

A woman wearing a wide-brimmed cowboy hat and a patterned blue shirt is riding a dark horse through a shallow river. The background is a lush forest of tall evergreen trees under a clear blue sky. Patches of snow are visible on the rocky banks. The overall scene is bright and scenic.

# california bountiful®

EXPLORING BOUNTIFUL CALIFORNIA

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## Wilderness ADVENTURES

Saddle up & explore!

Page 16

New & exotic  
**YUMBERRY**

Page 6

**WINE TOUR**  
revelations

Page 12

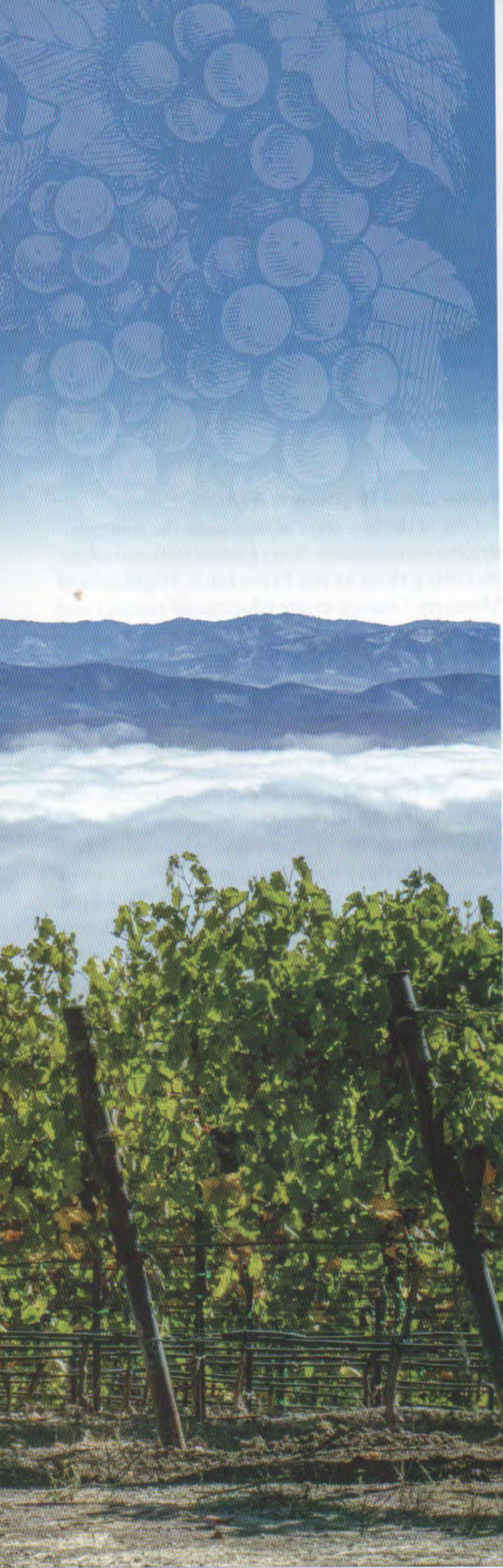
Summer's  
**BEST RECIPES**

Page 36

# WINES REFLECT A SENSE OF PLACE

Story by Jolaine Collins • Photos by Richard Green





## Regional tour explores wine and its roots

California wines are recognized throughout the world for their quality and diversity. But what makes these wines so special?

It starts with the grapes. Winegrapes in the Golden State flourish for the same reasons people like living here: abundant sunshine and a wide variety of climates and geography.

There's a perfect place for growing just about every type of grape, each with a surprising range of characteristics. California grape growers prove this by producing more than 100 varieties of white and red winegrapes, from obscure aglianico to popular zinfandel.

### **Distinguishing characteristics**

More than 635,000 acres of winegrapes are planted throughout California in a wide variety of regions that are delineated as appellations—defined either by a county or other political boundary, or by federally recognized growing regions, called American Viticultural Areas. California currently has 139 AVAs.

Every appellation produces wines with pedigrees that distinguish them from those grown in other appellations. That's why, for instance, a syrah grown along the coast of Santa Barbara County tastes different than a syrah grown in the rugged Sierra Nevada foothills.

Winemakers often say their job is to allow the nuances of a grape—including its climate, soils and terrain—to be expressed through their wines. These combined qualities are known as “terroir,” a French term that simply means a sense of place.

