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The Five California Vineyards You Need to Know

Anyone looking for wines that are consistently strong should seek out bottles with labels bearing these names, says Lettie Teague

By LETTIE TEAGUE

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THERE ARE MANY great vineyards in California, but very few people will see their names on a label. That's because they often belong to a single producer turning out wines in tiny amounts. A handful of vineyards, however, supply multiple producers who create wines that are more readily attainable—though no less profound.

The following five vineyards range from small to large but have two things in common: They've produced notable wines for decades, and top winemakers in California vie for the opportunity to buy their grapes. Anyone looking for wines of reliably high quality should seek out labels bearing these names.

Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard | Napa Valley

Andy Beckstoffer is one of Napa's great land barons, with more than 1,000 planted acres to his name. His holdings include many prestigious properties, but Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard is unquestionably his best.

Planted in 1868, the To Kalon Vineyard, in Oakville, has long been a source of great Napa Cabernet Sauvignon. Mr. Beckstoffer owns 89 acres. The rest is owned by Opus One, the joint venture of Château Mouton Rothschild and Robert Mondavi, and by Robert Mondavi Winery, which owns the To Kalon trademark. That's why Mr. Beckstoffer's portion of the vineyard must include his last name.



ILLUSTRATION: PING ZHU

Mr. Beckstoffer is at once an ardent preservationist and a shrewd businessman. He has fought to have his and others' properties protected from future development, and he has devised an aggressive pricing formula for his grapes. Mr. Beckstoffer charges winemakers he deems worthy of To Kalon fruit (he turns away many) 175 times the wine's retail price per ton of grapes. If a producer charges \$300 for a bottle of his Beckstoffer To Kalon wine, the price is \$50,000 for a ton of grapes (about five times the going rate for a ton of premium Napa Cabernet). Producers must charge a minimum of \$125 per bottle for Beckstoffer To Kalon wine, although most cost much more.



2012 Schrader Cellars CCS Beckstoffer To Kalon Cabernet Sauvignon

Mr. Beckstoffer says his producers get what they pay for. When I stopped by his office last month he handed me a thick sheaf of papers showing that various Beckstoffer To Kalon bottlings had been awarded very high critical ratings, including 100-point scores. Among the producers were some of Napa's greatest estates: Realm Cellars, Paul Hobbs, Tor Kenward, Carter Cellars, and Schrader Cellars.

Fred Schrader, of Schrader Cellars, was the first producer of a Beckstoffer To Kalon wine (a 2000 vintage). He praised the vineyard for its "purity of fruit, laced with incredible nuance." This was certainly true of the To Kalon wines I tasted: the powerful Paul Hobbs bottling, the lithe Carter Cellars and the 2012 Schrader Cellars CCS Beckstoffer To Kalon Cabernet Sauvignon (\$175 on release, now as much as \$900 retail), whose texture was supple yet dense. Did Mr. Schrader think Mr. Beckstoffer charged too much for his grapes? He did not. "If you can get it, you should take it," he said with a laugh.

Bien Nacido Vineyard | Santa Barbara

At nearly 900 acres, Bien Nacido in the Santa Maria Valley of Santa Barbara is a great vineyard supersized. The cool, sprawling place features both hillsides and flatter ground and 15 different grape varieties, although its Syrah, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are the most renowned.

The Miller family bought Bien Nacido in 1969, and the Millers have made improvements over the years. Its grapes are the basis of hundreds of notable wines, and a short list of their names reads like a roll call of Santa Barbara greats: Au Bon Climat, Qupé, Foxen, Sine Qua Non and Hitching Post, as well as newer stars such as Chanin, Longoria and Paul Lato. Some 35 producers turn out vineyard-designate wines, but as Nicholas Miller noted, about two thirds of the grapes purchased do not go into a wine with the vineyard name. (Every Bien Nacido-designated wine is tasted by the Millers to make sure it meets their standards; occasionally they've had to tell a producer it couldn't put the Bien Nacido name on its label.)

Bob Lindquist, of Qupé Vineyards, was one of the first producers to make a Bien Nacido wine, a 1987 Syrah. Mr. Lindquist said the vineyard is notable for its cool climate as well as its location and poor soil. "The grapes have to struggle a bit," said Mr. Lindquist. (Grapes have more character and complexity if they struggle.) Gavin Chanin, of Chanin Wine Company, credited the vineyard's management and viticulture. "Bien Nacido is at the forefront of farming in Santa Barbara," he said. Mr. Chanin makes Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from the vineyard, and the 2012 Chanin Wine Company Bien Nacido Vineyard Chardonnay (\$35) shows the quality of the vineyard: full bodied and rich, with a firm mineral thread.



