

TEXT NATASHA HUGHES MW

# CRUISING CALIFORNIA

Natasha Hughes MW takes a road trip down the Pacific Coast Highway to check out the wineries that are changing the perception of Californian wine by producing elegant drops of lighter bodied charm from cooler regions.



MEET RANDALL GRAHM, TED LEMON & MORE  
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ON THE COAST  
Kutch Wines' vineyard.  
Right: Morgan Twain-Peterson of Bedrock.



My first car was a Fiat 127, a teeny little box of a car that, as a friend of mine used to point out, had two speeds: slow and dead slow. Similarly, California has long been regarded as being a two-speed wine producer.

The state is probably best known for its mass-produced, branded wines, wines that are largely devoid of varietal character but, like Mary Poppins' medicine, packed with enough sugar to help them slip down easily.

At the other extreme, California makes top-end wines that follow the more is more model of production. These wines have more ripe fruit, more extraction, more alcohol and more oak than most and, inevitably, they cost more. It's not unusual for the basic cuvée from a Napa winery to sell for upwards of \$50, while the top wines from cult producers, such as Screaming Eagle and Schrader, retail for well over the \$1,000 mark.

The focus for California's turbo-charged production style has always been Napa Valley, but other regions, such as Sonoma or the AVAs of the Central Coast, have hardly bucked the trend. But, as per the Bob Dylan song, the times they are a-changin'. In truth, the times have been changing for quite a while. Pioneers like Cathy Corison, Ridge's Paul Draper and Littorai's Ted Lemon have always sought to create restrained wines, looking to Europe for inspiration rather than ratings from Robert Parker Jr. And, down on the Central Coast, the iconoclastic Randall Graham has long championed grapes from the Rhône Valley, Spain and Italy, which he believes are ideally suited to California's warm, dry climate. By and large, though, California's stylistic sea change is being driven by a younger generation of winemakers seeking to create wines that express every nuance of their terroir. The phrase 'sea

change' is particularly apt in this context, as most of the new generation of winemakers are working with grapes grown in California's coastal AVAs.

This is, of course, great news for anyone planning a trip to The Golden State as it allows for the perfect combination of winery visits and the ultimate Californian road trip down the picturesque Pacific Coast Highway. The best place to kick off your trip is in San Francisco as it also gives you an opportunity to make the most of its funky restaurant scene. **State Bird Provisions** (1529 Fillmore St, San Francisco, +1 415 795 1272, [www.statebirdsf.com](http://www.statebirdsf.com)), where intensely flavoured small plates are wheeled round the restaurant on dim sum trolleys, allowing you to swoop on anything that takes your fancy, is a particular favourite. I'm also very partial to the relaxed atmosphere and nouveau Mediterranean cuisine at **Nopa** (560 Divisadero St, San Francisco, +1 415 864 8643, [www.nopasf.com](http://www.nopasf.com)). The wine list at either place gives you a great insight into the mindset of California's most innovative winemakers.

Once you've had your fill of San Francisco and its food, which could take a while, it's time to begin your exploration of the Californian wine regions. Although it's tempting to head to Napa if you're short of time Sonoma should be your priority; it's the epicentre of much of the new-wave action. Sonoma County is a sprawling area that lies to the north of San Francisco, and its diverse climates and soil types have resulted in the creation of multiple AVAs. Broadly speaking, though, most of the innovative action is focused around cool-climate sites on or near the coast. Like most of coastal northern California, the vineyards are often blanketed by dense fog in the morning, but by lunchtime the clouds part, bathing the area in brilliant Californian sunshine. This fog, which rolls in from the ocean, helps moderate tempera-





**RHÔNE RANGER**  
Randall Grahm of  
Bonny Doon Vineyard.

tures, particularly in summer and early autumn. Some sites are so cool that it can be a struggle to ripen grapes, but like many marginal climates (such as Burgundy, the spiritual homeland of many of California's coastal winemakers), the very best wines produced here have an elegance and poise that seems almost impossible to achieve in sites with a gentler, more consistent climate.

For Sonoma's producers (with a few exceptions), pinot noir – and, to a somewhat lesser extent, chardonnay – is where it's at. This is a distinct point of difference from neighbouring Napa, where Bordeaux grapes rule. Having said that, Sonoma has some fine old vineyards planted with gnarly zinfandel bush vines, as well as a growing portfolio of varieties that range from Rhône Valley reds to sauvignon blanc and semillon.

