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Santa Cruz Mountains – The Gorgeous 2016s

BY ANTONIO GALLONI | AUGUST 16, 2018

Readers who appreciate the transparency and nuance of site-specific Chardonnays, Pinot Noirs and Bordeaux blends will adore the 2016s from the Santa Cruz Mountains. The wines are aromatically nuanced, delineated and highly expressive of their origins. After brutally low yields in 2015, Mother Nature was more generous in 2016. Yields are never especially high in the mountains, but producers had enough fruit to bottle all of their labels, a highly positive development compared to 2015, when a number of wines weren't made at all. As always, I am struck by the complexity and world-class pedigree that seems to come naturally in the Santa Cruz Mountains, a bucolic, seemingly remote region that is in reality quite close to Silicon Valley and some of the most vibrant communities in the United States.



Fogarty's Damiana Vineyard

Looking Back at 2016

The Santa Cruz Mountains is a patchwork of vineyards perched atop the Pacific and North American plates that are divided by the San Andreas fault. Growing conditions, and just as importantly, the perceptions of winemakers, can vary tremendously from

estate to estate. For that reason, I have placed most of the information about vintages within the respective producer profiles. In general terms though, 2016 is the last of the drought years for the region. The early part of the growing season was very warm. Depending on the site, some producers reported cool weather during flowering that lowered potential yields. July was quite warm, but temperatures cooled off in August as harvest began for the Pinots.



The cramped cellars at Rhys are home to a growing number of compelling wines

In tasting, the 2016s are gracious, refined wines with silky tannins and mid-weight personalities. Ridge's Monte Bello offers a good contrast between the more polished, riper tannins of 2016 as opposed to the grippier tannins caused by excessively low yields in 2015. The 2016 Pinots from Rhys, Big Basin and Fogarty also show off the natural elegance of 2016 to great effect.



Tasting a selection of older Monte Bellos at Ridge

I tasted the wines in this article during two visits to the region in March and June 2018, followed by additional tastings in New York. I have included a number of wines outside the Santa Cruz Mountains made by producers in the region, and, following longstanding convention, I have also included Calera (which is not in the Santa Cruz Mountain) in this article. As a reminder, a number of top Santa Cruz Mountain wines are made by producers who are based in other parts of California. Click the link below to see all Santa Cruz Mountains wines I have reviewed in 2018. Readers who are new to these wines will also find a good deal of introductory material in articles from previous years.

Calera

There are a lot of highlights in this range from Calera. The Vin Gris, Aligoté and both Chardonnays are terrific. The 2015 estate Pinots - the core of the lineup - clearly reflect the stress of a year in which yields are just 0.5 tons per acre. To be sure, Calera's Mt. Harlan estate is a rugged site on its own, and yields will never be especially generous, but production in 2015 is dramatically low, even by the standards of this vineyard. Tiny yields along with a preference to use a high amount of whole clusters may explain why a number of the 2015 Pinots are reticent and hard to read today. Historically, the Calera Pinots blossom with age. I suspect that will be the case here as well. Readers will note the addition of two new non-estate Pinots, both from sites Calera has worked within the past for their Central Coast Pinot label. As a reminder, founder Josh Jensen sold Calera last year to Duckhorn. It will be a few years before the wines made under the new ownership show whether or not there have been any meaningful changes in quality.

92 pts

Calera 2015 Pinot Noir Selleck Vineyard

Mt. Harlan, Central Coast

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2022 - 2035

The 2015 Pinot Noir Selleck Vineyard is a little more giving than some of the other wines in this range, but it, too, is surprisingly light in texture. Star anise, spice, hard candy, menthol and blood orange give the Selleck a decidedly exotic, spiced character. As with all of these Pinots, it will be interesting to see the direction the Selleck ultimately takes.

Antonio Galloni. Tasting date: June 2018

91+ pts

Calera 2015 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard

Mt. Harlan, Central Coast

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2022 - 2035

Deceptive in its mid-weight structure, the 2015 Pinot Noir Jensen Vineyard is extremely closed to a degree I don't think I have seen before in this wine. I imagine the 100% whole clusters have something to do with the wine's current state of reticence. Time in the glass helps to some degree, but it is clear the Jensen needs time in bottle to be at its most expressive.

Antonio Galloni. Tasting date: June 2018

94 pts

Calera 2015 Pinot Noir Reed Vineyard

Mt. Harlan, Central Coast

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2020 - 2035

The 2015 Pinot Noir Reed Vineyard emerges from a northern facing slope that is always the last to be harvested. Silky and succulent on the palate, with terrific vibrancy, the Reed is also quite open today. Like most of these wines, the Reed offers notable purity and freshness throughout. Best of all, it should drink well with minimal cellaring.

Antonio Galloni. Tasting date: June 2018

93 pts

Calera 2015 Pinot Noir Mills Vineyard

Mt. Harlan, Central Coast

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2020 - 2030

The 2015 Pinot Noir Mills Vineyard is the one Pinot in this range planted on own-rooted vines. The bouquet alone is exotic, with tons of bright floral notes that soar from the glass. Intensely perfumed red cherry and berry flavors add to the wines exotic yet totally beguiling personality. In this range, the Mills is differentiated by its penetrating aromatics and overall freshness.

