



CALIFORNIA'S BEST SINGLE VINEYARDS

BY STEVE HEIMOFF

BUYING WINES FROM THESE FIVE
PROPERTIES IS AS CLOSE TO A
GUARANTEE OF QUALITY AS
YOU'RE EVER GOING TO GET.

A generation ago, a vineyard designation on a California wine was rare. It represented the industry gold standard: Martha's Vineyard, Robert Young, Eisele. Wines just didn't get any better. Vineyard designations were for true reserve wines, and were saved by producers for their very best wines.

Today there are hundreds, maybe thousands, of vineyard-designated wines—so many that you just can't keep track anymore. You could, theoretically, grow grapes in your backyard and put them into a vineyard-designated wine (that is, as long as 95 percent of the grapes—the

TTB definition of a "single vineyard"-designated wine—came from your backyard).

These varying ideas of "single vineyard" are why we think it's more important than ever to recognize those vineyards whose grapes really do go into excellent wines. Because consumers, for better or worse, are willing to pay more for a vineyard-designated wine, it's important to clarify which single-vineyard wines really are worth seeking out, and separate the wheat from the chaff. Because believe me, there's plenty of chaff.



PHOTO FAITH ECHTERMEYER, COURTESY HAUSER RANCH VINEYARD, PASO ROBLES, CA

When we first came up with the idea to write about California's single vineyards, we ran into difficulties deciding on a definition of "single vineyard." What exactly did we mean by that? There are some vineyards that are wholly owned by a single winery, whose grapes go solely into that winery's bottlings (think Shafer Hillside Select Cabernet). There are privately owned vineyards, whose grapes are sold to different wineries (such as the Sanford & Benedict Vineyard). And there are wines made from purchased grapes grown by wineries that use grapes from the same vineyard in its own bottlings (an example here would be the Williams Selyem Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir).

For the sake of simplicity, we are focusing on vineyards that have been around for at least 10 years, and have both contributed fruit to a flagship wine for its owner and/or manager, and to vineyard-designated bottlings from other wineries who buy the grapes from that vineyard. Lauding vineyards whose grapes are used by only one winery, we reasoned, would make it difficult to determine if good fruit, or good winemaking, was the root of their success. Overall, the wines from the vineyards included here are at the top of their classes, with proven ageability.

You'll notice also that our top five vineyards all are most famous for

their red wines. This raises the age-old question of what constitutes a "noble variety." Traditionally, Europe's noble grapes have come from France: Bordeaux (mainly Cabernet Sauvignon), Burgundy (Pinot Noir and Chardonnay) and the Northern Rhône (Syrah). Admittedly, this is an old model, but it's a useful starting point. Our listing features one Cabernet vineyard (Tokalon), one Syrah vineyard (Alban) and three Pinot vineyards (Rochioli, Pisoni and Sanford & Benedict), although each of these properties also produces other grape varieties.

I suppose this breakdown reflects my bias that, as great as California Cabernet Sauvignon can be, Pinot Noir has emerged as the more interesting wine, and in some ways, the most promising. As for Chardonnay, we'll get around to honoring it in a future issue, as well as honoring great vineyards that produce Zinfandel. Then there's Sauvignon Blanc. Always a bridesmaid, never a bride, it's going to take some time before any single vineyard in California can claim to produce a "great" one.

What we're not saying is that these five vineyards always produce California's best wines. No, their greatness lies in the fact that you're practically guaranteed to get an interesting wine from grapes grown here, and as often as not, a great wine. All of these vineyards are located in fabulous spots; their owners have the highest farming and winemaking standards and are very selective about who may buy their grapes. And because producers craft wine from each property differ-

ntly, you, the wine enthusiast, have the pleasure of comparing their styles.

So here they are, *Wine Enthusiast's* top five California vineyards. Their names on labels is as close to a guarantee of quality as you can get.