This vinous variety continues as you travel south, down past San Francisco and on into the Santa Cruz Mountains and the Central Coast. Perhaps the best-known producer in Santa Cruz and the most irreverent is Randall Grahm. His reputation was made thanks to his work with Rhône grapes, and he's a founding member of North America's Rhône Ranger movement. In the past couple of decades, though, he's broadened his portfolio to include Iberian and Italian varieties. And, where Grahm leads, much of the Central Coast often follows. There's a good chance that, in years to come, the region may become as well-known for its malvasias, picpouls, albariños and nebbiolos as it is for its syrahs and grenaches.

In wine terms, the territory that runs south of Monterey is fairly poor when it comes to high-class wineries. Cruise through the flat fields of Salinas before heading for the most scenic stretch of the Pacific Coast Highway between Monterey and Morro Bay.

You'll know you're on the home straight when you reach the Santa Rita Hills AVA, which lies on the westernmost fringes of Santa Barbara

County. Although temperatures in southern California are generally higher than those in the north of the state, this particular area is cool thanks to a corridor formed by the hills, which funnels the ocean breezes inland. Temperatures rarely exceed 27°C, even at the height of summer, but nor do they fall much below 12°C in winter. As a result, the grapes can remain on the vine for as long as it takes to achieve full ripeness. Santa Rita didn't attract much viticultural interest until the 1970s. The pace of planting began to quicken in the '80s and '90s, when growers realised that the climate afforded them a particularly long growing season. There's growing excitement about the area's potential to make focused, mineral-laden chardonnays and pinots, as well as syrahs that express cool-climate notes of cracked pepper and violets.

Somewhere around Santa Rita, the Pacific Coast Highway merges into the stream of freeways heading east into downtown Los Angeles. Vineyards give way to sprawling suburbs and broad surfing beaches. Although your road trip may well be at an end, your love affair with California's new style of wines will probably have only just begun.

### Where to Taste

If you want to get down with the hipsters, visit **Broc Cellars** (1300 5th St, Berkeley, +1 510 542 9463, [www.broccellars.com](http://www.broccellars.com)). The winery is located in an industrial warehouse in downtown Berkeley. Owner and winemaker Chris Brockway buys in an eclectic assortment of grapes: picpoul from Paso Robles, zinfandel from Sonoma, grenache blanc from Santa Barbara and nero d'avola from Mendocino. After a bit of foot treading, Brockway allows indigenous yeasts to ferment the grapes in a number of vessels, from open-topped wooden fermenters to terracotta amphorae. The resulting wines are savoury and fresh with alcohol levels that rarely top 13 per cent.



**Littorai** (788 Gold Ridge Rd, Sebastopol, +1 707 823 9586, [www.littorai.com](http://www.littorai.com), visits by appointment) has vineyards on the Sonoma Coast and in the Anderson Valley, but its winery is situated alongside its The Pivot Vineyard, which lies just outside Sebastopol. A visit doesn't come cheap (from \$25), but it's a great opportunity to visit one of the pioneers of California's new-wave wines. Proprietor Ted Lemon worked for many of Burgundy's greatest domaines, including Dujac, Bruno Clair, Georges Roumier and de Villaine (the family winery of Aubert de Villaine) before returning to the USA. He established Littorai in 2008, where his chardonnay and pinot noir have become national benchmarks. Biodynamic principles govern viticulture here, and a visit incorporates a tour of a garden designed to attract native pollinators, as well as insights into the creation of plant-based teas to maintain the vines. A tasting of the elegant wines follows.

Jamie Kutch began his working life on the trading floor at Merrill Lynch in New York before chucking it all in to make wines on the West Coast. The first release from **Kutch Wines** (21660 8th St E, Sonoma, +1 917 270 8180, [www.kutchwines.com](http://www.kutchwines.com), visits by appointment) came in 2005, and 10 years later, his elegant pinot noirs are considered to be among California's best. Kutch sources his fruit from some of the coolest sites on the Sonoma Coast. His aim is to find impeccable fruit in order to allow him to practice minimal intervention winemaking using indigenous yeasts. Punch downs are done by hand (or, when I visited, by foot), and Kutch tries to use as little sulphur as possible – in some cases, no sulphur at all. The result is a series of restrained, sophisticated wines that reflect the character of the vineyards in which the grapes were grown.

