

805 LIVING  
WINE  
COUNTRY

THE ARMCHAIR OENOPHILE'S  
GUIDE TO WHAT'S NEW IN CENTRAL  
COAST WINE CULTURE.



BY ANTHONY HEAD

Based on this magazine's distribution and readership, *805 Living* Wine Country stretches from the canyons of Malibu to the northern border of San Luis Obispo County. That's a lot of vineyard acreage for one guy to cover, especially someone who values his downtime. But for this special issue I arose from my chair, left my dog, Brix, at home (looked after, of course), and struck out to discover what's new for Central Coast oenophiles.

## APPELLATIONS, AVAS, AND ACRES

Anyone who is new to wine should be forgiven for thinking that the geographic listing on a wine bottle's label indicates where the wine was produced. In fact, it specifies the appellation (or official government-recognized region) in which the grapes were grown. From the point of view of the winery (wherever it's located), these appellations are important for marketing and branding. When choosing wines, a true oenophile recognizes—and seeks out—certain appellations (and even specific vineyards within those appellations) because local geology and microclimates tend to

produce in grapes similar characteristics that, over time, come to taste recognizable and familiar from wine to wine.

Most countries have their own systems of categorizing grape-growing appellations. In the United States they are called American Viticultural Areas (AVA), a federal program overseen by the Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB). In *805 Living Wine Country*, there are 11 AVAs, most of which overlap with California's Central Coast AVA. (See below. Note: Acres listed represent total area of the AVAs, not just where vines are planted.)



### 805 LIVING WINE COUNTRY

#### SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY AVAS

**Central Coast**—1,000,000 acres  
(San Francisco Bay Area to Santa Barbara County)

**Arroyo Grande Valley**—42,880 acres

**Edna Valley**—22,400 acres

**Paso Robles**—666,618 acres

**Santa Maria Valley**—116,273 acres  
(including about 18,790 acres in Santa Barbara County)

**York Mountain**—9,360 acres

#### SANTA BARBARA COUNTY AVAS

**Santa Ynez Valley**—76,800 acres

**Sta. Rita Hills**—30,720 acres

**Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara**  
—23,941 acres

#### LOS ANGELES COUNTY, SOUTH COAST AVAS

**Saddle Rock-Malibu**—2,090 acres

**Malibu-Newton Canyon**—850 acres

**BECAUSE DISPLAYING AN AVA** on a label means something to producers, this past January the 30-year-old **Santa Maria Valley AVA** ([santamariavalleywinecountry.com](http://santamariavalleywinecountry.com)), which lies in San Luis Obispo and northern Santa Barbara counties, annexed nearly 19,000 additional acres. The AVA's 1981 map was essentially redrawn to reflect geographical markers, similar soil compositions, and common coastal climate influences rather than the occasional manmade boundaries (including the 101 freeway) used when the TTB originally established the AVA. Now, more vineyards are included in this appellation that is routinely praised for producing world-class chardonnay and pinot noir. Next up: **Ballard Canyon**. Earlier this year, wineries and vineyards in the Santa Ynez Valley (between Los Olivos and Buellton) petitioned the TTB for recognition of a new Ballard Canyon AVA. In addition to showing specific boundaries and data on unique geography, climate, and

physical features of the proposed appellation, the petitioners must demonstrate that the defined area, in this case fewer than 8,000 acres, deserves such acknowledgment. When it comes to Ballard Canyon syrah and pinot noir, that's an easy sell. The TTB's decision should come next year.

### *The Armchair Oenophile Recommends*

**Foxen 2009 Pinot Noir**, Santa Maria Valley—  
a multi-vineyard blend of warm, spicy paradise.  
(\$34, [foxenvineyard.com](http://foxenvineyard.com))

**Rusack 2009 Syrah**, Ballard Canyon Estate,  
Santa Barbara County—an elegantly composed red wine  
with a youthful expression. (\$25, [rusackvineyards.com](http://rusackvineyards.com))

