

## POSTCARD



My association with the Santa Cruz Mountains American Viticultural Area (AVA) runs deep: my father has lived in the area for 25 years, and I worked there as a sommelier in 2000. There's a lot to discover here, as a January visit reminded me; indeed, the appellation's low-production Pinot Noirs

and Chardonnays are often as good as their more famous counterparts at the top of California's quality pyramid.

Although much of Pleasant Valley was originally zoned for apple orchards, this area just inland from the city of Santa Cruz is now the appellation's fastest-growing subdistrict. Viticultural consultant Prudy Foxx looks after about 150 acres—accounting for 95% of the vineyards in Pleasant Valley—and another 150 elsewhere in the Santa Cruz Mountains, comprising 20% of the AVA's total. "We harvest late here," said Foxx of the successful 2012 vintage, for which she was pulling Chardonnay on Nov. 7. "Our sandy soil is like a cold-blooded animal, changing temperatures more quickly than clay-based soils do." Wide diurnal temperature shifts generated by the combination of heavy fog and sun favor Burgundian varieties, she added: "The fog helps cleanse the grapes, washing away the dirt and heat, but doesn't douse them; it's like a woman using a skin toner."

Foxx's clients include Craig and Cathy Handley, proprietors of Pleasant Valley Vineyards, which they launched commercially in 2004. Sourced from a 2-acre vineyard that's also planted to Dijon clones of Chardonnay, their Dylan David Pinot Noirs are among the most consistently pristine I've tasted; the Estate Reserve bottlings from 2006 and 2010 and the 2010 Lester Vineyards Willa Louise's Block were all strikingly delicious and poised for long aging.

Down the road, Steve Storrs and Pamela Bianchini-Storrs (pictured above with me) are building their first on-site winery since they started operations in 1988. Steve, like his wife a University of California-Davis viticultural graduate, showed me around the new development, which is situated in a former quarry adjacent to one of his longtime vineyards. It includes a 6-year-old parcel of Pinot Noir planted in sections of three tight rows, helping to compensate for the elevated phenolics and anthocyanins produced by summer heat spikes. The 2008 Storrs Petite Sirah, from an accidental planting, was ripe and balanced without any edges.

Former restaurateurs and bakers Richard and Mary Kay Alfaro farm 30 acres in the Corralitos district at the AVA's southern end; on my visit, I saw a deer scampering out from under a massive, 90-year-old avocado tree. In 2008, when California claimed only 10 acres of Grüner Veltliner, a taste of Nikolaihof at a local wine bar prompted Richard to grow a 1.25-acre lot, now the only California Certified Organic Farmers planting of Grüner in the state. Called La Playita Vineyard, it's off to a good start with its inaugural 2012 vintage. In addition, the 2010 Alfaro Family Pinot Noir Schultze Family Vineyard drew me in with its nose of leather, black cherry, and black pepper; while a bit tannic and firm on entry, it was understated, finishing with a touch of elegance.

The Beaugard family has farmed grapes along Bonny Doon Road for four generations; current proprietor Ryan's great-grandfather was a deputy sheriff who bought the property in 1949, after it had gone dormant during Prohibition. Besides the 13 original acres, named Beaugard Ranch, Ryan also farms the own-rooted Bald Mountain Vineyard and Nora's Vineyard, planted to Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Zinfandel. Since taking the reins in 2009, he has practiced 100% native-yeast fermentation, avoiding chemical manipulation and enzymes and using minimal sulfur dioxide. "Anything you have to put on a gas mask to work with, you shouldn't be adding," he maintained. The impact on the finished product was clear when I compared the 2008 and 2011 vintages of Beaugard's Chardonnay Ben Lomond Mountain: the latter showed more balance and less oak. The 2011 Pinot Noir Muns Vineyard, meanwhile, displayed a pleasant nose of undergrowth and redcurrant, its vibrant finish indicating a long life ahead. (See the online version of this article at [www.sommelierjournal.com](http://www.sommelierjournal.com) for profiles of four more producers.)

*Cheers, David Furer*