

From Missions to Top Notch Pinot Noir

Early viticulture in the Santa Maria Valley leads to many vineyards, some still family-owned, that produce some of the finest grapes in the county

A Santa Maria Times Staff Report

Wine production in Santa Barbara County dates back to the days of Spanish missions, some of which still dot the countryside.

According to the University of California, Berkeley wine historian Victor Geraci, in 1789, explorer Gaspar de Portola visited the Santa Ynez Valley and noted the rolling hills, good soil and plentiful water supplies. Geraci's and subsequent observers' reports led to the arrival of grapevine cuttings to support the three missions that had been built in the area: La Purisima Concepcion, Santa Ines and Santa Barbara. The grapevines were to insure that the missions' fathers would have a steady supply of sacramental wine.

Over time, more settlers from Europe settled in our region, bringing with them the more established European traditions of winemaking. Some of the earliest settlers of the Guadalupe region were of those of Swiss and Portuguese descent, While they are credited with establishing

the area's earliest dairies and beet farm operations, among others, both peoples also brought an appreciation for wine to the Central Coast.

The land that today is known as Rancho Sisquoc winery and vineyards played a key role in the early days of viticulture in the Santa Maria Valley. Rancho Sisquoc was granted by Governor Pio Pico to Maria Antonia Dominguez Caballero on April 17, 1845. Over the years, the original ranch was divided and sold, but in 1891, Thomas B. Bishop of San Francisco and John T. Walker of Watsonville repurchased all the pieces of the original property. The two men in 1899 formed the Sisquoc Investment Company. By the 1930s, its name had been changed to the Sisquoc Ranch Company, and Rancho Tinaquaic, located in Foxen Canyon, had become part of the company's holdings.

At this time, the Sisquoc ranch was at its largest size: 41,390 acres.

In 1950, the Green Cattle Company of San Luis Obispo bought the Sisquoc Ranch. In 1952, the company sold the land to James Flood III.

Flood found Rancho Sisquoc ideal for maintaining his large cattle business, but in 1968,

ranch manager Harold Pfeiffer supervised the first planting of wine grapes on the ranch.

Many years before, Rancho Tepusquet was sold to Don Juan Pacifico Ontiveros, who built an adobe on that property and planted that property's first vineyard around 1856.

Over the years, this Santa Maria Valley property at the junction of the Sisquoc and Cuyama rivers became part of Bien Nacido Vineyards, which today produces some of the world's most acclaimed grapes.

Historian Geraci, according to William A. Ausmus, author of "Wines and Wineries of California's Central Coast," detailed a key point in his studies of Santa Barbara County's early viticulture: One of the biggest forces behind the development of Central Coast vineyards was the success of wineries in the San Francisco area. As that area's growing population forced agricultural lands to give way to housing, wineries there were forced to look elsewhere for high-quality wine grapes, Ausmus wrote. Out of necessity, these wineries looked to the young vineyards being established on the Central Coast.

In 1965, the California Land Conservation Act (Williamson Act) was passed to slow the sale of the state's valuable agricultural land to housing developers. In turn, the act resulted in the sale of more land for viticulture use.

The earliest successes of viticulture in Santa Barbara County paved the way for a 1965 report issued by the Santa Barbara County Agricultural Extension Service, which noted what the early pioneers in local viticulture had discovered: Santa Barbara County's Santa Ynez and Santa Maria valleys displayed excellent soils and growing conditions for grapes, according to Ausmus.

Commercial vineyards in the Santa Maria Valley got a foothold under the guidance of Louis Lucas, a member of the Central Valley's Lucas farming family.

Ausmus writes that Louis Lucas and high school friend Dale Hampton, together with Louis' brother George, Louis pronounced the Santa Maria Valley ideal for viticulture. Today, Louis Lucas is co-owner of Lucas & Lewellen Vineyards with retired Santa Barbara County Superior Court Judge Royce Lewellen, and Dale Hampton, who co-founded Coastal Farming Company in Santa Maria

and Hampton Farming, is a well-respected vineyard consultant (check this!)

Two other important contributors to the Santa Maria Valley viticulture and winemaking industry were brothers Steven and Robert Miller, members of a fourth-generation California farming family.

In 1969, the two purchased two neighboring parcels that were part of the original 9,000-acre Ontiveros land grant called Rancho Tepusquet. Noting the successes of their neighbors, the Miller brothers opted to plant grapevines on their property in 1972. Dale Hampton was hired to produce a superior grape crop, and the Miller brothers named their vineyard Bien Nacido, which means "well born" in Spanish. In 1999, the Millers planted their Solomon Hills vineyard, located just south of Clark Avenue. Both vineyards continue to produce some of the county's most sought-after pinot noir grapes.

In addition, the Miller family in the late 1980s established Central Coast Wine Services in Santa Maria, which provides a full range of winemaking assistance for smaller winemakers or those without their own production facilities.

The Millers opened a second Central Coast Wine Services facility in Paso Robles in recent years.

The Santa Maria Valley American Viticulture Area (AVA) was established in 1981, and was the first AVA established in Santa Barbara County. With its valley and river lands, the Santa Maria Valley AVA has a climate that leads to early bud break and a long ripening season for the grapes. The area's soils are mostly sandy loam with some limestone and chalk, Ausmus writes.

-- Sources: "Wines and Wineries of the Central Coast," by William A. Ausmus (University of California Press, 2008); "2004-2005 Viticultural Survey of Santa Barbara County," Viticulture & Enology Program, Allan Hancock College; "California's Central Coast: The Ultimate Winery Guide," by Mira Advani Honeycutt (Chronicle Books, 2007); and Santa Maria Times articles.