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 straggly 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 fourth-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 grow and make a healthy array of 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.

At 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. “We've seen a lot of growth in the last few years.”

Meanwhile, the industry’s growth has also elevated Santa Barbara’s status in the eyes of gourmands. Kathy Janega-Dykes, president of the Santa Barbara County Conference & Visitors Bureau, explained that the 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.

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The industry’s adventurous spirit is also showing up in the tasting rooms. Take Arista, 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 important to create something that’s memorable for the guest.”

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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.

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