2012 Chanin Wine Company Bien Nacido Vineyard Chardonnay PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Hirsch Vineyard | Sonoma Coast

High on a ridge on the Sonoma Coast, 2.5 miles from the Pacific Ocean, Hirsch Vineyard is decidedly remote. The 45-minute drive from the coastal town of Jenner is rugged and so full of switchbacks and sharp turns that the vineyard's director of private-client services, Juliana Chioffi, recalled a man so disconcerted by the ride that when he got out of his car, he told her, "This better be worth it." All was well when he tasted the wines. Hirsch Vineyard is home to some of the finest Pinot Noirs in California—and relatively few visitors.



2012 Littorai Hirsch Vineyard Pinot Noir PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

First planted to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay by its namesake owner and vintner, David Hirsch, in 1980, Hirsch Vineyard now totals 72 acres. The group of winemakers fortunate enough to buy the fruit is small and includes Hirsch as well as Ted Lemon of Littorai, Williams Selyem, Lioco, Under the Wire, FEL, B. Kosuge and Failla. Many buy fruit based on handshake contracts with Mr. Hirsch.

A range of styles and flavors reflect the vineyard's varied exposures and terrains. Some Hirsch Pinots—such as the Williams Selyem—are lush and aromatically beguiling, with dark and red fruit notes. Others, like the 2012 Littorai Hirsch Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$125) from Ted Lemon, are big, bold, structured wines. The diversity of expressions within the vineyard make it great, said both Mr. Lemon and Ehren Jordan of Failla Wines, who called it “a village of grapes.”

Hyde Vineyard | Carneros



2012 Ramey Hyde Vineyard Chardonnay PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Larry Hyde knows every inch of his almost 200-acre Carneros vineyard, and after my visit I'm convinced he wanted me to know it just as well. Mr. Hyde drove from one place in the vineyard to the next, pointing out where he'd recently done some replanting, some experimenting with clones and rootstocks and even changed the direction of some vine rows. He even gave me maps to study on my way home.

Chardonnay is the most important variety, although nine varieties are planted throughout. Currently about 35 producers buy grapes from the Hyde family, but only 12 or so vintners make vineyard-designate wines. Some of the best known names include Paul Hobbs, Kistler Vineyards, Patz & Hall, HdV and David Ramey. Mr. Ramey, a longtime Hyde client, came along for the vineyard ride and afterward poured his richly textured 2012 Ramey Hyde Vineyard Chardonnay (\$60) and a couple of older wines (the 2005 was gorgeous and remarkably youthful) as well as a few other Hyde Vineyard-designate wines from HdV and Paul Hobbs.

Mr. Hyde doesn't interfere with winemaking decisions. "It's important to me that they pay for their grapes. After that, they can pretty much do whatever they want," he said. But like the Millers, he tastes every wine that might bear the Hyde label.

Savoy Vineyard | Anderson Valley

The Savoy Vineyard in Mendocino County's Anderson Valley isn't easy to find on a map or in person. I had to flag down a local to escort me there. Planted by Richard Savoy in 1992, Savoy is a Pinot-dominant 43-acre vineyard, with a small amount (5 acres) of Chardonnay planted as well. Tucked against a hill, the vineyard was a great place of experimentation for Mr. Savoy, who was "constantly tinkering with different clones," said Ryan Hodgins, winemaker at FEL, the Anderson Valley winery formerly known as Breggo.

Napa vintner Cliff Lede bought Savoy Vineyard in 2011 and Breggo in 2009. Savoy may be a small vineyard, but it is well represented in the world by acclaimed producers such as Peay, Radio-Coteau, Littorai, Auteur, Barnett, Failla and of course, FEL.

Every winemaker has a different style of Savoy Pinot Noir, Mr. Hodgins noted. FEL's, for example, was distinctly savory, while the Radio-Coteau was bigger and more concentrated. Ehren Jordan of Failla liked Savoy because the vineyard climate was "just cool enough but not radically cool, where you are on a tightrope 100 feet up," wondering if the fruit will get ripe. He also liked the "tension and acidity" found in Savoy wines, qualities his 2012 Failla Savoy Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$65) definitely had, along with a vibrant acidity and lots of dense fruit.

Winemakers like to say great wine is made in the vineyard. I'm not sure how much they believe this and how much it's just a catchy sound bite. One thing I know to be true: A great vineyard is where a great wine must start.

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2012 Failla Savoy Vineyard Pinot Noir PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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