TOKALON VINEYARD

Established: 1868

Established by: Hamilton Crabb

Location: Oakville, Napa Valley

Acres planted: originally 359, now 699

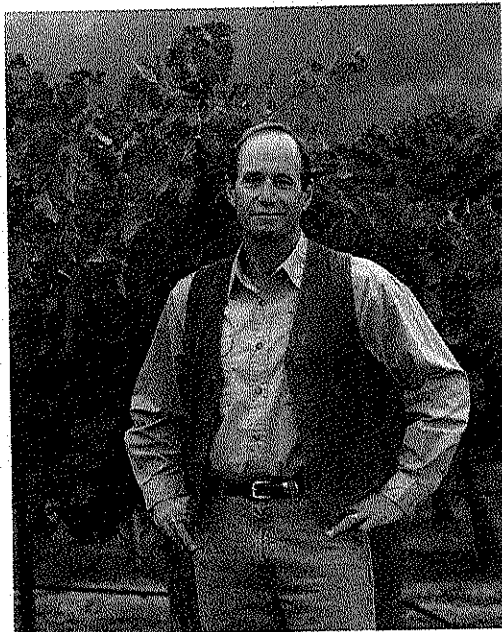
Planted to: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec,

Petit Verdot, Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon, Syrah and Zinfandel

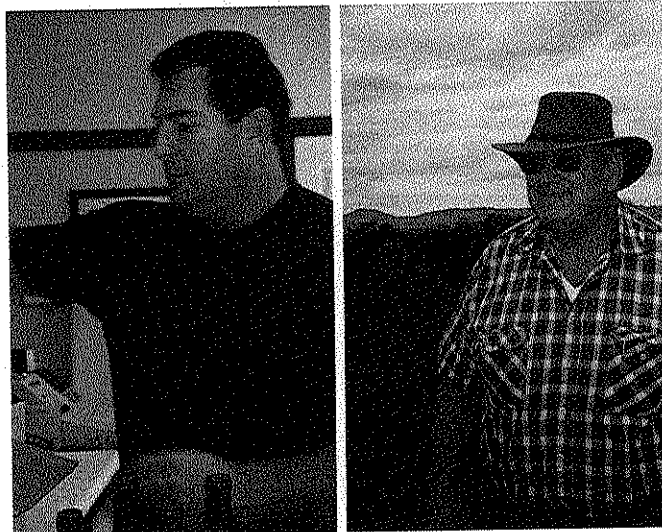
Ownership: Constellation Brands/Robert Mondavi (originally 325 acres, now expanded to 555). Also Andrew Beckstoffer (89 acres), Constellation/Opus One (35 acres), U.C. Davis (20 acres). Two small plots, Detert and Horton, remain in private hands, but Mondavi manages them.

Flagship grape variety: Cabernet Sauvignon

Tokalon Vineyard wines are made by: Robert Mondavi, Karl Lawrence, Juslyn, Behrens & Hitchcock, Schrader, Paul Hobbs, Provenance, Atalon



Left, Andy Beckstoffer. Below, Tom Rochioli in his winery lab and Joe Rochioli Jr. in the vineyard.



ROCHIOLI VINEYARD

Established: 1958. First Pinot Noir in 1968

Established by: Joseph Rochioli Sr. and Jr.

Location: Healdsburg, Russian River Valley

Acres planted: 128

Planted to: Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, Gamay Beaujolais

Ownership: Rochioli family

Flagship grape variety: Pinot Noir

Rocholi Vineyard Pinot Noirs are made by: Rochioli, Williams-Selyem, Gary Farrell, Davis Bynum

Tokalon has been the source of some of California's most famous wines for a century. It is one of the greatest homes of Cabernet Sauvignon in the New World.

The vineyard lies on east-facing benches of the Mayacamas Mountains. The soils are gravel and sand along the hills, turning to heavier clays along Highway 29, where the wines are "less dense and concentrated," says Mondavi's vineyard director, Daniel Bosch.

The oldest vineyard-designated Cabernet dates only from the 1990s, when Mondavi put "To Kalon" (as they spell it—you'll also see it written as "ToKalon") on a label. Previously, the grapes had gone into other Mondavi bottlings, and Beaulieu Vineyard's Georges de Latour Private Reserve Cabernet. In 1993, grapegrower Andrew Beckstoffer acquired Beaulieu's parcel and replanted it. Mondavi has greatly increased acreage over the years, prompting Beckstoffer to argue that his portion is more historic.

