



Santa Barbara County Wine History

Santa Barbara County has a history of winemaking and wine grape growing stretching back more than 200 years, before California was a state. From the Mission Era of early California to the beginning of the modern era of wine production which started in the '60s, Santa Barbara County has emerged as a world class wine region combining traditional, time-honored techniques, with the latest cutting-edge innovations. Richly endowed with natural and human talent, the region has made its mark in the wine community.

The Beginning (1780-1960)

Father Junipero Serra brought grapevine cuttings from Mexico in 1782 to be planted in the fertile bottoms of Santa Barbara's Sycamore Creek (in what is now known as that city's Milpas district.) The largest mission vineyard, about 25 acres, was located in the San Jose Creek area, and an adobe winery, built nearby in 1804, is now Goleta's oldest landmark. Producing sacramental wine from the Mission grape variety, Santa Barbara was second in wine production of all California's missions. But wine wasn't all for religious purposes. The Spanish rancheros were also planting grapes and producing wine, mainly for brandy and primarily for *their* enjoyment. By the late 1800s there were 45 vineyards with a total of 260 acres and 17 winemakers in the county with the Mission grape still predominant. A grapevine planted in 1842 on a farm in Carpinteria grew to monstrous proportions. In fifty years, it had a trunk measuring more than nine feet around, an arbor covering two acres and an annual yield of ten tons of grapes.

As immigrants came to the country, so did their love of wine. In 1884, Justinian Caire imported grape slips from his native France and planted a 150-acre vineyard on Santa Cruz Island, just off the coast of Santa Barbara, to European vinifera varieties that included Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Zinfandel. His prize-winning wines were shipped to San Francisco for bottling. With the enactment of Prohibition, his last vintage was in 1918. The entire wine industry was decimated – statewide.

When Prohibition was repealed in 1933, the now legal wine industry once again began to flourish. It was one of the few industries to expand in the fourth year of the Great Depression. Northern California was the first to benefit, but shortly thereafter that interest traveled to Santa Barbara County. A nudge from respected authority came from UC Davis viticulture professors Maynard Amerine and Albert Winkler who deemed Santa Barbara County as one of the state's great potential growing regions for fine wine. A wine revolution was sparked.

The Wine Revolution (1961-1990s)

Early studies found that Santa Barbara County was *cooler* than most wine regions of Northern California and that it had an excellent balance of geology, climate, soil and water, giving it great potential as a viticultural area. Those first modern vineyards were planted in Cabernet Sauvignon, Sylvaner, Riesling, Chardonnay, and Sauvignon Blanc on their own rootstock in the Tepusquet area of the Santa Maria Valley in the early 1960s by Uriel Nielsen and Bill De Mattei. Brother Timothy of Christian Brothers in Napa Valley had encouraged their venture from the start, and when the grapes were ready for harvest in 1968, he offered them a five year contract paying \$325 per ton. Rancho Sisquoc, also in the Santa Maria Valley, and the Bettencourts of Santa Ynez were the next to take the plunge. News of grape growing success spread quickly. Shortly thereafter, vineyards were planted in several parts of the Santa Maria and Santa Ynez Valleys. Other winegrowers who pioneered the region include *Louis Lucas, Bob Woods, Dale Hampton*, and the *Miller Family* in the Santa Maria Valley, and the *Davidge Family, Richard Sanford* and *Michael Benedict*, the *Firestone Family*, as well as *Bill Mosby* and *Eric Brander* in the Santa Ynez Valley.

Initially, most of the fruit produced was shipped out of the county to be made into wine. And while *Santa Barbara Winery* was the first commercial winery in the county since Prohibition, Firestone was the first estate winery to make wine using its own locally grown grapes, with their first vintage being 1975. Sanford & Benedict, Zaca Mesa, Rancho Sisquoc and Santa Ynez Winery soon followed. Among the first generation of winemakers were *Tony Austin, Michael Benedict, Richard Sanford, Fred Brander, Bill Mosby, Ken Brown, Alison Green, Rick Longoria, Mike Brown, Bruce McGuire, Jim Clendenen, Bob Lindquist, Lane Tanner, Bruno D'Alfonso, Stephan Bedford, Bryan Babcock, John Kerr, and Chris Whitcraft*. In the early 1980s, 13 wineries existed and by the end of the decade there were 29 with over 9,600 acres of wine grapes in the county and 30 percent of the yield being made into wine locally. This was a time of elemental experimentation in the field; identifying what grape varieties did best in different areas, and what farming techniques were most appropriate. The *Santa Maria Valley* (1981) and *Santa Ynez Valley* (1983) were established as federally approved AVAs, further pinpointing the differences within growing regions. By the '90s, it was all a matter of fine tuning—vineyards and winemaking. And Santa Barbara County is a region that defines *fine tuning*.

SBCVA History

The introduction of a few large corporate wineries from the north purchasing land and establishing wineries in Santa Barbara County, called for the local wine industry to take on a more serious tone. In 1983, seventeen “founding” wineries, incorporated the Santa Barbara County Vintners’ Association. Once casual, small, family-owned ventures making up the overwhelming majority of wineries in the County, now had formal business plans, winery/grower relationships were stabilized. The result? Better structure. In the business. And in the wines.

Still Going Forward

Entering the “New Millennium”, Santa Barbara County continues to evolve. Family owned and operated wineries still predominate, but a new generation of winemakers is joining veterans at the helm. The ever-growing roster of wineries now includes some new family names *Tensley, Margerum, and Vogelzang*, along with the ‘nicknamed’ *Carina* and *Palmina*, as well as the whimsical *Flying Goat, Martian Ranch, and Sea Smoke*, just to name a few. The county added two more AVAs. In 2001, the Santa Rita Hills became a federally approved AVA, *Sta. Rita Hills*, emphasizing Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. And in 2009, the formerly untapped eastern edge of the Santa Ynez Valley referred to as “Happy Canyon”, a region dedicated to Bordeaux and Rhone varieties received its own AVA, *Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara*.

Since the modern era of winemaking began in the ‘60s, a fresh, open minded approach to produce ultra-premium wine has led to the success of this area. The land has always been the teacher in Santa Barbara. And the learning has always been achieved by doing. The winemakers have grown simultaneously with the vineyards. Giving and taking from each other.

Today there are well-over 100 wineries and over 20,000 acres of grapes planted to a very diverse 65+ varieties – most of the planting to Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Syrah – yet, the Cabernets, Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris have a foothold, with Rhône, Italian and Spanish varietals making headway. The wine industry has grown from virtually nothing in 1970 to *almost a billion dollar business* in less than 35 years.

Santa Barbara County is an extraordinarily unique place to grow grapes. What sets it apart as a wine region, though, is the maverick spirit and attitude towards winemaking and winegrowing that was grown and made in Santa Barbara.

That spirit’s innovation and quality have earned the wines of Santa Barbara County such respect among knowledgeable wine drinkers worldwide. A respect more impressive, more important than the array of medals collected in decades of regional, national and international competitions.