

{ somm camp preview }

There is no better way to learn about a wine region than to spend three days immersed in its vineyards, from sun-up to sundown. This is a report previewing what a small contingent of sommeliers will experience at the Santa Cruz Mountains Somm Camp, which took place at the end of April and will be recapped in the August-September issue of *The Somm Journal*.


Santa Cruz Mountains is not a walk in a park. You can get lost in its densely

wooded glens and dark ravines, from scraggly ridgetops down to bucolic sand dunes. Megan Metz—Executive Director of the Santa Cruz Mountains Winegrowers Association, which is co-sponsoring this Camp with *The Somm Journal*—likes to describe this AVA as “islands in the sky”—remote mountain vineyards, floating atop wispy banks of fog.

Proximity to the Pacific Ocean gives many of the appellation’s vineyards their

moderate climate, falling on the cool side. Ridge’s famed Monte Bello Vineyard is here, perched on slopes 1,300 to 2,700 feet in elevation. So is Mount Eden Vineyard, founded on still another mountaintop (lest you forget the physical reality behind the name) in 1945 by the famously cantankerous Martin Ray. It is easy to forget that this is where the concept of handcrafted, minimal intervention California Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay was born, artisanal wine-

ISLANDS



Thomas Fogarty's Rapley Trail Vineyard tops off at 1,650 feet, well above the fog line.

growers throwing thunderous bolts down at the rest of the American wine industry.

The term “mountain” has been bastardized so much over the past 50 years, it is easy to forget the impact of this brand of viticulture. When you grow grapes near or well above fog lines (on the California coast, at 1,000 to 1,200 feet), sunlight and photosynthesis are maximized, while moderate temperatures and less than promiscuous soils lead to different definitions of

things like varietal character. Black-skinned Bordeaux grapes yield ironman reds, stronger in phenols than in fruitiness. White wine grapes produce wines leaning towards minerals and acid. Edgier styles of Pinot Noir smell and taste like the wind blowing through fir, old-growth redwood, madrone or buckeye.

Perhaps this is why, despite a winegrowing history dating back to the 1860s, Santa Cruz Mountains is often over-

looked among today's ocean of wines. They don't make easy comparisons with other West Coast wines. In fact, if any American wines consistently ring truly of “place”—and less of arbitrarily defined “varietal” character or shamelessly score-focused manipulation—it may be the wines of Santa Cruz Mountains.

Conversations with three of our Somm Camp hosts, representing the region's iconic tradition of bold, brazen winemaking.

in the sky

DISCOVERING WHAT MAKES SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS WINES SO SPECIAL

story and photos by Randy Caparoso





Nathan Kandler, Director of Winemaking at Thomas Fogarty Winery & Vineyards, says "Our winemaking has evolved out of the diversity of sites found throughout the region."

Nathan Kandler

Thomas Fogarty Winery & Vineyards

While established in 1981—its first estate vines planted in 1978—Thomas Fogarty has remained one of the appellation's most innovative producers. Visionary ownership has helped, starting with founder Dr. Thomas Fogarty, a heart surgeon and acclaimed inventor (of the embolectomy catheter), and carried on by his son Tom Fogarty Jr., as well as a graceful succession of crack winemakers, Michael Martella and Nathan Kandler.

"Santa Cruz Mountains has become the poster child for new styles of Pinot Noir," says Kandler, the winery's current Director of Winemaking. "Ten, fifteen years ago everyone was trying to make the same Pinot Noir; and in California it was a matter of how close you could come to a Russian River Valley style. We don't even think about that now. Today, we're concerned more about individual vineyards. If one vineyard produces higher tannin Pinot Noir and another is lower in color, higher in acid, or more structured, capturing those differences is now our goal, not trying to achieve some kind of uniformity. There is greater acceptance of individual styles of Pinot Noir, directly related to greater appreciation of vineyards."

To make their case, Kandler crafts no fewer than nine single-vineyard Pinot Noir bottlings. "In vineyards, we stress building soil and vine health through composting, which leads to heightened sense of site. We pick for pH and total acidity—we want to keep winemaking simple: strictly native yeast, using minimal sulfur, no enzymes, making no tannin or acid adjustments, and keeping the use of new oak either at zero or below 20 percent, depending on the site. This is how you produce Pinot Noirs that express vineyards rather than varietal uniformity."

