Tim's Wine Market

October 2026
By Tim Varan

Looking back at recent selections, one important area of California that has received little attention from us is the vast Central Coast AVA. This region begins south of San Francisco and stretches all the way to Santa Barbara County. In preparing this set of wines, I started with a broad view, as the Central Coast encompasses over 40 different AVAs, multiple soil types, and dramatic variations in growing conditions. Ultimately, I decided to focus exclusively on the southern portion of the area, as it best showcases the differences in style.

2021 Halter Ranch Ancestor | $69

We begin our lineup with a wine that has been a club selection three times before, starting with the 2008 vintage in 2013. For several years, I selected this wine every other year for various themes, with the last spotlight being in 2017. At a recent tasting with the winery representative, I was reminded of how good this wine is, making it a perfect starting point for our discussion of the Central Coast AVA.

In terms of acreage, Paso Robles is the largest sub-AVA in the Central Coast, encompassing over 40,000 acres of vines (roughly 100,000 acres in total in the whole region). When it was established in 1983, Paso Robles had large boundaries, spanning almost 42 miles from west to east. It was commonly divided into two regions due to differing growing conditions: the cooler "west side," west of Highway 101, and the much warmer "east side," which runs from Highway 101 to the eastern border. In 2014, the region was further divided into 11 sub-AVAs based on climate and elevation.

Our feature wine comes from one of the most famous sub-AVAs, the Adelaida District, known as one of the elite growing regions globally, not just in California. This recognition began in 1973 when André Tchelistcheff—often considered the father of the modern California wine movement—identified exceptional potential in the area. He collaborated with Hoffman Mountain Vineyard on their early plantings, taking into account the region's elevation, diurnal temperature changes, rainfall, and high pH soils. The area received a significant boost when the Perrin family, owners of the renowned Château Beaucastel in Châteauneuf-du-Pape, purchased what is now Tablas Creek in 1989. By then, the MacGillivray family, who owned neighboring Halter Ranch, was already growing grapes. In 2000, Halter Ranch winery was purchased by Swiss entrepreneur Hansjörg Wyss, who initiated a massive planting schedule, now cultivating over 200 acres of vines.

The real catalyst for Halter Rach growth came when Hansjörg hired winemaker Kevin Sass. For nine years, he was at the helm of Justin Winery, producing their world-renowned Isosceles and Paso Cab. When the Baldwins sold the winery in 2010 to Stewart Resnick and Fiji Water, Hansjörg Wyss invited Kevin to move to Halter Ranch. He was already familiar with the vineyards at Halter Ranch, as they had supplied the grapes for many of Justin's top-end wines.

If you visit Halter Ranch, you'll easily see why the wines are so appealing. The property spans over a thousand acres on Adelaida Road in the west side of the appellation. It features more than 260 acres of vines on rolling hills and steeper slopes, some at elevations exceeding 1,700 feet above sea level. The vineyards are divided into 77 unique blocks, planted with 19 different grape varieties. Approximately 60% of the vines are Bordeaux varieties, while the remainder includes Rhône grapes, along with some Tempranillo. Additionally, the winery boasts one of the most modern, state-of-the-art facilities I have ever visited, creating the palette from which Kevin crafts his masterpiece: the Ancestor wine.

The Ancestor is named for one of California's largest and oldest Coastal Oaks, located among the vines in what Halter folks call Block 11. This massive tree resembles a grand Southern Oak with branches that stretch at least fifty feet from its trunk. To create the Ancestor wine, Kevin aims to produce the best example of what the vineyard offers each year. For 2021, the blend consists solely of Bordeaux varieties; previous vintages included both Bordeaux and Rhône varieties. This year's blend features 54% Cabernet Sauvignon, 34% Petit Verdot, and 13% Malbec. Kevin has also reduced the oak influence, aging this wine for 16 months in 60% new French oak.

When you open this wine, it's recommended to decant it for half an hour to allow the aromas to develop and the tannins to soften. After some time, you'll notice a rich bouquet of cooked cherry, blackberry preserves, dark chocolate, black licorice, balsamic syrup, and bay leaf. On the palate, it feels dry and firm, with abundant tannins balancing the ample fruit. While it's enjoyable now, I suggest holding it back for a couple of years and drinking between 2028-2035.

2021 Presqu'ile Syrah, Santa Maria Valley | $55

Next, we head farther south to Santa Barbara County, where the next two features come from. This area is notably cooler during the growing season—a phenomenon I experienced one summer when I left Paso Robles, where it was 100 degrees, and drove one hour south, suddenly wishing for a light jacket. While not perfect, the weather in Santa Barbara is awfully close to ideal.

The significant temperature shift is due to the region's geography. The west coast of the U.S. is bordered by a coastal mountain range that runs parallel to the ocean. This range prevents cool ocean air from moving inland, except in certain areas where gaps exist. An example is the Petaluma Gap, which creates cooler conditions in the Russian River Valley of Sonoma. However, about 29 million years ago, a piece of the coastal mountain range broke off and turned roughly 45 degrees, allowing a direct line to the Pacific. This enables cool ocean breezes to flow inland unimpeded. One of the best examples is the Santa Maria Valley, which lies in Santa Barbara County and is the source of our feature wine.