Sonoma's **Bedrock Wine Co.** (21481 8th St E, Sonoma, +1 707 343 1478, [www.bedrockwineco.com](http://www.bedrockwineco.com), visits by appointment) is fairly unusual in the area as its focus is not on pinot noir and chardonnay, but on field blends and gnarly old vine material. Bedrock is a small-scale operation; your guide to the vineyards will likely be founder and winemaker Morgan Twain-Peterson. Chances are a visit will incorporate a stroll round one of

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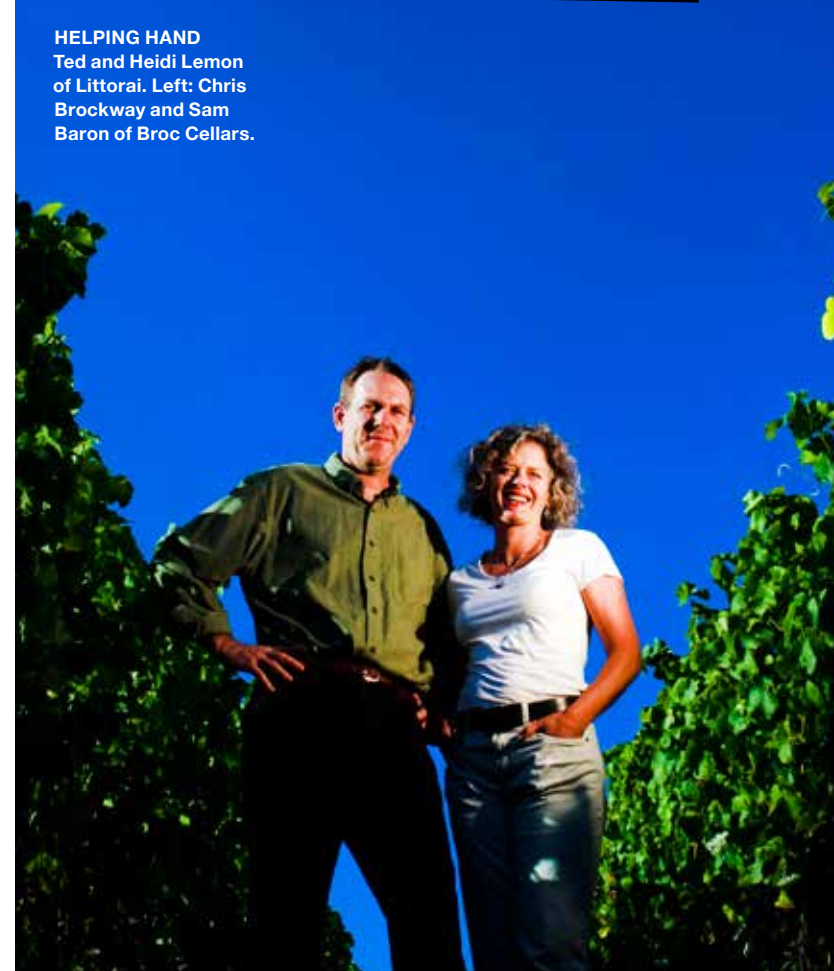


**VINE FORM**  
The Hirsch Vineyard  
at Kutch Wines. Right:  
Kutch Wines owner  
Jamie Kutch.

## WORLD WINE



Most of the innovative action is  
focused on or near the coast.



**HELPING HAND**  
Ted and Heidi Lemon  
of Littorai. Left: Chris  
Brockway and Sam  
Baron of Broc Cellars.





+1 805 456 2700, [www.santabarbarawine-collective.com](http://www.santabarbarawine-collective.com)). The advantage of tasting at the collective is you get to sample wines from some of California's other like-minded producers, including Qupé, Babcock Wines and The Paring.

Although **Liquid Farm** (65 Los Padres Way, Buellton, +1 805 686 7903, [www.liquidfarm.com](http://www.liquidfarm.com), visits by appointment) produces a little bit of mourvèdre-based rosé, chardonnay is the winery's raison d'être. Owners Jeff and Nikki Nelson fell in love with the Santa Rita AVA because they believe its combination of diatomaceous and loam soils has similarities to the soils of Champagne, Chablis and the Côte-d'Or. Their aim is to express their terroir via minimal intervention in the winery, which means early picking, indigenous yeasts, spontaneous malolactic fermentation and the use of neutral oak.

