

July, 2014

Santa Cruz Mountains – A Study in Terroir
Antonio Galloni

The Santa Cruz Mountains remains one of the most distinctive appellations in California, with an ever-increasing number of world-class Chardonnays, Pinots and Cabernet Sauvignons that merit serious attention.

Stanford's campus, Silicon Valley, major highways and a number of other landmarks are all visible from high-up on the ridges that form the Santa Cruz Mountains, yet this collection of rugged hillside vineyards remains quite isolated, almost completely detached from the bustling world below. The San Andreas Fault runs right through the Santa Cruz Mountains and acts as a natural border between the cooler, western part of the appellation, where Burgundian varieties thrive, and the more inland, eastern side of the region, which is more hospitable to Bordeaux varieties. Over the last few years a handful of top winemakers from outside the immediate area have begun sourcing fruit here, including Wind Gap, Ceritas and Arnot-Roberts. Their wines serve to further illustrate the huge potential and sheer greatness these sites are capable of.

Most of the wines I tasted on my most recent trip were from the 2012 vintage, a growing season that rewarded producers with much more favorable conditions and a more generous crop than 2011. These steep, hillside sites are already quite marginal in normal years. Cool, late-ripening years such as 2011 can push things to the limit. In 2012

however, producers benefited from a long, relaxed summer with plenty of sunshine, with no heat spikes or other shocks. The 2012s are radiant and expressive. Yields were on the generous side for the Santa Cruz Mountains, which only means average in terms of what would be considered normal elsewhere around the world. Because the yields are essentially normal in this vintage, I did not taste as many diluted 2012s in the Santa Cruz Mountains as I encountered elsewhere throughout the Central Coast.

Big Basin proprietor Bradley Brown began his career as an apprentice of John Alban, so it is hardly a surprise that the early Big Basin wines reflect that influence. Over the last few years, Brown has made a pretty radical shift towards a much lighter style of winemaking. Picking dates have moved up and the overall emphasis today is on freshness. Neutral oak is favored over new barrels, while the use of whole clusters, especially in Pinot, is on the way up. It isn't exactly clear to me yet where Brown and Big Basin will ultimately end up in the stylistic spectrum but it is obvious the wines are quite different in style than they were just a few years ago.



Langdon Shiverick Imports