



RUSACK

THE ESSENTIAL SANTA BARBARA COUNTY WINERY BUCKET LIST

THE PRESS

BY
THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

When I started to explore the Santa Barbara County winery scene 20 years ago, there was primarily one way to taste wine: drive about an hour from my home in downtown Santa Barbara over the twisty San Marcos Pass, head to an estate vineyard in the heart of the Santa Ynez Valley, waddle up to the bar alongside other patrons, and sample the handful of wines they were pouring that day.

There was nothing wrong with that time-tested formula, employed in wine countries the world over. Such a bucolic experience brought you closer to the vines and made the geographic education you received all the more real, for you witnessed the region's unique topography on your way in and out of the valley. (Plus, tastings were mostly free in those pre-"Sideways" days!)

But much has changed. The open-to-the-public, one-size-fits-all estate experience is still alive and very well in Santa Barbara County, but so is every imaginable tasting opportunity otherwise. Due to both increased competition and the county's strict regulations on tasting rooms in rural areas, wineries are constantly forced to think beyond the traditional model, so the experiences are becoming more diverse and stratified.

There are now many reservation-only tastings, in which your small group gets an intimate tour and seated tasting with the resident expert. There are more and more tiers of tastings, in which deeper experiences, tours, and/or food pairings are offered for more money. (By the way, nothing is free anymore — thanks "Sideways"! — although fees are often waived with multiple bottle buys.)



Not far from Buellton is Ballard Canyon, an appellation dedicated to Syrah and other Rhone varieties that was approved in 2013. Though full of vineyards, the only open-to-the-public tasting room is Rusack Vineyards, where Geoff and Allison Wrigley Rusack took over one of the county's oldest wineries in 1995. Santa Barbara-raised winemaker Steve Gerbac is at the helm, crafting estate Syrah, Sauvignon Blanc and Zinfandel but also pulling from some of the county's top Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon vineyards. The Rusacks also discovered old vines on Santa Cruz Island and planted them on Catalina Island, and those wines can also be sampled in their tasting room for an additional cost.



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