



# San Benito County

## Life after Almaden

By Tim Patterson

Among wine consumers, San Benito County rings no bells, except perhaps with those geographically inclined enough to remember that's where Calera makes superb pinot noirs and chardonnays. Even in the industry, San Benito is often remembered as "the place where Almaden used to have its vineyards," except among those who know that San Benito grapes also make their way into discriminating, upscale brands like Williams & Selyem.

Yet for a low-profile winegrowing area, San Benito has a lot going on. Directly east of better-known Monterey County, on the other side of the Gavilan Mountains, San Benito County boasts four recognized AVAs (Cienega Valley, Paicines, Lime Kiln Valley and Mt. Harlan), plus portions of two others (Chalone, mostly in Monterey, and Pacheco Pass, whose wineries are mostly in Santa Clara). After dropping by half in the 1980s, planted acreage is back up to 3,000. New wineries are opening their doors, Pietra Santa perhaps making the most waves so far, and even the old Almaden properties, in decline since the 1970s, are taking on new life. Bit by bit, local growers and wineries are working toward putting together a county winegrowers association in hopes of making San Benito synonymous with quality wine in more people's minds.



Vista Verde vineyard, in the Paicines AVA, a source of fruit for Williams & Selyem. (Photo by Corky Roche.)

Giving the county a recognized, positive identity immediately runs up against the common misconception that the whole area is hot as blazes, one big extension of Gilroy (which is, in fact, in Santa Clara County). "Everybody seems to be born with a gene," says Calera's Josh Jensen, "that makes them believe that Hollister is a hot town. The people who believe this most strongly are those who've never been near it."

The reality, according to Agriculture Commissioner Mark Tognazzini, is that "San Benito ranges from Region I to Region III; the San Juan Valley is like Carneros, Hollister like Yountville, Paicines like Calistoga." The complex maze of mountains, canyons and valleys, some running east-west rather than north-south, channels substantial marine influence into San Benito from the Pacific Ocean, only 20-30 miles away. Jensen's study of UC Davis temperature records indicated that Hollister was measurably cooler than St. Helena or Healdsburg, both in terms of daytime highs and nighttime lows. Afternoon peaks over 100 followed by diurnal drops into the 50s can be common during the growing season.

Charlie Hosom, a freelance consultant in the area after a decade each in Napa and eastern Washington, credits San Benito with a large number of natural quality factors. He points to a drier climate than the North Coast, only 12 inches of annual rainfall, a third of what Napa gets, and the absence of rain in the fall, allowing growers to control the timing of water. On the ground, he cites the prevalence of low fertility soils, high in sand and

comparatively low in clay and organic matter. The concentrations of dolomite limestone on Calera's Mt. Harlan are unique, but many growing areas in the county have traces of lime and a generous share of pebbles, gravel and ancient stream boulders.

These natural assets are balanced by some daunting obstacles. San Benito is hoping to stake its quality claim just as the wine industry thrashes through a period of over-supply and shakeout, not the best environment for new players in the market. On the consumer side, San Benito has been a largely invisible outpost of wine country; only recently did the county's first winery (Pietra Santa) establish regular tasting room hours. Most of the county's grapes head elsewhere at harvest, rarely carrying the San Benito name, and the relative handful of local wineries have yet to come together as a "wine trail."

Dick Steltzner, a cabernet and merlot producer in Stag's Leap for over three decades, has visited and held discussions with San Benito growers. He thinks the area has tremendous potential, "gorgeous soil, ideal rooting conditions, lots of things going for it." But he also observes that the local farm labor force "can outraise us on broccoli or strawberries ten to one, but not on grapes." One problem he observed, for example, was scion root suckers developing from vines planted too deep by inexperienced hands, leaving the grafted vines unintentionally on their own roots. Training a new labor force in the maze of details that goes into premium viticulture is no easy task.

## PICKING UP THE ALMADEN PIECES

For the period ahead, bound to be full of trial and error, San Benito County has a cast of characters ready to rise to the occasion. For sheer sizzle, Pietra Santa in the Cienega Valley near Hollister takes the prize. The 455-acre parcel (former Almaden turf) for this upscale, Italian-inspired project was purchased in 1989 by businessman Joseph Gemelli. To date 130 acres of vines have been salvaged or planted to sangiovese, dolcetto, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, pinot grigio and chardonnay. Plantings range from the valley floor (around 1000 feet) to hillsides and terraces. Brother Ken Gemelli also owns significant bearing acreage in the same area, and is on track for his own winery operation at some point.

Pietra Santa's winemaker, Alessio Carli, learned his trade as assistant winemaker at the Badia a Coltibuono estate in Chianti, came to California in 1990 to oversee winemaking at Viansa, consulted for a few years and then settled in full-time at Pietra Santa in 1998.