## ASSORTMENT

*Grape varieties planted and produced in 805 Living Wine Country appellations.*

barbera	muscat
cabernet franc	nebbiolo
cabernet sauvignon	petite sirah
carignan	pinot blanc
charbono	pinot gris/pinot grigio
chardonnay	pinot noir
chenin blanc	riesling
cinsault	roussanne
dolcetto	sangiovese
gewürztraminer	sauvignon blanc
grenache	sémillon
grenache blanc	syrah
legrein	tannat
malbec	tempranillo
merlot	viognier
mourvèdre	zinfandel

## WINEMAKERS

After the grape harvest—beginning right about now—the winemakers take over. In addition to showcasing a grape varietal’s true characteristics, winemakers add their own personality to the juice. Some produce big wine, others compose complex wine. For Paso Robles winemaker Amy Jean Butler, creating balanced wine is the highest priority.

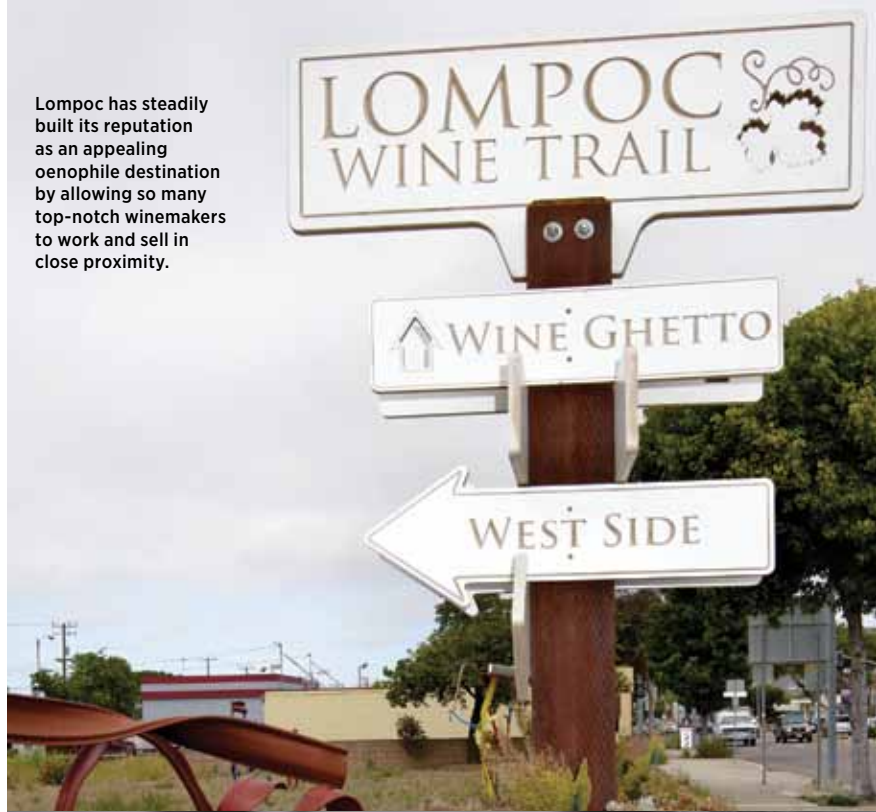
Butler puts that philosophy into practice full time at **Ranchero Cellars** ([rancherocellars.com](http://rancherocellars.com)), her own label that launched in 2008, although until last year she was winemaker for Edward Sellers Vineyard. Even though her wines consistently displayed fresh style and true balance, “It was time for me to step away and do my own thing,” she told me recently. “I was with them for six vintages, and they were good vintages.”

They were great vintages, especially her white blends—which makes sense because whenever she’s asked about professional goals she always replies with her desire “to make Paso’s best white wine.”

Today, as the head honcho at Ranchero Cellars, Butler admits it’s not always easy chasing that dream. Balancing financial responsibilities, exploring new varietals, and expanding her wine portfolio takes time. But this month, while she’s out harvesting grapes from nearby La Vista Vineyard, her 2010 Chrome, Paso Robles (grenache blanc and viognier) will be available—and it’ll be making Butler’s case for her.

GARY MOSS

Lompoc has steadily built its reputation as an appealing oenophile destination by allowing so many top-notch winemakers to work and sell in close proximity.