Antonio Galloni. Tasting date: June 2018

92 pts

Calera 2015 Pinot Noir Ryan Vineyard

Mt. Harlan, Central Coast

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2020 - 2030

The 2015 Pinot Noir Ryan Vineyard is dense and powerful in the glass, with a real sense of gravitas that gives the wine its somber feel. Vertical in construction and yet also dense, the Ryan is another wine that is going to need bottle age to be at its very best. There is plenty of potential though, that much is obvious, although the elevated ripeness and hints of slightly roasted fruit are impossible to fully escape.

Antonio Galloni. Tasting date: June 2018

94 pts

Calera 2015 Pinot Noir de Villiers Vineyard

Mt. Harlan, Central Coast

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2020 - 2030

The 2015 Pinot Noir de Villiers Vineyard is powerful and dense yet also tightly wound at this stage. Even so, the flavors are bright and precise, with a good bit of energy pulsing through the wine. The intense fruit and floral notes are quite appealing, but another few years in bottle should be highly beneficial. All things considered, the de Villiers is one of the more overt Pinots in this range. The 2015 was done with 50% whole clusters, which, as usual, is on the lower side for the estate wines.

Antonio Galloni. Tasting date: June 2018

88 pts

Calera 2016 Pinot Noir Muns Vineyard

Santa Cruz Mountains, Central Coast

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2019 - 2026

The 2016 Pinot Noir Muns Vineyard is a powerful wine. This hillside site planted at 2,600 feet confers plenty of mountain structure and overall grip. Bright, energetic and focused, the 2016 has quite a bit of energy. It will be interesting to see if the wine fleshes out with more time in bottle. Today, it is a touch austere despite its size.

Antonio Galloni. Tasting date: June 2018

89 pts

Calera 2016 Pinot Noir Bien Nacido

Santa Maria Valley, Central Coast

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2019 - 2026

The 2016 Pinot Noir Bien Nacido is soft, pliant and accessible, all of which make it an excellent choice for drinking now and over the next few years. Lifted floral/spiced notes, bright red cherry fruit and silky tannins all add to the wine's immediacy and overall appeal.

Antonio Galloni. Tasting date: June 2018

88 pts

Calera 2016 Pinot Noir (Central Coast)

Central Coast, Central Coast

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2018 - 2022

The 2016 Pinot Noir (Central Coast) is soft, fruity and delicious, all qualities that make it a terrific choice for drinking now and over the next few years. Sweet red cherry, hard candy, and wild flowers are front and center in this gracious, mid-weight Pinot from Calera. The Central Coast Pinot is a terrific introduction to the range.

Antonio Galloni. Tasting date: June 2018

88 pts

Calera 2016 Viognier (Mt. Harlan)

Mt. Harlan, Central Coast

White wine from United States

Drinking window: 2018 - 2022

Calera's 2016 Viognier (Mt. Harlan) is soft, open-knit and inviting. The 2016 is quite pretty, but it is not as varietally expressive in its aromas, flavors and textures as it has been in the past.

Antonio Galloni. Tasting date: June 2018

93+ pts

Calera 2016 Chardonnay (Mt. Harlan)

Mt. Harlan, Central Coast

White wine from United States

Drinking window: 2018 - 2026

The 2016 Chardonnay (Mt. Harlan) is a powerful, phenolic wine built on structure and intense minerality. Smoke, slate, lemon confit, white flowers and herbal notes open up in the glass, but only with great reluctance. I would prefer to cellar the 2016 for another 6-12 months, as it really needs time to come together. Even so, it is impressive at this early stage.

Antonio Galloni. Tasting date: June 2018

90 pts

Calera 2016 Chardonnay (Central Coast)

Central Coast, Central Coast

White wine from United States

Drinking window: 2018 - 2022

The 2016 Chardonnay (Central Coast) is absolutely delicious, not to mention one of the very finest values readers will find in California Chardonnay. Orchard fruit, floral and chamomile notes are beautifully woven together, with gentle tropical inflections that add character throughout.

Antonio Galloni. Tasting date: June 2018

90 pts

Calera 2017 Aligoté

Central Coast, Central Coast

White wine from United States

Drinking window: 2018 - 2022

The 2017 Aligoté is a crisp, bone dry and refreshing wine with plenty of citrus, almond and floral character. One of the more distinctive white being made in California today, Calera's Aligoté is ideal as an aperitif, but also has the depth to pair well with a wide range of foods.

89 pts

Calera 2017 Vin Gris of Pinot Noir

Central Coast, Central Coast

Red wine from United States

Drinking window: 2018 - 2021

The 2017 Vin Gris of Pinot Noir is super-refined, silky and polished. A Rosé of pure class, Calera's Vin Gris has so much to offer. Expressive floral and stony notes add nuance to the bright cranberry and pink grapefruit flavors.

<https://vinous.com/articles/santa-cruz-mountains-the-gorgeous-2016s-aug-2018>