A Tokalon Cabernet typically has a firm, classic structure, with dry, well-oaked currant flavors and a long finish. In exceptional years, they are long lived. Mondavi's represent the purest expression of the terroir, and can oftentimes ride out lighter vintages. Mondavi winemaker Genevieve Janssens describes them as "not shy, but we can work the wine so it has elegance. And [they are] very profound. We have a deep voice in To Kalon we don't have anyplace else."

In spite of the vineyard's heritage and reputation, the wines from Beckstoffer's portion get more mixed reviews. This is probably because many of these newer wineries that buy these grapes are still developing their own styles. For them, a poor vintage matters much more than it does at Mondavi.

Harvest-date decisions vary widely. "It's fascinating when people decide to pick," says Atalon winemaker Tom Peffer. "You'll see 10 rows get harvested, while next to them a win-

ery might go another three weeks." Behrens & Hitchcock takes a late-picked approach, which results in Porty wines not meant to age.

Most others harvest sooner. But vintage, as I have said, makes a huge difference. "The 2000 is not a 25-year cellarworthy wine, like the 1999 or 2001," declares Matt Hobbs, vice president of Paul Hobbs.

One word about Mondavi's To Kalon Fumé Blanc: Especially when labeled "I Block," it is one of the greatest Sauvignons in California, extremely dry and flinty, and can improve with age.

A little trivia: Davis Bynum made the first vineyard-designated California Pinot Noir in 1973. It was a Rochioli Vineyard Pinot. Rochioli Pinot Noirs have been cult wines longer than some cult winemakers have been alive.

The vineyard ranges from foggy sand and gravel banks above the Russian River to mountain slopes rich in red volcanic soil. The best wines come from the oldest blocks nearer the river, a tenderloin winemaker Tom Rochioli calls Mid 40. For this article, we focus on the 11.7 acres of East Block (planted 1968), West Block (1969) and Three Corner (1974). These names are trademarked by Rochioli. Grapes from older vines also go to Williams Selyem, Gary Farrell and Davis Bynum. Production from these diseased old vines has plummeted, and they will soon have

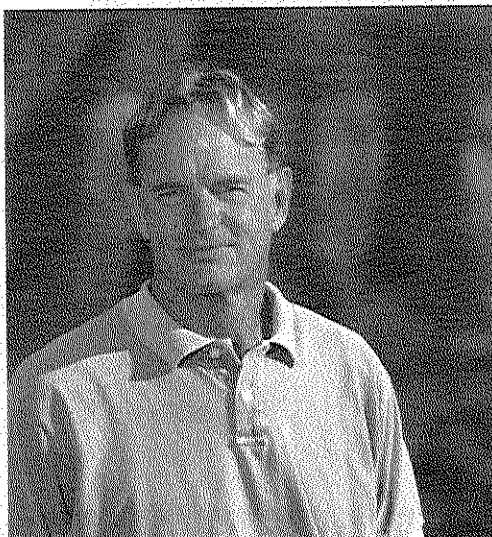
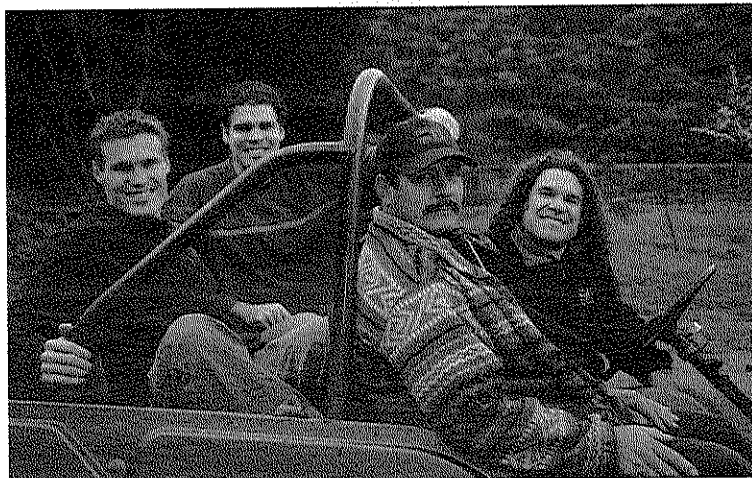
PHOTOS STEVE HEIMOFF

to be replanted. But quality is very fine.

