

Along the Pinot Trail in California: Part I - Central Coast

For those score obsessed, number-centric wine enthusiasts, the conversion for my ratings to numerical scores is begrudgingly provided as follows: Pinot Geek (94-98), Very good (90-93), Good (86-89), and Decent (82-85). Unsatisfactory signifies a wine that is flawed or that I would not recommend. The same ratings apply to Chardonnay, except a Golden Geek icon is used to signify exceptional wines. A (+) would indicate the upper number of the range and a (-) the lower number of the range.

2009 and 2010 vintage comments by Ben Cain, winemaker at Twomey Cellars. "2010 was a long, cool year, 2 to 3 weeks later than 2009, and more akin to a European vintage whereas 2009 was definitely California. This translated into physiological ripeness at lower sugar levels, but greater time to develop more complexity and nuances. Thus the wines are more elegant, but have higher density with great tannin structure, balanced natural acid spines, and very clear terroir-driven expressions of place of origin. I found the 2009 wines were more reflective of their vintage than their sites, but were definitely expressions of place. The 2010 wines show clearer differences and more precise snapshots of place."

2009 vintage comments by Gary Farrell, winemaker at Alysian Wines. "2009 is a standout vintage among critics and consumers alike, as the wines show tremendous generosity and structural integrity without excessive extract or alcohol. In 2009, cool and steady temperatures slowed the ripening process, and delivered fruit with elevated levels of flavor and acidity at lower sugar levels; an ideal scenario for crafting fully flavored wines with enhanced freshness, impeccable balance and (importantly) lower alcohol levels."

Take special note of the following producers in Part I and Part 2: Clos Pepe Estate, Dragonette Cellars, McIntyre Vineyards, Big Basin Vineyards, The Donum Estate, Stemmler, Alysian, Scherrer, Twomey, La Rochelle, Waits-Mast, J Vineyards, Canihan and MacPhail. All these wineries have more than one highly rated wine.

Sta. Rita Hills

2010 Clos Pepe Estate Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir 14.5% alc., pH 3.45, TA 0.71, 915 cases, \$54. The Clos Pepe Pinot Noirs in 2010 are bigger and riper than the traditional Clos Pepe restrained style. *Moderately dark reddish-purple color in the glass. Evocative aromas of black cherries, ripe berry jam, spice and subtle oak. Mouth full of generous strawberry, raspberry and red licorice flavors with a satiny smooth mouth feel, and a very long finish displaying a good spark of acidity that keeps the fruit in check and leaves a refreshing memory. This wine is built for enjoyment with food. Very good.*

2010 Clos Pepe Estate Vigneron Select Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir 14.6% alc., pH 3.50, TA 0.68, 72 cases, \$59 *Dark reddish-purple color in the glass. More subdued on the nose and offering a riper fruit profile. Darker fruits are featured with compliments of savory herbs, leaf and earth. Compared to the Estate bottling, more intensity of dark berry flavor, more fruit presence on the finish, more ripeness, and a hint of alcohol in the background. Very silky with modest tannins, and acidity that is well integrated. A true select bottling but not one defined by more oak as with many reserve wines. Definitely needs more time, say 2 to 3 years for optimum enjoyment. That said, it is hard to keep your hands off it now. Very good (+).*



2010 Dragonette Cellars Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir 14.5% alc., 300 cases, \$42. Sourced from vineyards on the western edge of the Sta. Rita Hills including Sebastiano, Cargasacchi-Jalama, Cargasacchi, Fiddlestix, La Encantada, and Zotovich. clones Pommard, 113, 114, 115, 667 and 828. Native and commercial yeasts. Aged 16 months in 25% new French oak barrels. Unfined and unfiltered. *Dark reddish-purple color in the glass. A little spicy, a little savory, and plenty of dark red cherry and berry fruit aromas. Discreetly concentrated flavors of red and black raspberries and cherries and red plum cake, with modest tannins and a generous cut on the finish. This is perfect for drinking now. Very good.*

2010 Dragonette Cellars Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir (“Black Label”) 14.4% alc., 100 cases, \$75. Favorite barrels (50% Cargasacchi, 25% Fiddlestix, and 25% La Encantada vineyards). Clones 115 and 667. Native and commercial yeasts. Aged 16 months in 50% new French oak barrels. Unfined and unfiltered. *Deep, dark plum color in the glass. Very reserved, even locked down, barely offering scents of black cherries and vanillin oak. Striking mid palate attack of ripe dark berry and satsuma plum flavors, underlain with notes of oak, chicory and tar. Very soft in the mouth, with modest tannins, finishing with remarkable fruit intensity. Hard to evaluate at this early stage, but the potential is obvious. Very good (+).*



