

Santa Lucia appellation says 'cheers'

Small wineries gaining recognition for quality and variety of their vintages

By JOLI SPENCIER
For South County Life

As you drive north on Highway 101, the dark mountains to the left encompass the Santa Lucia appellation, a specialty grape-growing region in Monterey County, which has received worldwide recognition. Anyone who is tired of the highway can get off and take River Road along the base of the Santa Lucia Mountains for a nice side trip — and perhaps enjoy wine tasting along the way.

With numerous artisan wineries, each of which produces no more than 50,000 cases, and tasting rooms along the way, this region is fast becoming a wine tourist destination.

"Wineries like us are providing the full winery experience," said Steve Pessagno, owner and winemaker at Pessagno Winery in Salinas.

Associations have sprung up to promote the area. One such organization is the River Road Wine Trail Group, representing tasting rooms in the area. This group is hosting its first-ever open house May 5 at all member tasting rooms.

Wine Artisans of the Santa Lucia Highlands, formed in 2005 represents grape-growers' interests specific to the Santa Lucia appellation. The group is holding its debut event May 19, a wine and food tasting with 20 wineries all pouring at Paraiso Vineyards, 8060 Paraiso Springs Road in Soledad.

Members plan to pull out all the stops, with special reserves and prized vintages. Wineries pouring include Bernardus, Hahn, Loring, Manzoni, Morgan, Paraiso, Pelerin, Pessagno, Pisoni, Roar, Robert Talbott,



RICHARD GREEN/
SOUTH COUNTY LIFE FILE PHOTO

Signs point out the direction of some of the wineries in south Monterey County.

Siduri, Toncré, Testarossa and others. Five tasting rooms are represented in the Wine Artisans organization, but some labels, such as Roar and Lucia, have no tasting room.

Cool climate coupled with sparse soil impart a special savor to Santa Lucia wines. Varietals of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Syrah, and, to a lesser degree, cool climate varietals such as Riesling and Gewürztraminer, are grown in the northern reaches of the Santa Lucia range.

These artisan growers aren't interested in high volumes.

"We are looking for high-quality wines that represent the area," Pessagno said.

Grapes grown here end up in boutique wines. "There is a tremendous amount of recognition for this area's quality," he said.



RICHARD GREEN/SOUTH COUNTY LIFE FILE PHOTO

Visitors sample wines on the deck of Paraiso Vineyards' tasting room in August 2003.

TO ATTEND

■ **WHAT:** Wine Artisans of the Santa Lucia Highlands wine and food tasting. Twenty wineries will pour; catering by Chef Cal Stamenov from Bernardus Lodge in Carmel Valley.

■ **WHEN:** 3 to 6 p.m. May 19.

■ **WHERE:** Paraiso Winery, 8060 Paraiso Springs Road, Soledad.

■ **TICKETS** \$85. Limited to 300 people, who must be at least 21. Buy through www.santaluciahighlands.com.

TO ATTEND

■ **WHAT:** River Road Wine Trail Group open house.

■ **WHEN:** May 5.

■ **WHERE:** all member tasting rooms.

■ **INFORMATION:** www.riverroadwinetrail.com.

Talbott Vineyards in Gonzales owns some of the oldest vines in the Santa Lucias, said marketing manager Ross Allen. Located at the northern end of the appellation between the Mer Soleil and Morgan facilities, Talbott grows Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and some Riesling.

"It is a phenomenal growing area," Allen said. "Fantastic wines are coming out of the highlands."

Farther south along the corridor, the predominant variety of grapes begins to change.

"You are moving away from the source of the cold," said Greg Freeman, assistant winemaker at Hahn Estates Winery

in Soledad, which is located in the middle of the appellation. The farther you get from the Monterey Bay, which brings cold marine air, the warmer the climate becomes.

"You change your grapes to accommodate the change in microclimate," Freeman said.

Hence, toward the southern end of the Santa Lucia Highlands you will see more Bordeaux varietals such as Cabernet, Merlot and Malbec wines, which are traditionally grown in warmer regions.

"They require more heat to ripen and mature," Freeman said. Hahn produces some Cabernet varietals.

But when you arrive in the southern reaches of the appellation, the growing conditions are quite different. According to David Fleming, winemaker at Paraiso Vineyards, the many microclimates found on the Paraiso grounds are what distinguish the wines.

Growing techniques distinguish the various wineries' styles. Wind plays a major role in developing the flavor of the grapes, Fleming said.

Travelers can also get in a little shopping at some of the gift shops located in the tasting rooms.

Winemaker Gaby Hahn at Hahn Estates/Smith and Hook often brings back interesting items from her travels in Africa. The boutique at Paraiso Vineyards is the only one like it within a 30-mile radius, said Jennifer Smith, who manages the shop.

"It is not your average tasting room," Smith said. "You can drink wine and shop all at the same time."