Rochioli Vineyard lies in the warmest part of the Russian River Valley, which is called the Middle Reach. A Rochioli Pinot Noir is a big, dark wine, with rich tannins, crisp acids, cherry flavors and plenty of oak. Flattering in youth, they are generally also age-worthy wines. Leave an opened bottle out on the counter for a few days, and you'll see how much better it gets.

Some people, like Farrell, favor an earlier-picked, higher-acid, lower-alcohol wine. "The challenge [in Pinot Noir] is to find mature fruit at reasonable sugar levels," he says, arguing that the feeble old vines make grapes that "reach flavor maturity at low brix and high acidity." Davis Bynum's winemaker, Hampton Bynum, also prefers an earlier harvest. "These riper styles don't go well with food, although they stand out in competitions," he says.

Both Bob Cabral and Tom Rochioli prefer riper grapes. "The wines I used to pick at a little less [ripeness] are not as good," Rochioli argues. "They border on the herbal and don't last." Cabral's bottlings have an increasing tendency toward ripe flamboyance. But vintage matters. In a cool or rainy vintage, a Rochioli Pinot Noir can be rhu-barby; in a hotter year, they are Rhône-like, even raisiny. Joe Rochioli, Jr., Tom's father and the winery's chief viticulturalist, acknowledges the importance of vintage. Of his highest-priced bottling, East



Above: Mark Pisoni, Jeff Pisoni, vineyard manager Elias Gandora and Gary Pisoni. Left, Richard Sanford.

Block, he says, "When it's good, it's real good, but when it's a miss, it's not good enough to charge that kind of money," which is why he doesn't produce East Block every year.

But when everything comes together, a Rochioli Vineyard Pinot Noir is a glorious wine. The ageability curve, in a great year like 1999 or 2003, extends out to about eight

years, although lovers of old Pinot Noir will push them even further.

PISONI VINEYARD

Established: 1982

Established by: Gary Pisoni

Location: Santa Lucia Highlands, Monterey County

Acres planted: 50

Planted to: Pinot Noir, Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot

Ownership: Pisoni family

Flagship grape variety: Pinot Noir

Pisoni Vineyard Pinot Noirs are made by:

Pisoni, Peter Michael, Patz & Hall, Roar, Tantara, Testarossa, Siduri, Miura, Capioux, Ryan,

Arcadian, L'Angevin. Past buyers have included Flowers, Lorca, Miner, Morgan, Nichols, Ojai, Scott Paul and Tandem

Gary Pisoni's sons, winemaker Jeff and viticulturalist Mark, smile when asked to describe wines made from the family vineyard. "Just like Dad's personality," says Mark, "big, dramatic, intense."

Indeed, Pisoni Vineyard Pinot Noirs are chiefly characterized by size. In reviewing my notes of dozens of them, I'm struck by the number of times the words "dark," "complex," "enormous," "massive," and "intense" appear, often accompanied by a score above 90 points. Adam Lee, who uses Pisoni fruit in his Siduri brand, notes, "To make a shy, retiring wine from that vineyard just doesn't work."

The key is terroir. Pisoni is a mountain vineyard, with elevations ranging to 1,400 feet. The soils are decomposed granite and very well-drained. More importantly, the low-yielding vineyard is above the fog that usually blankets the Salinas Valley. A Pisoni Vineyard wine consequently is ripe and intense in varietal fruit.

Pinot Noir secured the vineyard's reputation rather quickly in the 1990s. The first famous one, a 1996 Ojai, preceded Pisoni's own. "I had some established wineries vineyard-designate [the wine]," Gary recalls, "and then waited for them to get good scores and lead the way for us."

