Fact File

Number of licensed wineries: More than 200
Total vineyard hectares: 8,095ha–10,526ha
AVAs: Santa Maria Valley, Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Rita Hills and Happy Canyon
Main grape varieties: 50 are grown. Most wineries focus on Syrah, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Grenache

Individuality is the watchword in this still-emerging region, says Katie Kelly Bell. Visit soon for a taste of California’s frontier spirit.

WHEN THE CRITICALLY acclaimed Jonata winery was exploring initial vineyard sites in Santa Barbara’s Santa Ynez Valley back in 2000, it invited select experts from across the globe to advise on everything from vineyard placement to density. The winemaker, Matt Dees, remembers one specific visit from a French winemaker from Bordeaux: ‘He walked around, saying little. After digging the soil a bit with his pocket knife, he snapped it shut and, without rules or expectations. Paul Warson, the winemaker for Firestone Vineyards, notes that ‘because there are no rules, there aren’t any to outshine the warehouse setting, and out of Los Olivos where you can leave the car as everything is within walking distance. Stop by the Qupé tasting room for a stellar selection of Rhône varietals, especially the Sawyer Lindquist stellar selection of Rhône varietals, and farmers.

What some view as an identity problem, others characterise. Here, steep, oceanside cliffs yield to softer rolling hills dotted with olive trees, wild lavender and bent, gnarled oaks. Cowboys and ranchers mingle with tourists and farmers.

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Thankfully, Jonata ignored his advice (even naming a wine Defiance in honour of the snub) and proceeded to cultivate world-class wines, garnering high praise for its Bordeaux varietals, Syrah and Sangiovese wines.

Indeed, defiance is the watchword in Santa Barbara County. This still-emerging wine frontier resists stereotyping and simplification, due in large part to the region’s astonishing density of microclimates and interplay of winemakers who value individuality over rules.

Just two and a half hours north of Los Angeles, the area’s small towns are vestiges of the old West frontier architecture, but it remains an impossible region to

My perfect day in Santa Barbara

Morning

Drive to your first stop at the new Pali Tasting Room in Santa Barbara’s Funk Zone, close to the ocean. Pali offers a good exploration of New World Pinot with its wines from Oregon and California. The Santa Rita Hills Pinot is impressive (www.paliwineco.com).

Lunch

Enjoy the oceanfront patio at the Four Seasons (pictured below), a few miles away, and look out for whales. Order a bottle of Gavin Chanin’s exquisite Lutum Santa Barbara Pinot Noir (www.chanim.com), relishes the showing best at the moment – not the current release – and you are likely to get some quality time with someone on the winemaking team. Appointments are a must (www.jonata.com).

Evening and overnight

A five-minute drive brings you to Los Olivos where you can settle in for dinner after a glass at The Watering Hole (www.wateringhole.com). Order a bottle of Gavin Chanin’s exquisite Lutum Santa Barbara Pinot Noir or the nearby Hitching Post restaurant (www.jonata.com).

Afternoon

Continue the scenic drive north deeper into Santa Barbara county. Next stop is Buellton for a private tasting at Jonata’s winery. The wines easily outshine the warehouse setting, and you’ll enjoy the rare opportunity to taste a range of terroirs from its award-winning and diverse portfolio (think sunny-climate Syrah and Sangiovese and cool-climate Pinot Noir and Chardonnay). They’ll pour what’s

Above: Cold Spring Canyon Arch Bridge over Santa Ynez Valley, one of the four AVAs of Santa Barbara County. The valley is a popular film location, including for the 2004 film Sideways – many movie fans make the pilgrimage to the nearby Hitching Post restaurant (pictured below).
agings, and forcing the use of sulphur. Yet, for Moorman, the most dynamic element is the region’s dramatic climate: ‘The diversity of soil and the dynamic temperatures are a rare combination, it’s uncommon to have both in play.’

As a transverse valley – one of the world’s few – a 12°C temperature variation exists from one end of the county to the other. A 21°C day in Santa Rita Hills (where Burgundian varieties thrive) is a 38°C day in Happy Canyon (great for Rhône varieties).

The one constant is the Pacific Ocean’s cooling influence, with breezes funnelled through the valley, soothing the grapes into gentile ripening, and nurturing acidity. The result is a beautiful marriage of fruit and freshness, variety and complexity. In a single day of wine touring you might come across a juicy cherry-berry Malbec, an Albariño perfumed with peaches and flowers and a dense, smoky Syrah – and you’ll only have driven 24km. Given this, weekdays are the ideal time to plan your cellar experimentation, Santa Barbara County is a wine adventurer’s paradise.

For a taste of cool-climate, Burgundian-style wines, make tracks for the town of Lompoc in the Santa Rita Hills, about 15 minutes from Buellton. Much like Burgundy, you’ll find mostly Pinot Noir and Chardonnay here. Gavin Chinni, the winemaker for Lutum (www.latumwine.com), notes that Santa Barbara ‘has an ideal climate for Pinot Noir. Burgundy gets maybe 108 days from flower to harvest; we enjoy 130 days. Our wines ripen on the vineyard scenery and drive down Santa Rosa Road or park the car and sample wines at the tasting room, for fresh loaves for your sandwiches later. Serious Grenache and Syrah can be found on the northern slope, up Foxen Canyon Road, about 10 minutes from Buellton. Here you’ll bump into a bit of the Wild West along with the likes of a supple, rich Sangiovese/Cabernet Sauvignon blend (Magia Nera). It’s also a peaceful picnic spot.