2010 Dragonette Cellars Fiddlestix Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir 14.3% alc., 150 cases, \$54. 17% whole clusters. Native and commercial yeasts. Aged 16 months in 35% new French oak barrels. Unfined and unfiltered. *Moderately dark reddish-purple color in the glass. Reserved, but pleasant aromas of dark red cherries and berries, with a hint of herbs. Delicious core of black cherry fruit with accents of spice and oak. Modestly rich and plush. Soft in the mouth with very well managed tannins (this vineyard can produce very tannic wines). Impeccable balance. Very approachable now, but will benefit from a few more years in the cellar. A complete wine and one of many I have had the pleasure of drinking from this venerable vineyard.*

2009 Furthermore La Encantada Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir 14.1% alc., pH 3.45, TA 0.61, 51 cases, \$40. Clones 115, 667 and 777. Aged 12 months in 33% new French oak barrels. *Medium reddish-purple color in the glass. Hi-spirited aromas of fresh darker berries, raisin and spice. Mid weight flavors of moderately dark cherries and raspberries draped in muscular, dry tannins. The most striking fruit, albeit super ripe, of all the 2009 Furthermore wines. This wine displays complimentary acidity so typical of Sta. Rita Hills wines. Still solid the following day from a previously opened and re-corked bottle. Quite enjoyable. Very good.*

2010 Longoria Rancho Santa Rosa Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir 15.6% alc., pH 3.63, TA 0.56, 97 cases, \$45. Pommard clone. A heat spell in September caused sugar content of grapes to shoot up quickly and the grapes were harvested at a riper level of sugar than usual. 100% de-stemmed. Aged in 35% new French oak barrels. Fined and filtered. *Medium reddish-purple color in the glass. Reserved aromas of dark cherries, very ripe berries, currants and bark. Fruit-driven on the palate, with plenty of wood-toned dark cherry flavor back by pliant tannins and finishing a little boozy (hot). A little more expressive the following day from a previously opened and re-corked bottle. Good.*

2009 Waits-Mast La Encantada Vineyard Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir 14.3% alc., 23 cases, \$47. Released September 2011. Clones 115 and 777. 100% whole berry, aged 17 months in 20% new French oak barrel. *Moderately light reddish-purple color in the glass. Aromas of black grapes, fruit leather, herbs and tar. Rich, plush and soft on the palate, featuring flavors of earth bound black cherries and plum. A bit ponderous and lacks a spark. Tasted the following day from a previously opened and re-corked bottle, the wine showed a riper profile including raisin. Good (+).*

Santa Maria Valley & Arroyo Grande

2009 Bien Nacido Vineyards Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 14.1% alc., \$N/A. The Miller Family's own approach to a Bien Nacido wine. *Moderately light garnet color in the glass. Lovely array of dark fruit aromas with a subtle green vegetal note. Discreetly concentrated flavors of dark red plums, black raspberries and currants with a hint of spice, green bell pepper and mushroom in the background. Medium weighted with balanced tannins, and light on its feet. A nicely balanced and savory wine. Very good.*



2009 BIGVINE Arroyo Grande Valley Pinot Noir 14.3% alc., 2,300 cases, \$14. 85% Arroyo Grande, 15% Sta. Rita Hills. Aged 12 months in 25% new French oak barrels with regular lees stirring. *Moderately light reddish-purple color in the glass. The interesting and complex nose really draws you in. Aromas of strawberries, cherries, sandalwood, sawdust and Indian spice.*

Delicious middleweight core of fresh dark cherries and red raspberries, caressed by supple tannins, offering good acidity, and finishing with memorable aromatic persistence. A beautifully balanced wine that is very easy to cozy up to, and



quite impressive for a first release. Unbelievable value.

