

Having a Vine Time

The wine industry has both tourists and business owners seeing red, white, and rosé.

BY MATT KETTMANN

In a mere three decades, Santa Barbara County winemaking has grown, quite literally, from a few scraggly vines into a robust and renowned \$500 million industry. Business is especially booming these days in the wake of the 2004 hit film *Sideways*, which made the region world famous and ramped up the already steady tourist traffic. The combination of the film, the proximity to Los Angeles' money, and Americans' rapidly growing love for wine

amount to what some are calling "a perfect storm." But there's something more to Santa Barbara County than stormlike luck—the county's entrepreneurial spirit, down-home charm, and adventurous attitude turn first-time visitors into instant fans and keep 'em coming back for more.

"People have called us the mavericks," explains Jim Fiolek, executive director of the Santa Barbara County Vintners' Association. "In most of our wineries, the

majority of people have learned in the cellar, not by the book. That is the best expression, in my opinion, of defining our area."

Perhaps no one knows that do-it-yourself spirit as well as Nicholas Miller, whose family started growing grapes on the Santa Maria Valley's Bien Nacido Vineyards in the 1970s and also owns Central Coast Wine Services. "It's exciting because of the mix of new stories being told," Miller says of the experimental growing and winemaking techniques used countywide. Most of the players are first-generation winemakers, he says: "And they're not businessmen—they're artists."

Those artists, whose palette includes three distinct wine-growing appellations and as many as 150 wineries (depending on what you define as a "winery"), tend to more than \$100 million in wine grapes every year, a figure that usually comes in as No. 2 or 3 in the county's crop totals. (Strawberries and broccoli round out the annual top three.) The resulting wines, when added to retail purchases, restaurant sales, and related tourist industry tallies, approach \$1 billion in revenue, making wine the county's single largest industry.

The area's commitment to maintaining

its rural charm means that money gets spread throughout the county, according to Steve Cushman, head of the city of Santa Barbara's chamber of commerce. When he started paying attention to the nascent industry 20 years ago, he saw the proximity to Los Angeles as the key to making a new Napa, with plenty of wine-country hotels and other tourist infrastructure. "It took me a year to figure out that Santa Barbara doesn't want that, thank you very much," he says now.

Meanwhile, the industry's growth has also elevated Santa Barbara's status in the eyes of gourmards. Kathy Janega-Dykes, president of the Santa Barbara County Conference & Visitors Bureau, explained that as the wines have blossomed, "Santa Barbara's wine and food have gained a new cachet as well.

"These growing attractions for our community have really drawn more people with a special interest in food, wine, and its preparation as well as visitors interested in culinary adventures," she says. The CVB is launching a new study this winter in hopes of determining just how many visitors—whether overnighters or day-trippers—are coming specifically for the wine, and they're expecting the number to surprise everyone.

For Lompoc, the wine boom has been even louder. Five years ago, there were five labels being made in the city's affectionately named "wine ghetto," an industrial park off the highway. Now, 14 wineries produce 30 labels that can be sampled in five tasting rooms. "We really emphasize the growth of entrepreneurship here," explains Kate Griffith, the city's economic development manager.

The industry's adventurous spirit is also showing up in the tasting rooms. Take Artiste, for instance, a winery in the heart of Old Town Santa Ynez where visitors not only taste boldly mixed wines, but also are encouraged to paint on community canvases or take part in a wine-blending seminar. Director of Marketing Christina LoCascio, whose own wine paintings are on display at the gallery, says, "We provide an interactive experience, and I think it's really impor-

tant to create something that's memorable for the guest." It's working—Artiste is getting younger crowds and the tasting room has grown from a tiny back room to three entire galleries in less than four years.

After a stop at Artiste, visitors can travel one of six tasting trails, ranging from the more urban Santa Barbara route and jaunts through the villages of Solvang and Los Olivos to the bucolic rides through Foxen Canyon, the Sta. Rita Hills, and the Santa Ynez Valley.

So the wine will keep flowing, and the people of Santa Barbara County are adamant about keeping the region's charm intact. "People want to keep Santa Barbara what Santa Barbara is," says Fiolek. "The county's been very actively aware of not killing the goose that's laying the golden eggs."

Clockwise from far left: Syrah grapes; a tasting at Artiste; Nicholas Miller of Santa Maria Valley's Bien Nacido Vineyards; painting at Artiste

Meet the Appellations

Although you can visit all three Santa Barbara County appellations in one busy afternoon, they are remarkably distinct wine-growing regions. Here's a rundown:

Santa Maria Valley: The county's first and northernmost appellation stretches east from Santa Maria into a flat, fertile valley and into the slow-rising foothills. Thanks to cool ocean breezes and a long growing season, it produces renowned Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

Santa Ynez Valley: More inland and warmer, this region produces a healthy array of varietals, including Santa Barbara favorites Pinot Noir and Chardonnay as well as Viognier, Sauvignon Blanc, Syrah, Merlot, and—increasingly in Happy Canyon on the valley's hot eastern edge—Cabernet Sauvignon.

Sta. Rita Hills: This newest superstar region runs between Buellton and Lompoc, where the undulating hills along California Route 246 and Santa Rosa Road are often coated with a chilly fog, a perfect climate for growing Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

—Matt Kettmann



PHOTO BY KIRK IRWIN

