 1991
c. 2,390ha
First vineyard 1973



Above: Jack Galante is among those producing wines with the ability to age at his vineyard in Carmel Valley

Right: stunning vistas such as these at Hahn Estates illustrate why tourism took precedence over wine for many years

and two miles deep – the deepest across the entire west coast of America – has a huge impact on inland temperatures.' This Blue Grand Canyon provides an estimated 300m² of cold, deep water and ensures fog and wind blows down the viticultural districts.

It's unsurprisingly on the cooler hillside spots that lie closer to the ocean, covering around 4,000ha or less than a quarter of the total plantings, that many of the most exciting wines are being produced – so Chalone (its own AVA), Carmel Valley, the Santa Lucia Highlands and Arroyo Seco.

In the olden days...

The winemakers here come with wild stories of earlier times. Jack Galante of Galante Vineyard's great-grandfather, James Frank Devendorf, founded the town of Carmel. He was the stepson of Joseph Aram, a sea captain and one of the signatories of the first California constitution. Devendorf was a developer with a lot of land around what is now Silicon Valley. Legend has it that he was taking a buggy ride with his daughter in the early 1900s when they stopped and sat on the beach at Carmel, and she suggested it would be a great place for a town. In the 1960s, the same girl, Jack's grandmother, bought a 280ha cattle ranch in the hills of Carmel Valley, just over the ridge from Big Sur. This is where they planted vines in the early 1980s, built a winery a decade later, and today bottle entirely estate-grown Cabernet, Petite Sirah and Sauvignon Blanc.

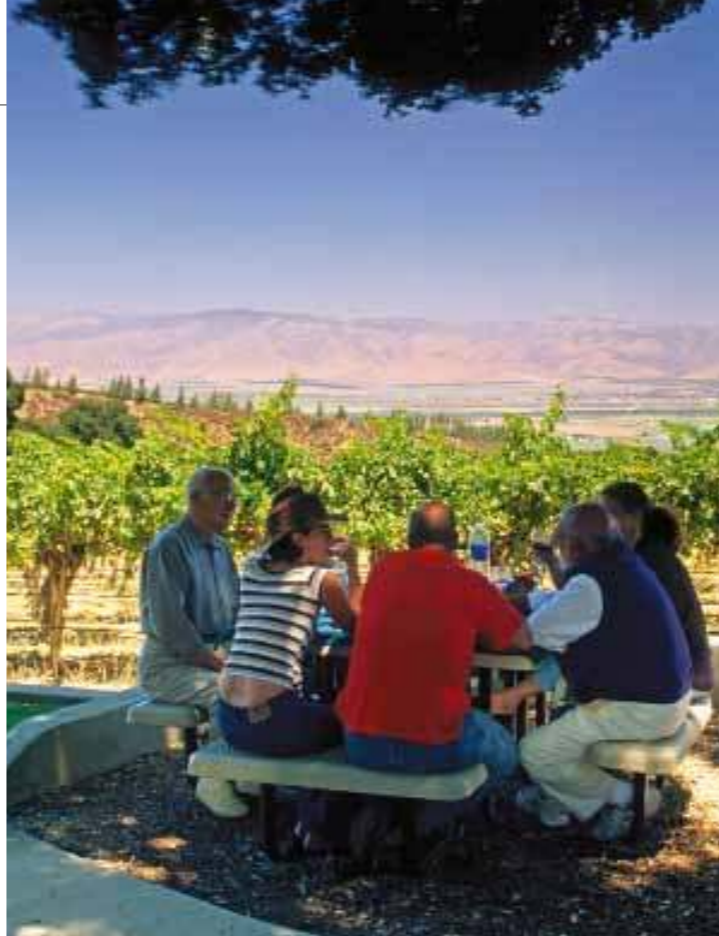
The feeling of being at the frontier is seductive. I seemed to be forever gasping at views during my visits to vineyards here, like perhaps nowhere since the Cape Winelands of South Africa. Chalone particularly is wild country, vines interspersed by scrublands, expanses of volcanic rock covered with chaparral, dizzying escarpments reaching up 600m to The Pinnacles, America's newest National Park,

signed in by President Obama on 1 January, 2013.

The Santa Lucia Highlands also, where Hahn covers 263ha, has an aching beauty, with falcons and buzzards swooping overhead (some are even brought in by trained falconers at harvest time to scare the starlings away from the succulent ripe grapes). It was in this region that Gary Pisoni (from another family of Swiss-Italian immigrants) started his eponymous family winery, growing high-quality grapes back in 1982, and he remains perhaps the most iconic winemaker in the region. Both Hahn and Pisoni farm single-vineyard blocks arranged around the mountainous landscape, up to 400m high in the granite-laced mountains of the Santa Lucia Range.