2010 Longoria Bien Nacido Vineyard Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir 13.5% alc., pH 3.58, TA 0.57, 160 cases, \$45. 100% de-stemmed. Aged 16 months in 30% new French oak barrels. *Moderately light reddish-purple color in the glass. A savory wine featuring aromas of cherries, red raspberries, bell pepper and stem. Light and soft in the mouth with delicate tannins, featuring flavors of red fruits, green bell pepper, and green tea leaf. An elegant wine with bright underlain acidity. Harvested at lower Brix and shows it. Good.*

Santa Lucia Highlands & Arroyo Seco

2010 Bruliam Soberanes Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir 14.3% alc., \$46. Released December 11, 2011. Inaugural bottling. Pisoni clone. 100% de-stemmed. Aged 10 months in 50% new French oak (Remond), and another 3 months in bottle before release. *Medium reddish-purple color in the glass. Takes some work to bring the nose out, but it grudgingly offers pleasing aromas of dark berries and exotic spices. Lip-smacking, middleweight core of perfectly ripe dark red and black berry and plum fruit. Very good supporting acidity and oak, lacking slightly in finishing length and intensity. Quintessential Santa Lucia Highlands fruit profile. Good (+).*

2009 Furthermore Rosella's Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir 14.5% alc., pH 3.66, TA 0.67, 70 cases, \$50. Clones 828 and Pisoni. Aged 12 months in 50% new French oak barrels. *Moderately light reddish-purple color in the glass. Very savory in style. Aromas of dark red cherries, sage and other herbs. Herb-toned red fruit with notes of green and black olives. Modest tannins. About the same the following day from a previously opened and re-corked bottle. A bit atypical for Rosella's in my experience. Good.*



2010 J. Lohr Fog's Reach Arroyo Seco Pinot Noir 14.9% alc., pH 3.78, TA 0.55, 2,427 cases, \$35. Clones 115, 667, 777 and Pommard 4. Fruit was 100% de-stemmed. Aged 8 months in new and second fill French oak barrels. *Moderately dark reddish-purple hue in the glass. Evocative perfume of raspberry jam on toast. Richly endowed with flavors of black cap raspberries, dark strawberries, sassafras, herbs and complimentary toasty oak. An embracing wine with fruit that really draws your attention. Could use a little more acid zip. The finish goes on and on. Very good.*



2010 Kori KW Ranch Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir 14.2% alc., 200 cases, \$38. From the 14-acre terraced KW Ranch Vineyard. The vineyard has previously supplied fruit to several famous vintners. Clones are 667 and Pommard 4. Grower is Kirk Williams and winemakers are Kori Violini and Sabine Rodems. *Moderately dark reddish-purple color in the glass. Impressively aromatic with bright, intense aromas of black raspberries, kirsch and dark plum sauce. Medium weight flavors echo the nose with added accents of toasty oak and floral notes, finishing with a flourish of black raspberry fruit. Soft and velvety on the palate, and very comforting to drink. Admirable balance with silky tannins and well-honed acidity. A complete wine that brings out the best in Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir. A big, but pleasant surprise to me, as I had never previously met with this label.*



2010 La Crema Monterey Pinot Noir 13.9% alc., \$20. *Moderately dark reddish-purple hue in the glass. Very fragrant aromas of perfectly ripe berries include strawberries with hints of spice and vanilla. A charming wine that aims to please with a medium weighted core of luscious dark raspberries, strawberries and boysenberries accented with cola, cassis and oak. Nicely buttressed with soft tannins and offering good length on the finish. Great balance. All you can ask for in California Pinot Noir for the price of a Jackson.*



2011 La Rochelle Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir Rosé 12.5% alc., 119 cases, \$24. Pommard and Swan clones. *Light pinkish-orange color in the glass. Aromas of strawberries, cherries and orange peel. Light and refreshing, featuring flavors of rose water, red berries, and blood oranges. A perfect summer wine. Good (+)*

2010 Loring Wine Company Garys' Vineyard Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir 14.8% alc., \$40. *Moderately dark reddish-purple color in the glass. Enticing aromatics, featuring bright scents of cherries, dark red raspberries and spice. Crisp and hi-spirited, composed of middleweight red fruits that are pure and vibrant, supple tannins, complimentary oak treatment, and a finish of excellent length. Definitely ripe in character, but hard to ignore. The name "Garys' Vineyard" on a bottle is a reliable guarantee of quality. Very good.*



2010 McIntyre Vineyards Estate Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir 14.2% alc., pH 2.62, TA 0.63, 240 cases, \$38. Predominantly Dijon clone 777. Indigenous yeast fermentations. Crafted by Byron Kosuge. *Dark reddish-purple color in the glass. Opulent aromas of black cherries, black raspberries, cardamom spice and toasty oak. Pumps out the fragrance consistently over time in the glass. Very tasty core of dark cherry and dark berry fruits with a subtle hint of oak toast and vanillin in the background. Smooth and luxurious on the palate with soft, restrained tannins and some persistence on the finish. Very drinkable now, but the balance predicts a long life ahead.*