MORE TOP PLOTS

Here are other great California vineyards whose names you'll find on vineyard-designated wines. Obviously this list will be incomplete, but these areas perform at or near their peak, year after year, for their top varieties.

Allen (Russian River Valley)

Andrew Murray Roasted Slope (Santa Ynez Valley)

Backus (Napa Valley)

Bien Nacido (Santa Maria Valley)

Dickerson (Napa Valley)

Eisele (Napa Valley)

Garys' (Santa Lucia Highlands)

Hirsch (Sonoma Coast)

Hudson (Carneros)

Hyde (Carneros)

James Berry (Paso Robles)

Martha's (Oakville)

Mer Soleil (Santa Lucia Highlands)

Mitsuko's (Carneros)

Monte Bello (Santa Cruz Mountains)

Monte Rosso (Sonoma Valley)

Rincon (Arroyo Grande Valley)

Robert Young (Alexander Valley)

Rosemary's (Arroyo Grande Valley)

Shafer Hillside (Stags Leap District)

Sleepy Hollow (Santa Lucia Highlands)

Two Acres (Russian River Valley)

He launched his brand in 1998. Today, the Pisonis sell fruit only to selected buyers, and they have been known to drop some famous names from that list.

The range of wineries that sources from the vineyard means a variety of approaches. "Each winery obviously imparts its own style, but because they all source from different blocks, that's another variable that makes each different," says Jeff Pisoni. But, he adds, the biggest variable is harvest date. "Some pick earlier and some later," he says. An example of an early approach is Arcadian. At the other end are Siduri, Peter Michael and Patz & Hall. Siduri's Lee emphasizes the importance of balance when dealing with Pisoni fruit. "A Pisoni Pinot has enough weight as it is. The challenge is to make sure the wine isn't heavy. We don't want it to taste like Syrah." This tendency toward the Rhône-que was exemplified by the '02 Roar Pisoni Vineyard Pinot Noir. (Roar is co-owned by

Gary Pisoni and Gary Francioni.)

SANFORD & BENEDICT VINEYARD

Established: 1971

Established by: Richard Sanford and Michael Benedict

Location: Western Santa Ynez Valley, in the Santa Rita Hills AVA

Number of acres planted: 135

Planted to: Pinot Noir (68 acres), Chardonnay (52 acres), smaller amounts of Viognier, Gewürztraminer, Pinot Gris

Ownership: Robert Atkin, of England

Managed by: Richard Sanford

Flagship grape: Pinot Noir

Sanford & Benedict Vineyard wines are made by: Sanford, Foxen, Lane Tanner, Babcock, Gaïney, Au Bon Climat, Hitching Post

The stormiest day in 30 years is the best time to appreciate how well drained the soils are at Sanford & Benedict Vineyard.

Elsewhere, vineyards are ankle-deep in mud. But in these decomposed granites, with their coral-like structures that allows water to drain right through, the ground is firm despite having just received a foot of rain. The drainage helps to devitalize the vines. Vine growth also is slowed by cool temperatures, which are a Region I on the U.C. Davis scale.

This vineyard's first commercial vintage was 1976, under the Sanford & Benedict label. A few years later, Richard Sanford went out on his own, while Michael Benedict kept control of the vines. Losing his vineyard plunged Sanford, a Vietnam vet, into depression. But, 10 years later, he regained control, of a sort, when British businessman Richard Atkin purchased the vineyard and promptly hired Sanford to manage it. Sanford was ecstatic. "It was a very important healing process for me...it's a spiritual place," he declares. "My soul is there."

At first, Sanford took all the grapes for him-

10 WINES FROM CALIFORNIA'S TOP VINEYARDS

95 Alban 2003 Seymour's Syrah (Edna Valley); \$85. There's tremendous depth in this terroir-driven, block-designated wine. Shows flavors of black stone fruits, berries, spices, herbs, with layers of anise, chocolate and oak. Tannins are rich, thick and soft. Huge wine, delicious, sweet but dry.