Among the Thomas Fogarty Pinot Noirs, Kandler points out that their higher-elevation vineyards (up to 2,000 feet), grown on or near their Skyline Road estate, are dramatically different from vineyards located at the south end of the appellation, the Corralitos/Pleasant Valley area barely four miles from Monterey Bay. Says Kandler, "While the rocky, shallow, shale soils in the higher mountain sites can vary, the wines are generally soil-driven, with more spice elements, whereas the coastal vineyards are more climate-influenced—grown in sandstone, slower to ripen, a little more red-fruit aromatics."

Adds Kandler, "Our winemaking has evolved out of the diversity of sites found throughout the region. Sure, we use components from each one to produce our blended Santa Cruz Mountains Pinot Noir; but we spend most of our time and energy on finding ways to bring out what makes each vineyard unique."

Two of Thomas Fogarty's more terroir-focused bottlings:

Thomas Fogarty 2014 Pinot Noir, Windy Hill Vineyard, Santa Cruz Mountains (SRP \$78)

The estate's highest elevation (1,970 feet), most exposed block (hence the "windy" moniker) and undoubtedly the most distinctive. Its older vines were actually pulled out in 2010 and completely replanted by 2012 with new row orientation, different clones and rootstock

and tighter spacing. Yet the wines from the young vines produce Pinot Noirs with an uncannily close resemblance to the wines from the old planting—starting with the same pungent, woody spice suggesting exotic seasonings and eucalyptus, laced with red berry perfumes and composed of muscular yet svelte, supple phenols in the texturing.



Thomas Fogarty 2014 Pinot Noir, Rapley Trail Vineyard, Santa Cruz Mountains (SRP \$78)

This sloping block below the winery tops off at 1,650 feet and is planted exclusively to a Martini selection. Its nose is consistently lush, ripe, plummy, notably spicy (black pepper veering towards sweet incense-and-peppermint) and, even more interestingly, replete

with a compelling, foresty, almost greenish woodsiness, the latter quality impacted directly by daily winds whistling through surrounding stands of Douglas fir. Brooding, meaty, "mountain" palate feel, yet moderate and full of finesse in actual weight.





Jeff Brinkman

Rhys Vineyards

Since the first of their six separate Santa Cruz Mountains estate vineyards were planted in 1995, Rhys Vineyards Pinot Noirs have soared into the realm of “cult” on the basis of sheer quality, not simply 100-point magazine hype or the economy of miniscule scale associated with most California wines attaining elite status.

Rhys Vineyards winemaker Jeff Brinkman tells us, “I think what resonates with sommeliers is our basic approach to vineyard development. You can start with a site and then ask, ‘What do I do with this?’ Or you can do what Kevin [Rhys owner Kevin Harvey] did and start with the premise, ‘I want to make the best Pinot’ and then go out and look for the sites where it can be done.”

Pointing at a detailed topographical map of Burgundy, Brinkman continues, “If you look at where the Grand Cru Côte d’Or vineyards are located, you can see that they’re in the ‘Goldilocks’ locations, at the mid-points of slopes with an ideal mix of shallow soil.

“So we asked the question, where are California’s sweet spots? Rhys began with a search for the ideal mixes of limestone, shale, sandstone and clay. We found it here in Santa Cruz Mountains, particularly in the exposed stratas of geological material running close to the San Andreas Fault, where the Pacific Plate has been rubbing up against the North American Plate—giving us a number of virgin sites to plant.

“Elevation and a perfect, cool maritime climate, of course, are also key factors. I should say that coming to Santa Cruz Mountains was not just an intellectual decision. Kevin also did the tastings—finding a distinct sense of minerality, evocative of sites, in existing Santa Cruz Mountains wines. He wasn’t looking for the exact same taste as Burgundy, but he felt that Pinot Noirs from this area at least share the same aesthetic.

“From this starting point, focusing strictly on vineyards, we have taken everything to a logical extreme: tight spacing (up to 7,000 vines per acre), organic and biodynamic practices, exclusively small-tank fermentation, and four-year air-dried François Frères barrels—continuous trials that have helped us to decide what percent of whole-cluster or what percent of new oak are best for each site, every decision made around the idea that we are bottling vineyards, not wines.”