Two stops that also merit a visit are Pedrasaasi (www.novinelnad.com), with gorgeous, small-batch Chardonnay and Syrah from the winemaker Sashi Moorman, and Palmina (www.palminawines.com) – beautifully expressed Italian varieties: Arneis, Clockwise from top left: Janina produces world-class reds; the tasting room at Firestone Vineyard has a flight of six wines for $50; the Hitching Post is famous for its steak, as well as its appearance in the movie Sideways; the picnic area at Zaca Mesa, where there’s a focus on Rhône varieties; cowboy boots at western outfitter Jedlicka’s.

How to get there

Direct flights into Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) with connections into Santa Barbara’s local airport are best to avoid the Los Angeles traffic. From Santa Barbara the wine region is a 45-minute drive (or 2.5 hours from LAX).

TRAVEL: SANTA BARBARA

The town of Los Olivos, about five minutes’ drive from Buellton, is a mini-spoke on the wheel, but packed with tasting options. In addition to wine, you’ll find olive oil producers and expert restaurateurs. The perfect place for an afternoon stroll, Los Olivos has a concentration of small winery tasting rooms, such as The Los Olivos Tasting Room (www.thelosolivosinoastingroom.com), where nine wines are poured and $9 are for sale. Santa Barbara County is no small region to explore, but that’s part of the adventure.

Winemakers are experimenting, and producing some knockout wines. But when darkness falls, all is quiet – a sudden contrast to the sunny optimism of a typical Santa Barbara day. Temperatures drop and stars emerge in an unparalleled density, leaving the sky lacy with glittering light. Now is the time to open your bottle of California sunshine, light a fire, and savour the taste of defiance.

Katie Kelly Bell is a freelance food, wine and travel writer

Dolcetto and Barbera from the winemaker Steve Candolfo. Renting a house to pop into Sashi Moorman’s bakery, New Vineland Bread, just behind his tasting room, for fresh loaves for your sandwiches later. Serious Grenache and Syrah can be found on the northern slope, up Foxen Canyon Road, about 10 minutes from Buellton. Here you’ll bump into a bit of the Wild West along with the likes of a supple, rich Sangiovese/Cabernet Sauvignon blend (Magia Nera). It’s also a peaceful picnic spot.

At Pedrasaasi (www.novinelnad.com) go for the samplings of Syrah from some of the region’s oldest vines – and enjoy the life-size chessboard and short winey hiring trail while you’re there. The town of Los Olivos, about five minutes’ drive from Buellton, is a mini-spoke on the wheel, but packed with tasting options. In addition to wine, you’ll find olive oil producers and expert restaurateurs. The perfect place for an afternoon stroll, Los Olivos has a concentration of small winery tasting rooms, such as The Los Olivos Tasting Room (www.thelosolivosinoastingroom.com), where nine wines are poured and $9 are for sale.

Santa Barbara County
WHERE TO STAY, SHOP, EAT AND RELAX

Santa Barbara County
Restaurants

Hitching Post
Relive the best and worst moments from the movie Sideways at this classic western steakhouse (where much of the movie was filmed). The menu features smoked duck, Texas quail and some serious steaks.

www.hitchingpost2.com

Mattel’s Tavern
A great stop for breakfast, lunch or dinner. Try the poached eggs with braised spinach and buffalo sauce or biscuit with house-cured pancetta. www.mattelstavern.com

Full of Life Flatbread Pizza
This is where the locals go for quality pizza, but you’ll also find foraged chanterelles, eggplant flatbread or heirloom tomato salad, depending on seasonal pickings.

www.fulloflifefoods.com

Koehler Winery
Rent this private home at this charming winery along the rural Fosen Canyon Road. Perched on a hillside adjacent to the tasting room (pictured above), the home is spacious, with only grapes and goats for neighbours. The fully stocked kitchen makes it ideal for a large group travelling together.

www.koehlerwinery.com

Fess Parker Inn
An historic inn, now a boutique hotel, ideal for a romantic escape, with a touch of luxury and an award-winning Champagne spa right in the centre of Los Olivos. Make time for breakfast at the hotel’s Petro’s restaurant – the house-made Gyroh and granola with Greek honey is world-class delicious.

www.fessparkerin.com

SHOP

Jedlicka’s
Check out this tay shop, western outfitter and supply store in Los Olivos. One of the best cowboy-boot selections I’ve seen, as well as cowboy hats, shirts, jackets, jewellery, small gifts and belts. This has bags of local character, showing the western heartbeat of this area – it’s still wild country.

www.jedlickas.com

Bin 2860
Located adjacent to the Fess Parker Inn in Los Olivos, this intimate shop (pictured below) is packed with a smart international and local wine selection and the region’s best range of craft beers. Daily tastings are informative, and it’s a great place to get local tips on dining and touring.

www.bin2860.com

RETAIL

Winemaking has tracks for the Lompoc, and sample wines in the Lompoc Wine Ghetto (www.lompropcircraft.com), aptly named for the industrial-park ambiance of the tasting rooms. What it lacks in architectural charm, it makes up for in delicious wines.

www.newvineland.com

Hammad Yassine’s tower, the Gastronomic Travel Bureau, with gorgeous, small-batch Chardonnay and Syrah from the winemaker Sashi Moorman, and Palmina (www.palminawines.com) – beautifully expressed Italian varieties: Arneis,