Pietra Santa puts out 25,000 cases a year, with its sights set on 65,000, and the best of its top-end wines regularly win awards, thanks to Carli's mix of California fruit and Old World finesse. Production is evolving into three different lines at different price points, supplementing the Italian varieties with both high-end and mass-market bottlings of Bordeaux grapes and chardonnay.

But what makes Pietra Santa a Cienega Valley showpiece is the gorgeous setting, tucked into verdant rolling hills, and the eye-catching, spare-no-expense winery and hospitality facility. The striking structure, a kind of brick Tuscan villa, features urns imported from Italy flanking the large wooden doors and a bell tower hung with top-flight British-made instruments. Plans (at various stages of concreteness) call for the construction of caves, a hillside entertainment area, maybe a pond stocked with bass. Meanwhile Gemelli, a very hands-on owner, lives on the property in the former home of the CEO of Almaden in the 1970s.

A quarter mile away on Cienega Valley Road, right at the foot of the road to Pietra Santa, lies another winery facility just as striking in its own way: DeRose Vineyards. Here in a cluster of former Almaden warehouse sheds, Pat DeRose has concentrated since 1988 on making interesting wine, not on cosmetics—at least not in the usual sense. The San Andreas Fault (a constant companion in San Benito) runs right through the tasting room and winery, cracking the floor and stressing the walls, marked by a State of California plaque praising the excellent exposure of this geological tripwire.

In this only-in-San-Benito setting, DeRose makes intense, fruit-filled wines from old-vine zinfandel, cabernet franc, and some of the last remaining acreage of negrette (120-year-old vines) to be found anywhere. The roughly 100 planted acres also contain blocks of cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay, syrah and viognier, as well as alicante and rose of Peru. Pat's son Alphonse now shares the vineyard management and winemaking duties, bringing with him formal enology training and a stint in Chile. In recent vintages, DeRose has been turning out 4,000-5,000 cases of wines, bottling 60% of its fruit and selling the rest; plans call for increasing production and bottling all the fruit themselves.

A few miles to the south and east near Paicines, the major remnant of the Almaden era lives on as Blossom Hill. The once-mighty Almaden brand was purchased by Heublein in 1987 and its vineyard assets were dismantled; the label itself migrated to the Central Valley. The substantial block of vineyards at Blossom Hill—a little over 700 acres—passed through a series of corporate hands, most recently being added to the Diageo portfolio. The Blossom Hill brand, focused on generic reds and whites and mainly marketed in the UK, is based primarily on Central Valley grapes; the vineyards at the Blossom Hill facility in San Benito find their primary home in the BV Coastal and Sterling Vintners Collection lines.

Stasi Seay, who oversees Central Coast vineyard operations for BV/Diageo, contracts with Scheid Vineyards for management services at Blossom Hill. Significant effort has gone into upgrading the vineyards, modernizing the trellising systems, instituting reduced deficit irrigation practices, and shifting the varietal mix into more red grapes. Since experience has shown this is not a prime pinot-growing area, the emphasis is largely on merlot and cabernet. (Fortunately, a block of old-vine grenache, planted in the 1960s, has survived the replanting, making its way into the BV Signet series.) Blossom Hill is moving steadily toward greater sustainability in farming practices.

#### Quality-Focused Wineries

Calera's winery facility lies within the Cienega Valley AVA, but the vineyards that built its reputation are perched high (at 2200 feet) in the mountains above it. The distinctive qualities of the limestone-laden land Josh Jensen acquired in the 1970s have long been recognized by wine lovers, and gained designation as the Mt. Harlan AVA in 1990. Bottles from Calera, bearing the image of a limekiln that came with the property, identify the location simply as Hollister, CA.

With a worldwide reputation secured for his wines, Josh Jensen could easily let the rest of San Benito fend for itself. Instead, he has begun to participate in the informal series of tastings and discussions among area producers. And on the drawing board are plans to put in 30 acres of grapes, likely more pinot noir and chardonnay, down nearer the winery, smack in the Cienega Valley AVA.

A former jack-of-all-trades-turned-cellarmaster for Calera, Scott Flint, has gone out on his own as a winemaker, operating from a glorified garage along Cienega Valley Road. Many of the releases from Flint Wine Cellars so far have been based on fruit purchased from Monterey and Santa Clara County vineyards, but with the 2001 vintage, San Benito fruit is playing a more important role, including carefully-researched pinot clones planted in his own small estate vineyard.

Flint says that the limestone element that runs throughout the county is what inspired him to rip out walnuts and plant grapes. “In our soils down here in the valley,” he says, “I thought the lime was just migratory, but when we took the orchard out, the dozer was breaking off huge chunks of it.” He thinks Cienega Valley fruit has unique flavor components, roses and wild herbs, and that often being one of the last areas in the state to pick adds a dimension. If the winemaking skills he has applied to Monterey fruit carry through to San Benito, good bottles should be in the offing.