2008 McIntyre Vineyards Mission Ranch Arroyo Seco Pinot Noir 14.5% alc., \$36. Released spring 2011. From Mission Ranch Vineyard. Vinified by Byron Kosuge. *Dark reddish-purple color in the glass. Perfume of dark red cherries, berry glaze, leaf and oak. This wine offers only a glimpse of its future potential. A little rustic and closed down now, but showing sparks of flavorful purple and black fruits caressed by supple tannins. Better and better over time in the glass. The velvety texture is very pinotesque. Cellar or decant if you must open now. Very good.*



2010 McIntyre Vineyards East Block 3 Santa Lucia Highlands Pinot Noir 14.5% alc., 90 cases, \$46. Released spring 2011. Sourced from select lots of the 60-acre estate sustainably farmed home estate vineyard. Native yeast fermentation. Owner and grower Steve McIntyre. Winemaker Byron Kosuge. *Dark reddish-purple color in the glass. Alluring aromas of dark berries, plum pudding and subtle oak. Delicious middleweight flavors of black raspberry, blackberry and black plum wrapped in soft tannins, finishing with remarkable fruit presence on the lengthy finish. Impeccable balance. Can age but drinkable now.*

2008 Talbott Cuvée RFT Diamond T Vineyard Monterey County Pinot Noir 14.4% alc., \$75 (sold out). Named in honor of Robert Talbott's father, Robert Flook Talbott Sr. (RFT). Sourced from the 14-acre Diamond T Vineyard planted to Pommard and Dijon clones. The finest 10 barrels, aged 12 months in 100% new French oak barrels. *Medium reddish-purple color in the glass. Aromas of deep, dark plums, blueberries, roasted nuts and grilled beef. Ripely flavored and full-bodied, featuring tastes of dark berries, black currants and plum sauce with a hints of dark chocolate, chicory, and molasses. Soft in the mouth with firm, slightly rugged tannins. Unusual and distinctive. Very good.*

Santa Cruz Mountains



2008 Big Basin Vineyards Alfaro Family Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir 14.4% alc., 105 cases, \$48. Dijon clones. 20% whole cluster, indigenous yeast fermentation. Aged 14 months in 60% new French oak barrels. *Moderate reddish-purple color in the glass. Effusive aromas of strawberries, raspberries, spice and cut flowers. Well-endowed with flavors of dark red Pinot fruits fanning out on the palate in waves, finishing with a raspberry kiss. Savory herb flavors add interest. All you could want in a Pinot with supple, dreamy tannins, bright acidity and purity of fruit. With added bottle age, this wine is showing more transparency than the 2009 vintage bottling. Big Basin Vineyards has emerged as one of the top Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir producers along with Windy Oaks, Mount Eden, Rhys Vineyards and Thomas Fogarty Winery.*



2009 Big Basin Vineyards Lester Family Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir 14.1% alc., 193 cases, \$44. From a cool vineyard near Corralitos in the southern Santa Cruz Mountains. Very low yields. Fermented with 15% whole clusters using indigenous yeasts. Aged 16 months in 50% new French oak barrels. Unfined and unfiltered. *Dark reddish-purple color in the glass. Evocative aromas of blackberries and blueberries, plum cake and smoky oak. Rich, plush, and full-flavored with a core of black plum fruit wrapped in ripe, firm, proportionate tannins, complimentary oak, and finishing strong and long. Smoothly textured making for good drinking now, but the wine was better the following day from a previously opened and re-corked bottle indicating it will improve with further cellaring. Very good (+).*

2009 Big Basin Vineyards Alfaro Family Vineyard Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir 14.3% alc., 144 cases, \$44. From a vineyard in Corralitos. Yields of 1 ton per acre with small clusters and berries. One lot fermented with 15% whole cluster and one lot 100% de-stemmed. Indigenous yeast fermentation. Aged 16 months in 50% new French oak barrels. Unfined and unfiltered. *Medium reddish-purple color in the glass. Aromatically attractive, featuring scents of sweet black raspberries, black plum and savory herbs. Moderately rich flavors that echo the nose, picking up intensity over time in the glass. Hints of oak vanillin and herbs add interest. Nicely composed, offering pliant tannins, good acidity and some length on the finish. Needs more time in the cellar and could easily end up like the excellent 2008 vintage bottling. Good (+).*