Even though she’s built her reputation on producing balanced wines, Amy Butler of Ranchero Cellars in Paso Robles admits to receiving the nickname “Calamity Jane” from previous colleagues. “When I’m in the winery I tend to break a lot of glassware and drop things,” she says, “and I’m always wet head to toe.”



THIS PAGE: Among the features of the Conway Wines Deep Sea Tasting Room are views of Santa Barbara Harbor, adding a unique sense of place to the wine-tasting experience. OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP: In Paso Robles, Vina Robles begins a new era under the direction of winemaker David Galzignato. At Sandhi Wines, winemaker Rajat Parr uses French oak barrels to mature the juice from Santa Barbara County fruit, including chardonnay grapes.

**OTHER 805 WINEMAKER NEWS OF NOTE** includes the arrival of **Rajat Parr**, winemaker and partner in Santa Barbara County's high-profile Sandhi Wines (sandhiwines.com). Focusing on making pinot noir and chardonnay, Parr also continues his duties as wine director for Michael Mina's San Francisco-based restaurant empire Mina Group. In May, **Nicholas G. de Luca** was appointed new winemaker for Vina Robles (vinarobles.com). Prior to this Paso Robles gig, de Luca was director of vineyards and winemaking for Dierberg Estate and Star Lane Vineyards in Santa Barbara County. After running the reserve program for Charles Krug in Napa Valley, **David Galzignato** now makes the wines for Jada Vineyard & Winery (jadavineyard.com) in Paso Robles.

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### *The Armchair Oenophile Recommends*

**2005 Herzog Special Reserve Syrah**, Edna Valley—because even though Joe Hurliman is by no means a new winemaker (he's been at Herzog Wine Cellars in Oxnard for 13 years), with time comes wisdom, and his Edna Valley syrah is a true master's lesson in achieving depth of flavor. (\$36, herzogwinecellars.com)

### TASTING ROOMS

It's officially *Game on!* for tasting room locations. They're showing up everywhere. Some are attached to micro-wineries, others are inside weathered-looking barns alongside vineyard-laden country roads. Many are storefront operations within cities and towns of varying sizes. But the newly constructed **Conway Deep Sea Tasting Room** (deepseatastingroom.wordpress.com) sits right on Stearns Wharf in Santa Barbara and certainly ranks among the more unique local places to taste through a flight of wines. (Here, it's the Conway Family Wines portfolio.)

Inside this modern, bright space there are deconstructed wine barrels and photographs that link the tasting experience back to the winery. Outside, the deck boasts incredible views of the harbor and coast.

"We tried to integrate the space with a sense of what is involved with winemaking," says Gillian Conway, one of three siblings involved with the winery's operations.

Gareth Conway adds that his family's wines reflect California's maritime influences—like the fossilized rocks of uplifted seabeds that lace the vineyards, and the fog and weather patterns along the coast. "Our wines feature the influences of the water and soil of the coast," he says.

Open daily, this tasting room pours a variety of varietal flights, as well as the Deep Sea 2008 Red (syrah, petite sirah, lagrein, merlot, mourvèdre) and 2008 Chardonnay, both featuring fruit sourced from throughout the Central Coast.

**NEW TASTING ROOMS ARE OPENING ALL THE TIME.** For instance, the Santa Ynez Valley's thriving tasting room scene is located in and around the town of Los Olivos. **Fontes & Phillips** (fontesandphillipswines.com) opened its tasting room to feature Santa Barbara County chardonnay; **Coghlan Vineyard & Jewelers** (coghlanvineyard.com) opened a tasting room in May by pouring Sta. Rita Hills pinot noir and some not-so-common Santa Ynez Valley grenache blanc; and after being in business for a decade, **Kaena Wine Company** (kaenawine.com) has finally unveiled a tasting facility to offer its full, rich blends of both red and white varietals.

Malibu's wine-tasting scene was bolstered recently by the debut of a new tasting room at the Malibu Golf Club (see *Pulse*, page 25); and, after making wines for more than a decade, Jim Palmer of **Malibu Vineyards** (malibu-vineyards.com) tells me he intends to open a Malibu-based tasting room and retail space for all the Malibu wineries before spring. When Simi Valley-based **Four Brix Winery** (fourbrixwine.com) opens its new tasting facility on September 17, the attached winery will also become the only working winery inside Ventura's city limits ... for now.