On the eastern outskirts of Hollister, former fencing contractor Frank Leal has plenty of energy for the trial-and-error ordeal. His original plan to grow grapes and sell them quickly turned into building a winery; several acres of the cabernet he planted in 1999 have already been grafted over to syrah. Leal insists on “total control” of the grapegrowing and winemaking, and is willing to buy the “toys”—ozone generators, fancy weed-seeking sprayers, etc.—to make it happen.

To produce just the right grapes for the “chewy reds” he and winemaker Dave Griffin are aiming at, Leal has supplemented his original 30 acres with trial plots scattered over eleven parcels, up to 2000 vines each, in the backyards of area homeowners. They get the lifestyle enhancement, and he gets the grapes; “I’m experimenting with clones and rootstocks on other people’s property,” he says, “it’s winwin.” For the personal touch, he delivered the first release, 400 cases of chardonnay, direct to local restaurants and wine shops out of the back of his Ford Excursion.

Steve Pessagno, winemaker and general manager at Lockwood Vineyard in Monterey’s Salinas Valley, is making San Benito fruit a mainstay of his 3200-case Pessagno label. It helps that his uncle, Tony Escovar, is willing to plant some acreage a little northeast of Hollister to pinot, syrah and zinfandel, but Pessagno says, “I wouldn’t have planted there if I didn’t think it was good quality.” He also has some quasi-residential vineyard outposts in the same general area devoted to pinot noir clones. The wines have no trouble selling at \$30 a bottle, and they are among the first coming out with San Benito County on the label.

### Growing Pains

Some of the most highly regarded grapes coming out of San Benito County get bottled elsewhere. A prime example is the Vista Verde vineyard in the Paicines AVA, a 640-acre parcel purchased from Almaden in 1991 by New York winegrower and investor John Dyson (the second name in the Smart-Dyson trellis system) and developed now into 550 planted acres. Major varieties include chardonnay, merlot and cabernet, with smaller sections of pinot noir, syrah, viognier, arneis and tocai Friulano. Vista Verde supplies fruit to Dyson’s New York-based Millbrook label, and sells 90% of its grapes to corporate brands like Beringer and Kendall-Jackson and smaller producers like David Bruce, Au Bon Climat and Storrs.

Vista Verde fruit also makes a contribution to the near-cult Williams & Selyem range of pinot noirs, acquired by Dyson’s Pebble Ridge Vineyards & Wine Estates in 1998. Selected blocks of good clones in the right locations have gone into San Benito-designated wines, as well as into Central Coast bottles under the Williams & Selyem banner; a portion of this past fall’s harvest will emerge as a Vista Verde vineyard-designated wine.

Dyson believes this is “a very special area for pinot noir and aromatic whites, not like the generic Central Coast.” He identifies the same underlying factors, climate and soil: a long cool growing season and rock, gravel and pebbles (the inspiration for the Pebble Ridge name), laced with calcium carbonate lenses and a lot of lime, promoting good drainage.

Further down Highway 25, 35 miles south of Hollister near Bitterwater in the Topo Valley, Charlie Hinckle grows 80 acres of Rhone varieties and cabernet on his 11,000-acre spread, and leases another 220 to a venture owned by Chuck Wagner of Napa's Caymus. "We can grow reds as good as anywhere in the country," says Hinckle, who has been serving as president of the fledgling San Benito County Winegrowers Association.

Maybe so, but it's not an easy time to grow anything in the wine business. Back up in Paicines, Matt Donati picked up one of the former Almaden parcels in 1998, some of it with contracted vines, and planted another 130 acres of cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, merlot, malbec and chardonnay. In 2002, 90 additional acres were planted to more cabernet and merlot, plus pinot grigio, syrah and petit verdot.

From a cattle ranching family, with no grapegrowing experience, Donati knew his job would be "to see what problems I have out here and try to fix them." The first round of trouble involved animals: a squirrel invasion, damage from wild boars, and the need to put up six miles of deer fence. The problem now is trying to sell all those grapes. Donati sold 70% of his 2002 crop and dropped the remaining 30%; as with many new growers, a high proportion of Donati's vines aren't even bearing yet.

The San Benito growers, says Dick Steltzner, "are walking into one of the tougher markets they're going to meet. They have to organize for that reality."

Assembling the Winegrowers Association is a work in progress. "The area has a lone wolf tradition," says Scott Flint, though he agrees it would be good to raise the region's collective reputation. Agriculture commissioner Tognazzini helped prod initial efforts to form an organization, a part-time executive director has been hired, and discussions about branding the region and the possibility of common tasting room hours have been going on. "One of the attractions," says John Dyson, "is the rural, rustic quality. The rest of Silicon Valley has been paved. If that Old California look can be preserved, San Benito may be able to survive as an agricultural outpost."

"San Benito is a high-quality grape growing region," says Frank Leal. "Give us a couple years, I'll prove it." Meanwhile, he's proud to display the San Benito County legend on his labels, and flaunt it in bigger, bolder letters stenciled on the door of his truck. Stay tuned.