While the Santa Maria Valley may not be as well-known as other wine regions, it is one of the oldest AVAs in the U.S., established in 1981. Grape growing in the region dates back to the Mexican colonial period, and by the 1960s, over 100 acres were planted. Today, more than 7,500 acres are under vine, with a strong reputation for cool-weather varieties like Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Syrah.

When I began my search for wines from the Central Coast for this feature, I originally planned to select a Pinot Noir. However, a tasting with this winery in May changed my mind, as their Syrah was particularly intriguing. Unlike the Australian Shiraz featured two quarters ago, which is grown in the hot and dry Barossa Valley, this example is quite elegant and weighs in at less than 13% alcohol—a noteworthy contrast worth exploring.

New World winemakers often consider Syrah a heat-loving variety, planting it in warm conditions such as those in Australia and the Columbia River Valley in Washington. In contrast, producers in its ancestral home—France—find it thrives best in cooler climates, making it the dominant grape of the Northern Rhône Valley, in regions like Côte-Rôtie and Hermitage, while playing a minor role in warmer areas like Châteauneuf-du-Pape. Even in many New World regions considered cool, Syrah is now seen as a viable option for producing complex wines with great intensity, typically at alcohol levels below 14%.

Our feature from Presqu'ile winery exemplifies the cool climate of the Santa Maria Valley. The wine is crafted by Dieter Cronje, with consulting winemaker Jeremy Seysses from Domaine Dujac in Burgundy. Both men have extensive experience working with Syrah in France and focus on maintaining the grape's complexity while taking advantage of the unique growing conditions in Santa Maria Valley. The winery produces two examples of Syrah: one labeled Santa Barbara, a mix of estate and purchased fruit, and this bottling, which comes exclusively from their estate vineyard—one of the oldest in the area. Winemaking follows an old-world approach, utilizing 65% whole clusters in fermentation with stems included. The wine is then aged for 19 months in a combination of older oak barrels and concrete eggs, resulting in a vibrant and lively expression of Syrah that feels more like Pinot Noir on the palate.

Decant this wine for half an hour before serving and chill it to cellar temperature. When you swirl it, you'll be greeted by a savory bouquet of fresh black plums, black raspberry, black olive, burnt rosemary, menthol, and lardo (cured pork fat). It is bone dry, with impressive fruit that blossoms mid-palate and extends into the finish with some tannins and modest acidity. Of these three selections, this one is perfect for Thanksgiving, complementing turkey, as well as salmon or pork. Drink between 2026-2030.

2021 Star Lane Cabernet Sauvignon | $59

To conclude our quarterly selections, we travel slightly farther south to one of the newest AVAs in Santa Barbara, Happy Canyon. This area is also located in Santa Barbara County, in the next valley south of Santa Maria. Here, vineyards benefit from cool ocean breezes directly from the Pacific. Unlike Santa Maria, where the entire region is considered quite cold, the temperatures in Happy Canyon vary significantly from west to east. The renowned Santa Rita Hills lie directly east of Lompoc, where the climate is cold enough that vines must be planted higher in the hills for the grapes to ripen. The Santa Rita Hills AVA is enveloped by the Santa Ynez Valley AVA, which becomes warmer as you move east, allowing varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon to reach full ripeness. Our example from Star Lane originates from the Happy Canyon AVA, the easternmost sites in Santa Ynez, nestled against the San Rafael and Santa Ynez mountains. This warm, dry area is perfect for growing world-class Cabernet Sauvignon.

Star Lane Winery was founded by Jim and Mary Dierberg in 1996. They initially aimed to produce Pinot Noir and Chardonnay but recognized the potential of this site. After establishing Star Lane, they continued their search for cooler vineyard sites, ultimately founding the Dierberg winery in the late 1990s to produce Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in the Santa Rita Hills. Both wineries are overseen by winemaker Tyler Thomas, who has experience with all these varieties as a former assistant at HdV winery in Sonoma.

I first learned of Happy Canyon a couple of decades ago while tasting with Doug Margerum, a longtime winemaker in the area and former owner of the Wine Cask bistro in Santa Barbara. Even before Happy Canyon was designated an AVA, he highlighted the area’s virtues, including well-drained soils and a long, slow growing season. The 2021 vintage, however, was cooler than usual, with Tyler stating that they never really had summer; instead, a long, slow spring persisted until harvest. While the growing conditions were nerve-wracking at the time, when the fruit ripened in late October, Tyler sensed it was something special. Rarely in California do winemakers work with perfectly ripe grapes while retaining naturally high acidity. Consequently, this Cabernet has received high praise for its amazing tension and balance.

The final blend for this wine is 82% Cabernet Sauvignon, 6% Cabernet Franc, 6% Petit Verdot, 5% Merlot, and 1% Malbec. Tyler ages the wine in 35% new French oak for 21 months, resulting in an oak presence that is noticeable but not overwhelming. Decant for an hour, and you'll discover a profound combination of fresh black cherry, black currants, toasted walnuts, peach skin, orange peel, cocoa powder, and cedar on the nose. Despite its 14.5% alcohol content, the fruit is beautifully elevated on the palate, supported by great energy as the oak tannins provide a structure that carries into the finish. This wine is delightful now and will age gracefully for a decade, so I recommend drinking it from 2026 to 2036.