

9 wines from San Luis Obispo introduce you to a region you should know

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Things don't always happen so fast in SLO, and certainly that is part of the area's appeal.

"SLO" spelled-out is San Luis Obispo, the wine-producing county in the Central Coast of California that is home not only to the steadily rising Paso Robles region, but also the lesser-known Edna Valley and Arroyo Grande Valley regions to the south of both Paso Robles and the city of San Luis Obispo. The area is about 250 miles south of San Francisco and 200 miles north of Los Angeles.



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The regions are relatively small with fewer than 3,000 acres of total vineyards in the case of Edna Valley and barely more than 1,200 vineyard acres in the case of its southerly neighbor, Arroyo Grande Valley. But these places, collectively referred to by some as "SLO Wine Country," produce some very good wines.

Both appellations are situated on the west side of the coastal mountain range, with vineyards close to the Pacific Coast — about 5 miles on average and just a few miles in some cases — but Arroyo Grande Valley also extends east and rises to higher elevations, allowing for warmer temperatures and a wider range of growing possibilities. Otherwise, the two growing areas are generally cool, with long, slow growing seasons, and because of this, their bread-and-butter grapes are the varieties of Burgundy — pinot noir and chardonnay. Some 20 other kinds of grapes grow in SLO Wine Country, too, and many of them do well, including Rhone varieties and whites such as riesling, pinot gris and albarino.

San Luis Obispo's vine saga dates to the 1700s, when Franciscan missionaries planted grapes and turned them into wine for their own consumption. Even consumer wine production has a long history in the area, reaching well into the late 1800s. But it was not until the 1970s that things kicked into second gear for Edna Valley, and a decade later that the same thing happened in Arroyo Grande Valley. Even into the 1990s the greater Central Coast was still fighting for general consumer attention in a marketplace that was quickly getting to know California's two biggest wine producing regions (Napa and Sonoma) intimately, but not many others.

And as we know, things happen slowly in SLO. Fog creeps in from the Pacific Ocean, gently landing on the area's celebrated chardonnay and pinot noir vineyards. Daily temperatures do not skyrocket and plummet the way they can in other, more-inland California growing regions, and that long, cool growing season allows for slower ripening and more food-friendly acidity in the wines.

There is sort of a built-in composure in the southern half of San Luis Obispo, a more relaxed natural environment, although no one would say that the winemakers there are any more relaxed than they are in other parts of California, or the world. In addition to their careful attention to the wines they produce, local winemakers are also quite dedicated to sustainable farming practices. Edna Valley and Arroyo Grande Valley turn out some serious wines, and they are worthy of our attention. Get to know them fast. Or slowly. That'd work too.

Below are nine recommended bottles from a recent tasting, in ascending order by price.

Whites

2015 Niner Wine Estates Albarino. Made of 100 percent albarino from a single vineyard in Edna Valley, this wine is bursting with lime and peach, backed up by subtle tropical fruits, a mouth-watering acidity and a manageable 13.5 percent alcohol. **\$20**

2014 Zocker Paragon Vineyard Gruner Veltliner. Green apple and green pepper aromas mingle with flavors of ripe pear, mango and spice. Despite the wine's lushness, each sip gets wrapped up with a wonderfully tangy but not tart sensation on the finish. **\$20**

2014 Claiborne & Churchill Pinot Gris. From Arroyo Grande Valley, this lush wine has a soft, filling mouthfeel, offering up ripe melon, stone fruits and minerality that lead to a balancing acidic zing. Try a glass with roasted pork. **\$20**

2013 Talley Vineyards Estate Chardonnay. Here, you get lime, a floral and nutty quality, minerality, a slight wood presence and a crisp finish from one of the area's most renowned producers, this year celebrating its 30th anniversary in Arroyo Grande Valley. **\$27**

2014 Tolosa Winery 1772 Chardonnay. From Edna Valley, this creamy 100 percent chardonnay was fermented and aged for 16 months in small French oak barrels. Its lively acidity is accompanied by suggestions of hay, lemon, orange, spice and minerality. **\$48**

Reds

2014 Sinor-LaVallee Syrah. Raspberry jam and savory notes lead to pepper, cedar, a hint of eucalyptus and smoke in this 100 percent syrah from a vineyard that is just a touch more than a mile from the sea. **\$28**

2014 Saucelito Canyon Vineyard Estate Zinfandel. A scant 200 cases of this upper Arroyo Grande Valley zinfandel were made. It is a 100 percent varietal starting with raspberry, vanilla, toast and cranberry, culminating in a spicy, peppery finish. **\$30**

2014 Laetitia Reserve du Domaine Pinot Noir. From another of the area's legendary producers (its first plantings were in 1982), here is a complex and quietly confident pinot noir with suggestions of flowers, smoke, raspberry and tobacco. **\$42**

2013 Stephen Ross Stone Corral Vineyard Pinot Noir. Game, licorice, orange, cranberry, cedar, dark cherry and spice are a handful of the aromas and flavors you'll find in this luscious wine. And only 106 cases were made. **\$52**

If your wine store does not carry these, ask for wines similar in style and price.

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