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Daniel: Pinot Paradise festival stays close to home

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While the best-known pinot noir festivals take a global view (the International Pinot Noir Celebration, World of Pinot Noir), there are smaller gatherings that offer tasters a snapshot of pinot from a particular appellation. That's the aim of Pinot Paradise, a tasting of Santa Cruz Mountains wines.

The appellation's pinot producers have made big strides since the first tasting in 2005. Thirty-one wineries were represented at the Pinot Paradise held last month at Saratoga's Mountain Winery, and all of them were pouring at least one Santa Cruz Mountains pinot noir. (Last year, there were fewer wineries, and some poured wine from outside the area.)

Some of these wineries are tiny and represent a part-time venture for the winemaker. High-profile consultants are in short supply. Yet the quality of the wines was generally high -- no small feat considering how finicky the pinot noir grape can be.

The appellation -- which encompasses parts of Santa Cruz, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties -- would seem to be nearly ideal for pinot. Although the area has a range of microclimates, most of the places where pinot is grown are quite cool, with a strong coastal influence. The poor soils are important, too, because they naturally limit the size of the crop. About a quarter of the appellation's 1,000-1,200 acres of vineyards is devoted to pinot. For the most part, Santa Cruz Mountains pinots aren't ripe and bruising, as they can be in some other parts of the state. Wines are much more likely to fall on the elegant end of the spectrum, with pretty strawberry, cherry or raspberry flavors, some nice spice and supple texture. And you can't judge them on appearance alone: Even wines with good flavor concentration tend to be very light in color.

For consumers, one drawback is price. Farming can be difficult in the mountains; land, fueled by Silicon Valley's high prices, is very expensive; and yields are often quite low. So these wines aren't cheap. Still, some attractive examples can be found for around \$25.

Among the good buys are the **2002 Storrs Pinot Noir (\$26)**, a wine with dark-toned raspberry flavors, nice spice, firm structure and good concentration. Give the **2004 Soquel Vineyards Pinot Noir (\$25)** some air, and it opens up to reveal its ripe raspberry flavors. The **2004 Clos LaChance (\$25)** is also quite tight, with spicy raspberry and a somewhat drying finish. (These wines all carry the broad Santa Cruz Mountains designation, although most of these wineries also have single-vineyard bottlings.)

A lot of the newer pinot players are at the southern part of the appellation, around Corralitos, an area often referred to as Pleasant Valley. One is the Schultze family of **Windy Oaks Estate**. The **2003 Windy Oaks Estate Pinot Noir, Henry's Block (\$29)** is a supple, elegant wine with some toasty notes, while the **Reserve (\$42)** is a little more concentrated with more obvious oak. It should benefit from more time in the bottle.

Testarossa Vineyards also makes a lovely wine from the same vineyard (it's designated as **Schultze Family Vineyard**). The **2004 (\$54)** has more heft than the Windy Oaks wines do, but it retains its balance. Another winery in the area, **Alfaro Family Vineyards**, has a **2004 Estate Pinot Noir (\$33)** with ripe, juicy cherry and strawberry flavors and a supple texture.

Higher elevations also are yielding good pinot. **Muccigrosso Vineyards** used to sell its fruit, but now it's producing wines under its own label. The **2004 Pinot Noir (\$35)** displays ample cherry and strawberry fruit, surrounding a firm core of structure.

To the north, above Woodside, **Thomas Fogarty Winery** has a pair of good pinots. The **2003 Estate Pinot Noir (\$35)** has very pretty fruit, with a bit of tannic bite on the finish, while the **2002 Rapley Trail (\$48)** is more muscular and structured, with spicy raspberry flavors.

In what's known as the summit area, near Loma Prieta, **Burrell School Vineyards** has a **2003 Estate Pinot Noir (\$42)** whose light color belies the concentrated, spicy raspberry fruit and firm tannins. Not far away, **Silver Mountain Vineyards** produced a 2003 bottling from **Miller Hill Vineyards (\$36)** with similar raspberry fruit, accented by a floral note.

For even higher-altitude pinot, there were a couple of wines made from grapes grown at the Muns Vineyard, perched at 2,600 feet on the slope of Loma Prieta. The **2004 Soquel Vineyards Pinot Noir from Muns Vineyard (\$50)** is delicious, with bright raspberry, a bare hint of tomato and nice spice. **Sonnet Wine Cellars** had a 2005 barrel sample made from Muns fruit that was extremely promising. (Bill Muns has also started producing wine under his own label.)

Among other noteworthy pinots at the tasting were the **2004 Beauregard Vineyards Pinot Noir from Trout Gulch Vineyard (\$45)**, which offered pretty, ripe fruit and a lot more elegance than the previous vintage; **2003 Pelican Ranch, Remde Vineyard (\$30)**, with bright fruit and some savory notes; and **2004 Picchetti Winery, Deer Park (\$30)**, a little oakier style with firm structure.

And there's even more to look forward to. A couple of fledgling operations were showing barrel samples, including **Heart o' the Mountain**, whose estate vineyard near Scotts Valley was once owned by Alfred Hitchcock. The 2005 pinot, the winery's first commercial vintage, is dark, fruity and very promising.