### Wines to Try

**2012 Broc Cellars Vine Starr Zinfandel** (A\$50) has a lovely lightness of touch. A very perfumed wine with luscious black cherry notes and a hint of black pepper. The tannins are ripe, the acidity is brisk and the alcohol is an astonishingly moderate 12.7 per cent.

The **2012 Littorai Savoy Vineyard Pinot Noir** (A\$140), made from fruit grown in the Anderson Valley, is still very youthful, but its lifted notes of red cherries and currants promise much. The use of oak is restrained, and the tannins are fine-grained and elegant, while the purity of fruit is quite astounding.

Kutch's wines all seem to be marked by racy acidity, and the **2013 Kutch Falstaff Pinot Noir**, made from Sonoma Coast fruit, is no exception. The immediate impression is one of sandalwood, cherries and oak spice. The tannins are taut and firm, but should relax once the wine has spent a bit of time in bottle, and the finish is long and savoury with more than a hint of smoky minerality.

The **2013 Bedrock Wine Co. Heirloom** is a field blend of around 22 varieties grown in

room located just north of Santa Cruz. It's open for drop-in visits (check the website for opening hours), but if you want a tour of the winery or vineyards, you need to get in touch at least a fortnight ahead of time to book an appointment. The tasting room has a delightfully relaxed vibe, and the selection of wines available to taste is eclectic. The days of Graham's experimentation with his "rock quartet" (instant terroir derived from steeping bags filled with slate, granite and other Californian stones into tanks filled with wine) may be over, but that doesn't mean that you won't get to taste some of California's most unusual bottlings. Although it's easy to laugh at the witty names and the zany labels, you'll leave with a new-found appreciation for the versatility of California's coastal terroir.

Winemaker Sashi Moorman works on a number of projects in and around the Santa Rita Hills and Santa Maria Valley. Moorman's own project is the **Piedrasassi** ([www.piedrasassi.com](http://www.piedrasassi.com)), but he teamed up with sommelier Rajat Parr to found the **Domaine de la Côte** ([www.domainedelacote.com](http://www.domainedelacote.com)), and together Moorman and Parr collaborate with former Screaming Eagle owner, Charles Banks, on **Sandhi** ([www.sandhiwines.com](http://www.sandhiwines.com)). It sounds complicated, but in reality the projects all mesh together, and are based at a winery in the Lompoc Wine Ghetto, a series of industrial buildings on the outskirts of a fairly isolated farming town. While Piedrasassi is focused on the production of sinewy, savoury syrah, Sandhi and the Domaine de la Côte specialise in pinot noir and chardonnay. You can taste the Domaine de la Côte and Piedrasassi wines at **Lompoc** (1501 E Chestnut Ave, Lompoc, +1 805 736 6784, visits by appointment.), but the best place to find the Sandhi wines is at the **Santa Barbara Collective** (Suite C, 131 Anacapa St, Santa Barbara,



Bedrock's ancient vineyards, which are among the oldest in California. The Bedrock Vineyard was planted in 1888, while the Compagni Portis Vineyard, planted in 1954, is one of the youngest vineyards from which Twain-Peterson sources fruit. Bedrock does make a pinot noir, but it's the heritage blends and astoundingly fresh zinfandels that you'll remember long after the tasting is over.

If your trip is Sonoma-focused, you can visit **Ridge** at their Lytton Springs winery (650 Lytton Springs Rd, Healdsburg, +1 707 433 7721, [www.ridgevine.com](http://www.ridgevine.com)) just outside Healdsburg. If time permits, though, it's worth making the trek down to Ridge's **Monte Bello** winery (17100 Monte Bello Rd, Cupertino, +1 408 867 3233) in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The drive up to Monte Bello is steep and winding, but you'll be rewarded with an astonishing view out over the highlands towards Monterey Bay. Whichever of the Ridge estates you end up choosing, you're not going to be disappointed. Winemaker Paul Draper has been in charge since the late 1960s, and his hands-off winemaking philosophy has paid dividends in terms of the creation of wines of great poise and precision. Ridge's wines are hardly insider secrets. They've attracted critical plaudits since the 1970s, when the infamous Judgment of Paris tasting saw the 1971 Ridge Monte Bello take fifth place in a line-up of wines that pitted California's best against Bordeaux's top growths. These days the vineyards, which are managed organically, are planted with syrah, grenache, carignan, merlot, petit verdot, mourvèdre, petite syrah and chardonnay, along with the cabernet sauvignon and zinfandel for which the estate is best known.