Two Rhys Vineyards bottlings illustrating this obsessive focus on vineyards:

Rhys 2014 Pinot Noir, Alpine Vineyard, Santa Cruz Mountains (SRP \$79)

Located just ten miles from the Pacific on chalky shale slopes of up to 40 percent, this vineyard yields a slightly more acid-driven wine, silken sleek in texture, with perfumes veering more towards black tea and Asian spices (star anise/ cardamom), enveloping a black fruit concentration. The intrinsic structure of this growth has been necessitating closer to 50 percent whole-cluster fermentation and about a third new oak.



Rhys 2014 Pinot Noir, Skyline Vineyard, Santa Cruz Mountains (SPR \$99)



At 2,360 feet, one of the region’s loftiest sites, densely planted small vines in shallow, rocky soil yielding, in Brinkman’s words, “tiny, beady, scraggly clusters.” The sensory result is a wine with an opulent nose yet lean, sleek, slender structure. There is also a distinct Christmas tree-like spice emanating from front to back—some-

thing, says Brinkman, “we always smell in the Skyline, starting in the fermenter.” Skyline also receives a third new oak and 100 percent whole-cluster fermentation, a decision Brinkman tells us is “determined by the wine . . . counter-intuitively: New oak does not necessarily make Pinot Noirs taste oakier, and increased whole-cluster does not automatically equate to increased tannin or phenols—in fact, the result can be the opposite, at least from our experience with Skyline.”

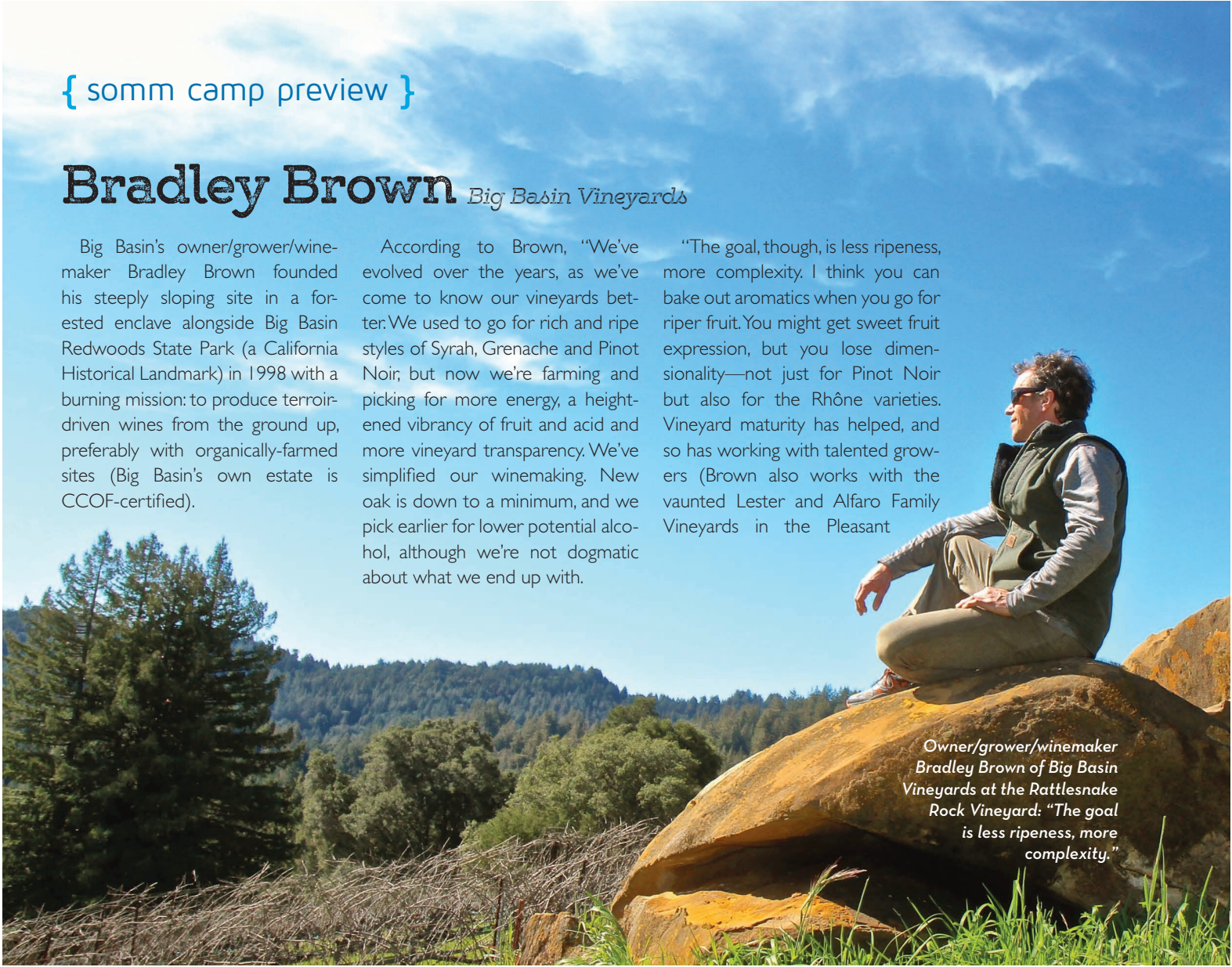
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Bradley Brown *Big Basin Vineyards*