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Grapes used to make wines from the Santa Lucia Highlands in Monterey County are distinguished by the area's cooling fog, afternoon winds and extended sun exposure.



Sommeliers compare wines and learn grape-growing techniques—including the use of owls to control pests, above right. Grower Mark Pisoni, bottom, shares insights.



### Santa Lucia Highlands AVA

One of the best ways to appreciate the concept of terroir is to experience it. Savvy growers and winemakers, including those in the Santa Lucia Highlands of Monterey County, create educational tastings and vineyard tours that do just that for wine enthusiasts.

For the past six summers, the Santa Lucia Highlands AVA has hosted sommeliers from around the country for a two-and-a-half-day tour, allowing them to experience what makes the Santa Lucia Highlands unique—including its sun, wind and winemaking practices. (Due to the pandemic, organizers this year plan to host a virtual event.)

Known for its highly rated pinot noir and chardonnay, this small, cool-climate AVA is part of the western mountain range that shields the Salinas Valley from the Pacific Ocean. The Santa Lucia Highlands is notable for its cooling fog, afternoon winds and extended sun exposure that lengthen the growing season and allow the grapes to develop complex flavors and a crisp acidity.

“The SLH Somm Tour is great for wine education and connecting people with our appellation,” said Mark Pisoni, a third-generation farmer and vineyard manager of Pisoni Vineyards. “The (sommeliers) tour our ranches to dig in the soils, experience the wind and weather, and better appreciate why our wines taste the way they do.”

One of Pisoni’s favorite activities during the SLH Somm Tour is introducing guests to crop thinning.

“We take them into the vineyards to experience the work we do and understand how it affects the wines,” he said.

Armed with a pair of clippers in a row of vines, participants learn how to drop fruit—clearing out clusters of grapes to give other clusters better air circulation, more sunlight and less disease pressure—to create higher quality wines.





Tour participants explore soils and thin grapevines with the help of growers including Steve McIntyre.

### Bringing it back to the glass

One of the participating sommeliers in last year's tour, Kenji Makino of Alexander's Steakhouse in Cupertino, said being in the vineyards and hearing from the SLH winemaking community helped him appreciate each winery's approach to winegrowing.

"Thinning the crop, I saw that they could have kept all the fruit on the vines and had more grapes. But they chose to keep only the best on the vine to create better wines," Makino said. "You can't make great wine without great grapes."

Vineyard tours gave him a better understanding of the region's terroir and its effect on the wines, he said. Tasting seminars offered insights into winemaking styles.

"I've taken those things into consideration with food

pairings in my restaurant, or when guiding someone with a recommendation based on the style of wine that they like," Makino said.

Gary Francioni, founder of ROAR Wines and another third-generation Santa Lucia Highlands farmer, says the tour helps wine specialists and their customers appreciate what it takes to make wine.

"We try to cover the whole spectrum, from growing to winemaking," Francioni said. "We work in the vines and we do side-by-side tastings to compare the wines. It's all an experience. When someone is wearing a jacket in our vineyards at 1 o'clock in July, they really get that this is a cool growing region." 🍃

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### MORE ONLINE

How does the pedigree of a winegrowing region such as the Santa Lucia Highlands show through its wines? See what sommeliers learned during their 2019 tour of this cool-weather appellation at [www.californiabountiful.com](http://www.californiabountiful.com).

## ALL ABOUT APPELLATIONS

Every California wine label lists the geographic origin, or appellation, where the wine's grapes were grown. Knowing which appellations you prefer for the varietals you enjoy will help guide you through your wine adventures.

- In California, the geographic origins of winegrapes are either identified by county or other political boundaries, or by federally recognized growing regions called American Viticultural Areas, or AVAs.
- California has 139 AVAs—each with a distinct, grape-growing pedigree that delineates it from other AVAs.
- For a wine to display the name of an AVA on

its label, at least 85 percent of the wine's grapes must be grown in that AVA. For county names, that proportion is 75%.

- Napa Valley was California's first AVA, established in 1981.
- If a wine's label lists California or a California AVA as its origin, it means 100% of the grapes were grown in the Golden State.
- Farmers grow grapes in nearly every California county. California produces about 80% of the nation's wine and is the fourth-largest wine producer in the world.