2009 Big Basin Woodruff Family Vineyards Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir 14.3% alc., 97 cases, \$48. From a 30-year-old vineyard in Corralitos. Fermented whole berry with 25% whole cluster, native yeasts, unfined and unfiltered. Aged 16 months in 50% new French oak barrels. *Medium reddish-purple color in the glass. Demure aromas of strawberries, raspberries and red currants with a subtle touch of smoky oak. Middleweight flavors of ripe dark red berries, subtle oak highlights, and whole cluster spice. Nicely composed with supple tannins, satiny mouth feel, and admirable length on the fruit-driven finish. Opens up over time in the glass. Very good.*

2008 Mount Eden Vineyards Estate Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir 13.5% alc., 985 cases, \$46. Estate grown and bottled. Previously reviewed November 24, 2010 and very impressed with the wine. This bottle did not live up to expectations for whatever reason. *Aromas of red cherries with a strong herbal and green component. Brisk and light on the palate, featuring flavors of red cherries and berries, savory herbs, and citrus peel acidity on the tight finish. Rather austere and mineral-driven. Better the next day from a previously opened and re-corked bottle with more fruit intensity but still not up to parr. Good.*

 **2009 Mount Eden Vineyards Estate Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir** 13.5% alc., 780 cases, \$45. *Medium reddish-purple color in the glass. Very nice array of aromas including dark grapes, black cherries and cardamom spice. Absolutely delicious, mid weight flavors of dark red cherries and berries with a long, long, long finish. Wow! Beautifully balanced with fine-grain tannins, moderate extraction and bright, juicy acidity on the finish. This is a wine you can bank every vintage. Known to be very age worthy.*



2010 Santé Split Rail Vineyard Corralitos Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir 14.3% alc., pH 3.65, 100 cases, \$35. From Sante Arcangeli Family Wines. Vineyard is at 1700 feet above Monterey Bay, planted to David Bruce clone, UCD 32 (a Champagne clone) and Dijon 115. Aged 10 months sur lies in 70% new American, Hungarian and French oak barrels. *Light reddish-purple color in the glass. Oak-kissed red fruit aromas with notes of rose petals, baking spice and sandalwood. Spicy, red fruited core including prominent strawberry flavor, underlain with cinnamon, oak vanillin and a hint of citrus. Different types of oak give the wine a spiced flavor profile that veers from the expected norm for California Pinot Noir. Elegant with a very bright cut of acidity on the finish. Good (+).*

2009 Windy Oaks Estate Proprietor's Reserve Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir 13.9% alc., \$60. Wine club or tasting room only. 15-acre vineyard 900 feet above Monterey Bay at the southern end of the Santa Cruz Mountains AVA. Estate grown, produced and bottled. Windy Oaks' signature wine, primarily from the 1.5-acre Bay Block of the original 3-acre vineyard. Unfined and unfiltered. *Demure but pleasant perfume of dark red fruits, rosewood, rose petals and spice. The core of dark cherries and raspberries is fresh and alive, accented with notes of oak-driven herb, mocha and caramel. Juicy, with bright acidity, ripe tannins, and some length on the finish. Very good.*

2009 Windy Oaks Estate Henry's Block Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir 13.9% alc., \$49. Wine club or tasting room only. From a 1-acre block in the oldest part of the original 3-acre estate vineyard featuring Wädenswil clone. Unfined and unfiltered. *Moderately light reddish-purple color in the glass. Fragrant with very ripe black cherry and currant fruit aromas associated with hints of spice, floral notes, and toffee. Very ripe, dark fruited featuring black cherries, black plums, sassafras, and slight prune. Silky with well-proportioned tannins, finishing with impressive length. I am not usually a big fan of Wädenswil as a stand-alone clone Pinot Noir, but in the right site as demonstrated here, can make a different, interesting wine. Very good.*

2008 Windy Oaks Limited Release Wild Yeast Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir 13.9% alc., \$55. Wine club or tasting room only. Unfined and unfiltered. *Moderately light reddish-purple color in the glass. Slightly funky, yeasty nose with bright black cherry fruit aromas. Mid weight core of darker red cherries and berries with a crisp, red berry driven finish. Moderately firm grip of tannin with plenty of oak flourish. I have mixed feelings about this one and this may not be a representative bottle. Good.*