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Off Cali's beaten path

Pass up familiar and take road less traveled to San Luis Obispo wines

By Bill St. John, Special to Tribune Newspapers

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One of the more oft-quoted sayings of the English essayist Francis Bacon is "Travel, in the younger sort, is a part of education; in a d v e r t the elder, a part of experience."

Works with wine too. For instance, if you're going to fully experience California wine, it helps to travel away from the familiar in order to taste wines that, as Bacon might add, are "sequestered from the company" of the already known. That would mean getting out of Napa or Sonoma and turning the corkscrew into a bottle or two of wine from places such as San Luis Obispo.

Wha'? Where?

In California's Central Coast area, midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles, lies San Luis Obispo, where wine grapes grow on average a mere 5 miles from the Pacific and its salvific, tempering, cooling breezes. Winemakers do well with cool-climate grapes here, pinot noir and chardonnay especially, but also with syrah; California's forte, zinfandel; a raft of Bordeaux varieties; and — incoming! — many of the European grapes we're currently trying our hand at, such as gruner veltliner, albarino, viognier and grenache blanc.

SLO, for short and, yes, pronounced "slow" is pinpoint perfect California wine country, no less blessed — some might say more so — than Napa or Sonoma with that felicitous grape-growing and winemaking amalgam of sunny, warm days; cool, crisp nights; diverse soil profiles; and talented, on-trend winemakers.

SLO sports two appellations that your taste buds would be wise to travel to, if only by the glass: Edna Valley and Arroyo Grande Valley. Each is dotted with killer vineyards and wineries, some of which have been making delicious wine for years, and several at fine prices relative to those charged further north.

Here are some highly recommended wines from both appellations, whites first, then reds. Don't miss reading the sidebar on the chardonnays of Talley Vineyards, fine examples of ageable whites.

Edna Valley

2012 Tagent Winery Albarino Paragon Vineyard Edna Valley: A dead ringer for a Spanish Rias Baixas albarino, all green apple and citrus and a slightly saline snap-to. \$17

2011 Edna Valley Vineyard Chardonnay "Fleur de Edna": Here's the butter, yellow peach and lees-y aromas and flavors — and heft — you buy from regions north for twice the charge; wonderful stand-alone chardonnay. \$27

2010 Center of Effort Chardonnay Edna Valley: Burgundy's famed Domaine Des Comtes Lafon makes Macons like this, lined with citrus, mineral and verve but chin-dripping juicy with fruit. \$30

2009 Kynsi Winery Syrah Edna Valley: Cool-climate syrah; red fruits with notes of blue fruit and furry, round-the-mouth tannin of the sort in walnut skin. \$28

Arroyo Grande Valley

The issue with red Burgundy isn't its effulgent aroma, never-ending layers of flavors or impeccable transference of place into wine; it's paying for those.

But you can "get" the Burgundian experience, slightly attenuated, by putting side-by-side the **2010 Laetitia Vineyard & Winery Pinot Noir "La Colline" Arroyo Grande Valley** and a sibling wine, the **2010 Laetitia Vineyard & Winery Pinot Noir "Les Galets" Arroyo Grande Valley**, both \$60 a bottle.

La Colline comes from a hillside vineyard; Les Galets from a low-yielding rocky one (as both names translated suggest). The different terroirs render two very different but equally lovely wines; La Colline, fresher, more refined, presently more open than its more rough-and-tumble, darker-fruited, slightly tannic brother.

•**2010 Saucelito Canyon Red Blend "Sauvage" Arroyo Grande Valley:** Another spot-on SLO version of a French song sung by California; a three-way Bordeaux blend that reprises all the Medoc could do with the same, but at far less the cost. \$34

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Talley Vineyards chardonnay

The Talley family has farmed the Arroyo Grande Valley since the 1940s and remains strong in produce. In the early 1980s, the family added wine grapes to its crops; shortly after, wine was in the making.

Talley Vineyards specializes in cool-climate wine grapes such as pinot noir and chardonnay. Over the past year, I've tasted through a dozen Talley chardonnays from vintages dating back to 1991. My major takeaway is that, given a certain makeup, a California chardonnay can age spectacularly well.

The Talley chardonnay speaks of its place; from its Rincon Vineyard, for example, it is peach-y and mineral-laden; from Rosemary's Vineyard, named after the clan's matriarch, the chardonnay is elegant, fine, piercing; Oliver's Vineyard gives chardonnay that's Cali-plush.

All of them are shot through with the acidity that only a cool climate sends into a wine — and that is the key to their aging. A 1997 Rincon, a 1995 Rosemary's and a 2004 Rosemary's all had burnished into their aromas and tastes those notes of nuts, melted honey, toasted marshmallow and caramelized sugar that make older chardonnay so captivating.

You can get a head start on that history by tasting a prequel, as it were, in the **2010 Talley Chardonnay Estate Vineyard Arroyo Grande Valley (\$26)**, all green apples and lemon cream with a splash of white rock minerals.

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