95 Robert Mondavi 2001 To Kalon Vineyard Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon (Napa Valley); \$135. Young, closed, with mint, oak, black cherry and smoke flavors. Powerful, elegant and smooth. Big time tannins but sweet and refined. Tremendous fruit. Should have a long life. Drink now-2020.

94 Paul Hobbs 2001 Beckstoffer Tokalon Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (Oakville); \$185. Young and closed, and dense, but extremely fine. Has suggestions of rum-soaked raisins, cassis, sweet oak and gingerbread. On the palate, the wine feels rich, fat and extracted, and borders on super-maturity. Yet it maintains balance and even elegance. Long, fruity finish. Hold beyond 2008.

93 Rochioli 2003 Three Corner Vineyard Pinot Noir (Russian River Valley); \$65. Dusty, young, and a bit raw, the wine oozes spice, earth, wood, berry and oak aromas. It's very fruity in the mouth, showing forward cherries and cocoa; it's almost candied, but very dry. Sappy, full-bodied, rich, jammy. Needs time. 2006-2012.

93 Sanford 2002 Sanford & Benedict Vineyard Pinot Noir (Santa Barbara County); \$43. This is a big, ripe, juicy Pinot, with powerful cherry and blueberry flavors and nuances of cola, coffee, cocoa and oak. It's rich and intricately detailed, and very young. Give it a few years to soften and sweeten. Should improve for five years or more.
Cellar Selection.

93 Sine Qua Non 2002 Whisperin' E White Wine (California); \$72.

This is very fine and dry, intense in ripe fruit, the flavors reined in by superb acids, judicious oak and a minerality and earthiness. A blend of Roussanne, Viognier and Chardonnay, most all fruit comes from the Alban Vineyard, with just a smidge of Stolpman fruit.

93 Williams Seylem 2002 Rochioli Riverblock Vineyard Pinot Noir (Russian River Valley); \$69. Most tasters loved the huge complexities of this ripe, dense young wine. They praised its massive cherry and cocoa flavors that flirt with overripeness, and the smooth, silky texture. Another taster, however, found it super-oaky and clumsy. Likely to soften and knit together with a few hours of decanting, or aging through 2007. (11/01/04; W.E.)

92 Bonnacorsi 2003 Sanford & Benedict Vineyard Pinot Noir (Santa Rita Hills); \$50. Jammy. All primary fruit (cherries) and loads of toast. Very fat. Rich, ripe, loads of cherry fruit flavor, scads of sweet oak. Juicy acidity. Really too young now. Best 2006-2012.

92 Pisoni 2002 Estate Pinot Noir (Santa Lucia Highlands); \$60. Dark and dramatic. This is an enormous wine, superextracted in cherry, blackberry and mocha flavors, but totally dry. Almost Syrah-like, except for the silky tannins. Not particularly nuanced now, but the gamble is on ageability. Drink now and through the decade. (11/04)

91 Patz & Hall 2002 Pisoni Vineyard Pinot Noir (Santa Lucia Highlands); \$65. A real winner for its complex array of earthy, coffee, smoke, black cherry and vanilla flavors, and the great balance and charm. Combines power and elegance in one package. Rich and mouth-filling, with a long, attractive finish.

self, but this prompted so many complaints from local wineries, whose supply was cut off, that he relented. Despite stylistic and block variations, a Sanford & Benedict Pinot Noir is a rich, intense wine, often explosive in cherry, raspberry and spice flavors. It often displays a silky texture and great length on the palate. Au Bon Climat's Jim Clendenen applauds the vineyard's propensity to produce wines with "brilliant natural acidity [and] mind-boggling intensity of fruit and purity of flavors." Foxen's Bill Wathan, who used S&B fruit for many years until 1999, says the vineyard "is Santa Rita Hills. It has a sense of being Burgundian."

The wines are succulent on release, but really hit their stride between five and eight

years of age. Sanford's 2001 is a classic example, still all primary fruit. The 1999, by contrast, is seamless, while a 1994 Foxen is one of the most attractive Pinot Noirs I've tasted.