Big Basin's owner/grower/winemaker Bradley Brown founded his steeply sloping site in a forested enclave alongside Big Basin Redwoods State Park (a California Historical Landmark) in 1998 with a burning mission: to produce terroir-driven wines from the ground up, preferably with organically-farmed sites (Big Basin's own estate is CCOF-certified).

According to Brown, "We've evolved over the years, as we've come to know our vineyards better. We used to go for rich and ripe styles of Syrah, Grenache and Pinot Noir, but now we're farming and picking for more energy, a heightened vibrancy of fruit and acid and more vineyard transparency. We've simplified our winemaking. New oak is down to a minimum, and we pick earlier for lower potential alcohol, although we're not dogmatic about what we end up with.

"The goal, though, is less ripeness, more complexity. I think you can bake out aromatics when you go for riper fruit. You might get sweet fruit expression, but you lose dimensionality—not just for Pinot Noir but also for the Rhône varieties. Vineyard maturity has helped, and so has working with talented growers (Brown also works with the vaunted Lester and Alfaro Family Vineyards in the Pleasant

A man wearing sunglasses and a dark vest over a light-colored long-sleeved shirt is sitting on a large, smooth, light-brown rock. He is looking off to the side, towards a vast landscape. The background shows a dense forest of tall evergreen trees on a hillside under a clear blue sky with some light clouds.

Owner/grower/winemaker
Bradley Brown of Big Basin
Vineyards at the Rattlesnake
Rock Vineyard: "The goal
is less ripeness, more
complexity."

A view of a vineyard on a hillside. In the foreground, there are wooden posts and wires for the vineyard structure. The vines are trained upwards. The hillside is covered in green grass and trees. The sky is blue with some clouds.

Rhys Vineyards' Skyline
Vineyard uses close spacing at
a 2,360-foot elevation.

Valley area, further south in the appellation). With better farming, we can do more whole-cluster fermentation—about 50 percent for the Grenache, and two-thirds to 100 percent for Pinot Noir—because we get good [stem] lignification, even when picking earlier, at lower sugars.”



Clay amphora, concrete square and steel barrel fermenters at Big Basin Vineyards.

A sampling of this “evolved” approach, epitomizing contemporary Santa Cruz Mountains winegrowing:

Big Basin 2014 Roussanne, Homestead Block, Santa Cruz Mountains (SRP \$48)

While it is challenging to grow this Rhône grape in the appellation’s cool climate, there is enough exposure near the top of the estate vineyard to produce a tightly coiled, acid-driven rendition of the variety, still oozing with sensations of raw honey, apricot, fresh citrus and flowery fruit—its purity preserved by racking out of barrel at 11 months into stainless steel, where the wine spent another four months before bottling. It’s a refreshing departure from the fat, blowsy style typifying most California Roussannes.



Big Basin 2013 Rattlesnake Rock Syrah, Santa Cruz Mountains (SRP \$55)

There are Syrahs that knock your socks off and Syrahs that whisper in a more feminine Northern Rhône-like fashion. Brown has dialed in the latter, classic, floral style—super violet perfume with foresty nuances—that is lean, tight, zesty and vibrant. He uses a two percent Viognier co-ferment, and the wine is aged strictly in 300-liter steam-bent hogsheads to minimize wood tannin and toastiness, hence a sense of sweetness defined by pure mountain-grown fruit rather than caramelized oak or watered-back ripeness. **SJ**



Spring oxalis blooms in the Lester Vineyard in Corralitos, Pleasant Valley.