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### *The Armchair Oenophile Recommends*

**Opolo 2009 Mountain Zinfandel**, Paso Robles—it's a jammy delight, made from grapes grown just down the road from Opolo's spacious tasting room. (\$28, opolo.com)



## MULTI-WINERY GATHERING SPOTS

In addition to tasting rooms, there are other places for oenophiles to explore regional wines. These congregations come in different sizes and locations, including Lompoc's Sobhani Business Park, a two-block industrial zone known better as the **Lompoc Wine Ghetto** ([lompocghetto.com](http://lompocghetto.com)). There aren't vineyards or faux Tuscan villa facades to admire. Instead, the Ghetto is made up of fairly nondescript warehouse spaces with production facilities and tasting counters. It's a bare-bones approach that sacrifices everything but the quality of the wine.

The first wineries opened here in 1998, but the area has essentially flown under the public's radar until recent years. Although all of the tasting rooms are open to the public only on weekends, the area has steadily gained in popularity and reputation to instigate talk of at least some wineries becoming round-the-week oenophile destinations.

While there is no official organization in charge of this asphalt wine trail, Clinton Froehlich of **Jalama Wines** ([jalamawines.com](http://jalamawines.com)) tries to handle the occasional spokesperson duties. He told me that individual wineries basically keep in touch via email, and some vintners meet periodically to organize events. But other than that, it's a very loose federation of vintners. By this fall, however, he expects the Ghetto to expand by three new tasting rooms, bringing the total to 16.

**OTHER WINE-LOVER GATHERING SPOTS** can be mapped across the region, including the Santa Barbara **Urban Wine Trail** ([urbanwinetrailsb.com](http://urbanwinetrailsb.com)), composed of a dozen downtown wineries and tasting rooms (Margerum, Kalyra, Summerland, Oreana, and others). And then there's the very intimate Malibu Sundowner Tasting Room inside **Wades Wines** ([wadeswines.com](http://wadeswines.com)) in Westlake Village. Although small in size, this tasting room's 32-tap wine system allows for a big selection to be offered.

### *The Armchair Oenophile Recommends*

**Semler 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon, Reserve**, Saddle Rock-Malibu— a wine as enjoyable as the Eden-like setting its grapes were sourced from. (\$55, [malibufamilywines.com](http://malibufamilywines.com))



To craft its quality pinot noir, syrah, and other estate wines, Ampelos Cellars ([ampeloscellars.com](http://ampeloscellars.com)) in Lompoc's Wine Ghetto emphasizes environmental stewardship in its estate vineyards.



Samsara Wine Company ([samsarawine.com](http://samsarawine.com)), in the Lompoc Wine Ghetto, focuses on producing Santa Rita Hills syrah.



Santa Barbara's Urban Wine Trail features unique locations like Carr Vineyards & Winery's ([carrwinery.com](http://carrwinery.com)) outsized facility.

## INNOVATION

There are hundreds of commercial wineries in 805 Living Wine Country. Add to that the thousands of wines available from around the world and the picture of competition gets clearer: There is a lot of wine out there to drink. To try grabbing some attention, Paso Robles winemaker Austin Hope prints QR codes on his **Candor** (candorwines.com) wine labels as another avenue of marketing. When potential customers use their smartphones to scan the black-and-white squiggles of these “Quick Response” barcodes, they can view a parody video of Hope “hunting” in his vineyard.

“I wanted them to be fun,” says Hope, who also spends time in the videos providing useful wine tips for his affordable Candor line. “People want to be entertained, and we want to make connections with our customers. We’re getting pretty good response from them.”