Richard Sanford has considered crafting a block selection from individual climates within the vineyard, which vary with elevation, soil type and clone, but is holding off, for now. "Too many variable-selection wines can be confusing from the public's point of view," he says.

ALBAN VINEYARD

Established: 1990

Established by: John Alban

Location: Edna Valley, San Luis Obispo County

Number of acres planted: 60

Planted to: Syrah, Roussanne, Viognier, Grenache

Ownership: Alban family

Flagship grape: Syrah

Alban Vineyard wines are made by: Alban and Sine Qua Non are the only wineries producing reds from this vineyard. Wineries producing white wines from Alban fruit include Failla, Turley and Sine Qua Non. Qupé used to produce an Alban Vineyard Roussanne.



John Alban remembers arriving in the Edna Valley when most of the appellation was planted to Chardonnay.

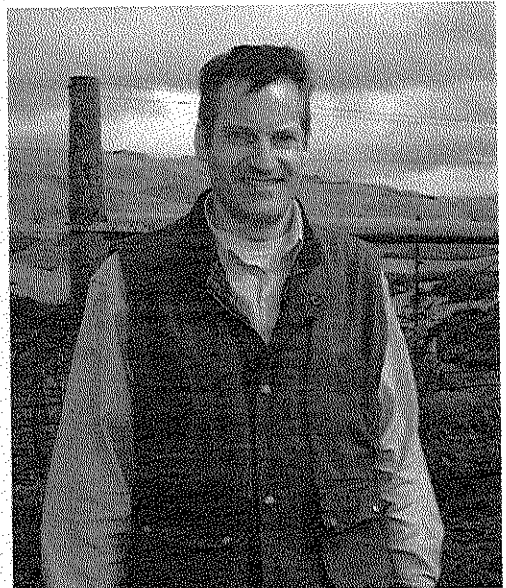
It made little sense to him, because he knew this part of California's Central Coast had the same cool climate as the Northern Rhône: Syrah country, that is. But "when I started the winery, nobody gave a rat's ass about these [Rhône] varieties," Alban says. That didn't stop him. The Rhône grapes went in, and by the mid-1990s Alban's grapes and wines, including the whites, were celebrated by insiders.

Alban Vineyard elevations range from 300 to 600 feet. Winds from the Pacific slam into the hill, chilling it. The growing season is exceptionally long, with virtually no chance of harvest rain. Soils are complex, and Alban takes great pleasure in pointing out how one block is filled with large stones, while another is volcanic clay and still another chalk and hard chert. Syrah and Grenache do best on the chalky soils, formed when the land was under water. The whites prefer the volcanics.

There are three single-block Syrahs: Reva

(planted in 1992), Lorraine (1995) and, the highest in altitude and most expensive, Seymour's (1998).

"Reva," Alban explains, "has a distinct espresso and blackberry note to it, with asphalt, emulsion, and very silky tannins. Lorraine tends to be more about red, sweet fruits, with more glycerol and sweet tannins. Seymour's is completely different, lots of exotic dried fruits, pomegranates, floral notes, more spice and tremendous weight and length." To judge from the 1992 and 1996 Revas, which I have just tasted, the wines age well; both vintages were remarkable.



John Alban and his 60-acre Edna Valley vineyards.

Alban sells Syrah grapes only to Manfred Krankl, at Sine Qua Non, who blends the fruit into his Syrahs, in varying amounts. "Alban Syrah is more interesting to me, more vivacious and brighter, than warm-climate Syrah," Krankl says. "It's not as jammy."

Among the white wines, Alban's Viognier shows classic honeyed tropical fruit flavors, but with a bracing, bright minerality and acidity. The Roussanne in particular is a thrilling wine that combines intensity with elegance. Ehren Jordan makes an Alban Viognier for his Failla label, as well as an Alban Roussanne at Turley Wine Cellars. "I have very specific requirements for any vineyard I do business with," Jordan says. "John's a great farmer, and he has an extraordinary site."

A word about Alban's Grenache: Often the last variety harvested, the grape thrives in the cool climate, attaining an intense, kirsch-and-raspberry vibrancy that allows the wines an easy decade of improvement. ■