Randall Graham's **Bonny Doon Vineyard** (450 Highway 1, Davenport, +1 831 471 8031, [www.bonnydoonvineyards.com](http://www.bonnydoonvineyards.com)) has a tasting

Twain-Peterson's ancient Sonoma Valley vineyard. Zinfandel and carignan make up about 60-70 per cent of the blend, while the balance is composed of syrah, petite syrah, tempranillo and teinturier varieties like alicante bouschet and grand noir de la calmette, among others. This is a deeply flavoured, concentrated wine, rich with spice, berries and plums with a long, complex finish. An enormously satisfying and very age-worthy wine.

You shouldn't leave the Ridge tasting room in the Santa Cruz Mountains without sampling its flagship wine, Monte Bello. The exact proportions of its blend change every year, but the recently released **2011 Ridge Monte Bello** is 88 per cent cabernet sauvignon, eight per cent merlot and four per cent cabernet franc. Unusually for many of the more restrained Californian wines, it's mainly aged in American oak barrels (only one per cent of the barrels were made with French oak) as winemaker Paul Draper believes American oak can be just as elegant as French oak if it is properly seasoned. This is a refined wine, which is nuanced and complex with an incredibly persistent finish.

Bonny Doon's totemic wine is the Le Cigare Volant, a Rhône blend whose name is a reference to the 1954 law that prohibits flying saucers hovering over the Châteauneuf-du-Pâpe vineyards (weird, but true). The **2010 Bonny Doon Le Cigare Volant** (A\$75) is a robust blend of mourvèdre, grenache, syrah and cinsault that has a rather fine, floral aromatic expression, and a long, powerful finish.

Although **Tatomer** ([www.tatomerwines.com](http://www.tatomerwines.com)) doesn't have a tasting room, it's worth trying to track down its grüner veltliners or rieslings while you're in California. The **2012 Tatomer Kick-on Ranch Riesling** from Santa Barbara has abundant apricot fruit and a salty minerality. The acidity is a little low, but it's still an astoundingly fresh, vibrant wine.

A tasting at the Lompoc Wine Ghetto should reveal a few gems. The **2012 Domaine de la Côte Bloom's Field Pinot Noir** has some real whole-bunch character – herbaceous hints intermeshed with dark spice and licorice. It is savoury, linear and fresh. The pick of the syrah bunch is **2012 Piedrasassi Rim Rock Vineyard Syrah**, which has a complex, savoury palate reminiscent of Cornas



in a ripe year. Complex, pure fruited and firm, with great persistence.

Although Liquid Farm makes three chardonnays, I've only tasted the **2013 Liquid Farm Golden Slope Chardonnay** from Santa Rita Hills. Taking inspiration from the Côte-d'Or, it shares that region's generosity and richness. While the fruit might be slightly riper than you might expect in Burgundy – all spiced apple and buttered pears – the smoky minerality and vibrant acidity hints at a European frame of reference.

### Places to Stay and Eat

The best place to base yourself in Healdsburg is at the **Duchamp Hotel** (421 Foss St, Healdsburg, +1 707 431 1300, [www.duchamphotel.com](http://www.duchamphotel.com)). Its minimalist décor provides welcome respite from the chintzy, pseudo-historical excesses of most American B&Bs, and its breakfasts are deliciously healthy.

Morro Bay is a pleasant place to break your journey down the Pacific Coast Highway,

and the best hotel in town is the **Anderson Inn** (897 Embarcadero, Morro Bay, +1 866 950 3434, [www.andersoninnmorrobay.com](http://www.andersoninnmorrobay.com)). Pay a little extra to score a seafront room with a balcony, as this puts you in pole position to watch the sea otters and seals that populate the bay.

Healdsburg's best restaurant may well be **Barndiva** (231 Center St, Healdsburg, +1 707 431 0100, [www.barndiva.com](http://www.barndiva.com)). The food is modern Californian, which is to say that its flavours are inspired by Central America, Mexico, Asia and Mediterranean. As you might expect from a top-class restaurant in a wine town, the wine list is encyclopaedic.

I'm incapable of going to Sonoma without having at least one meal at **The Fremont Diner** (2689 Fremont Dr, Sonoma, +1 707 938 7370, [www.thefremontdiner.com](http://www.thefremontdiner.com)). The pulled pork or pastrami served hot from the smoker in a bun with relishes and appropriate sides always hits the spot, although the oyster po'boy also appeals.

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