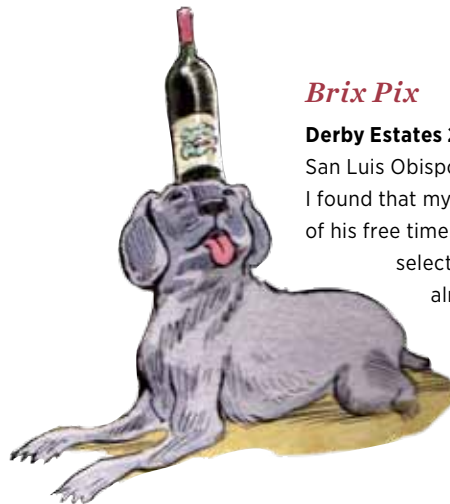
“I thought up the ‘hunter’ character,” says Austin Hope, winemaker for Candor Wines in Paso Robles and hopeful YouTube darling. “It’s a parody, of course.” To watch the videos, scan the QR code or go to [805living.com](http://805living.com) for a link.

**OTHER AREAS OF INNOVATION** include the growing use of wine-on-tap systems. The **Wine Cask** (winecask.com) in Santa Barbara, **Restaurant Brooks** (restaurantbrooks.com) in Ventura, and a growing number of locations purchase keg wines to serve via nitrogen-based tap systems. The technology prevents oxidation and keeps wine fresh, while the reusable kegs eliminate corks and bottles. Using that technology to the fullest, wineries like **Carr Vineyards & Winery** (carrwinery.com) in Santa Barbara now fill 1-liter to-go bottles at their tasting room with a variety of wines; refills cost \$5 less than the original purchase price.

### *The Armchair Oenophile Recommends*

#### **Niner Wine Estates 2006 Fog Catcher,**

Paso Robles—it’s a big, beautiful cabernet-based blend produced in the first LEED-certified (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) winery south of Napa Valley. (\$58, [ninerwine.com](http://ninerwine.com))



### *Brix Pix*

#### **Derby Estates 2008 Pinot Gris,**

San Luis Obispo County—Upon my return home, I found that my trusty dog, Brix, had spent some of his free time in the cellar. His “welcome home” selection is crisp and invigorating. It almost makes me want to head back out and start all over again.

(\$20, [derbywineestates.com](http://derbywineestates.com))

## CALENDAR OF EVENTS

*A few occasions for oenophiles to schedule their lives around.*

### SEPTEMBER 21

(ALSO OCTOBER 19 AND NOVEMBER 16)

*Solvang  
Solvang Third Wednesday Wine Walk*

Five stops at downtown tasting rooms.  
([solvang3rdwednesday.com](http://solvang3rdwednesday.com))

### SEPTEMBER 25

*Malibu  
Malibu Family Wines Grape Crush & Harvest Festival*

Food, wine, and live music at Saddlerock Ranch benefiting City Hearts: Kids Say Yes to the Arts.  
([malibufamilywines.com](http://malibufamilywines.com))

### SEPTEMBER 29–OCTOBER 2

*Various locations  
Savor the Central Coast*  
Sunset magazine presents a celebration of Central California’s food and wine.  
([savorcentralcoast.com](http://savorcentralcoast.com))

### OCTOBER 8

*Templeton  
Wine & Roses Bike Ride*  
Bike rides of varying distances through wine country, beginning at Templeton Community Park.  
([templetonchamber.com/wine-a-roses-bike-ride.html](http://templetonchamber.com/wine-a-roses-bike-ride.html))

### OCTOBER 8

*Santa Maria  
Celebration of Harvest*  
Food, wine, and live music at Rancho Sisquoc Winery.  
([sbcountywines.com](http://sbcountywines.com))

### OCTOBER 9

*Westlake Village  
California Wine Celebration*  
Regional wineries are sure to make a strong showing at this event at the Westlake Village Inn.  
([californiawinecelebration.com](http://californiawinecelebration.com))

### OCTOBER 21–23

*Throughout Paso Robles  
Harvest Wine Weekend*  
Individual wineries host special events. ([pasowine.com/events/harvest.php](http://pasowine.com/events/harvest.php))

### NOVEMBER 4–6

*San Luis Obispo County  
The SLO Vintners Rockin’ Harvest Celebration*  
Tastings, auctions, dinners in various locations. ([slowine.com](http://slowine.com))

### NOVEMBER 12

*Paso Robles  
The Garagiste Festival*  
A celebration for the many artisans of the small-production wineries, held at Windfall Farms.  
([pasogaragiste.com](http://pasogaragiste.com))

*For more wine recommendations from The Armchair Oenophile turn to pages 92 and 95.*