Above: hailing from a cattle farming family, Gary Pisoni of Pisoni Vineyards produces dazzlingly fresh Pinot Noirs



'Up here we have a long growing season that encourages deep colours and complexity in the wines,' says Clifton. 'Pinot can only grow in a handful of places in California, and the Santa Lucia Highlands is one of them. It might get to 30°C in the summer, but only ever for a few hours, and will it always cool back down again at night.'

Undulating landscape

We taste through his remarkably fresh Pinots while sitting at a table laid out at one of the highest spots of the vineyard, with the slopes falling away in front of us. The vines cascade down the hillside until it evens out to the valley floor and then rises again to The Pinnacles and the vineyards of Chalone. The mountains facing us look close enough to touch but in reality are a good 40-minute drive away. It's easy to see how this wine region can get under your skin; the wild open spaces, the vertiginous passes, the easy hospitality of ex-ranchers turned winemakers, the sense of possibility that permeates everywhere, the bewitching views of the Pacific Ocean.

Mark Andrew, California specialist at Roberson Wine in London, points out that the best cool-climate sites are clustered together, and their grapes attract many of the most successful names, from Broc Cellars to Testarossa, Copain and Siduri.

Caraccioli, who now grows all his own grapes for his sparkling wines but still bottles at Galante winery, neatly explains why. 'Wineries work together remarkably well here, unlike the highly competitive tech world that I come from. Often here your competition is also your customer, because so many of us sell grapes as well as final wine. It can be incestuous at times, but it makes it not only very supportive, but a great learning experience. We are all committed to working out the best grapes, best sites, and raising the profile of this region.' **D**

Anson's six of the best from Monterey



Caraccioli Cellars Brut Cuvée, Santa Lucia Highlands 2007 16.5/20 (88/100)
N/A UK www.caracciolicellars.com

Frenchman Michel Salgues is winemaker here. He used to head up Anderson Valley's Roederer Estate and is recognised as one of the leading sparkling winemakers in the US. 60% Chardonnay and 40% Pinot Noir, picked at 18.5 brix (c. 11% potential alcohol), then *méthode champenoise* winemaking. This is rich and round, with good persistency of mousse, attractive citrus hints and softly toasted almonds. They make a vintage every year here, no NV. **Drink 2014-2018 Alcohol 12%**



Hahn SLH Pinot Noir, Santa Lucia Highlands 2012 17.75 (92)
c. £23.99 Castelnaud.com
Wine Agencies

Clonal selection vines from a variety of sites across the AVA have been planted here. Lovely berry fruits on the nose, with juicy notes throughout, emphasising the fruit. With strawberry and cranberry flavours, this is certainly a warmer expression of Pinot Noir than you'd find in some Old World sites, but a delicious, juicy and thoroughly enjoyable wine all the same. **Drink 2015-2025 Alc 14.5%**



Galante Vineyards, Rancho Galante Cabernet Sauvignon, Carmel Valley 2010 17 (90)
N/A UK www.galantevineyards.com

As Jack Galante says himself; 'We don't go huge, juicy Napa Cabs here; I am still selling wines from the 1990s and 2000s, because I like my wines to be able to age.' This certainly has the firm structure and juicy tannic bite to suggest that it has a future. Blueberries and bilberries rather than intense cassis flavours dominate, with a good lift on the finish. **Drink 2014-2025 Alc 13.4%**



Chalone Vineyard, Estate Grown Chardonnay, Chalone 2011 18 (93)
£11.99 (2010) [Waitrose Cellar](http://Waitrose.com)

Many of the Chardonnay vines date back to 1946, or have come from budwood of those oldest vines. This has a hint of reduction on the initial nose that gives it a true Burgundian character. Grapes have been hand-picked at night since the 2007 vintage, then whole-cluster pressed and aged in French oak barrels. This is rich and round in the mid-palate, with streaks of crème brûlée and candied lemon, but twists of lemon-lime on the finish. Great value for this level of quality. **Drink 2014-2022 Alc 13.5%**



The Other Guys, Moobuzz Monterey Pinot Noir 2011 16.25 (87)
£16.95 [Roberson](http://Roberson.com)

Largely (85%) Pinot, but with a few touches of Sangiovese, Tempranillo and Syrah, from the Italian Sebastiani family, who has been in California (coming from Tuscany) since the 19th century. This is a wine to enjoy soon, and is a great example of an inexpensive Pinot from Monterey with moderate weight and sweet dark cherry fruit that doesn't stray into over-sweet. **Drink 2014-2017 Alc 13.5%**

For details of UK stockists, see p88 of main issue



Carmel Road Liberated Riesling, Arroyo Seco 2011 17 (90)
£14.95 [Corney & Barrow](http://Corney.com)

Arroyo Seco adjoins the Santa Lucia Mountains and is known for its inexpensive red and white varieties. This is a focused yet delicate Riesling. There are orange blossom and honeysuckle rather than petrol aromas, but there is a clean minerality, and a very attractive lift on the finish. **Drink 2014-2017 Alc 13.5%**

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