

Uncork the Central Coast

**WINE AND GOLF
PAIR BEAUTIFULLY
IN CALIFORNIA'S
'SIDEWAYS' COUNTRY**

No. 8 at La Purisima Golf Course
COURTESY OF LA PURISIMA

By **Martin Kaufmann**

Lompoc, Calif.

“This is my golf wine,” Wes Hagen says as he pours two glasses of his 2010 Axis Mundi, a grenache-syrah blend.

Hagen, the winemaker and irreverent frontman of Clos Pepe Vineyards, often has a few bottles on hand when he joins friends at La Purisima Golf Course, two miles west of the vineyard on State Route 246. Axis Mundi is a versatile, fruity, unpretentious wine that can be put in the cooler and served in tumblers. (Hagen’s whimsical tasting notes advise visitors, “Shut up and drink it!”) Hagen even outfitted it with a screw cap because, really, how many people carry a corkscrew in their golf bag?

When a visitor shares details from his round that morning at La Purisima, Hagen, who maintains an 11.9 index there, interjects, “How many flat lies did you have?” Answer: Maybe four. “If you can maintain a 12 there,” Hagen says, “you can play anywhere.”

La Purisima, part of the Central Coast Golf Trail, often has been a qualifying site for U.S. Opens and other tournaments. For first-timers, it is an inscrutable layout; my playing partner and I drove ahead on several holes to try to formulate strategy. Even so, the proper driving line on No. 7, a par 4 with a large tree in the landing area, remains a mystery. Whatever you do, don’t lose your approach to the right; a sign warns golfers, “Caution Angry Bees.”

In the afternoons, La Purisima is made even more difficult by the two-club winds that come off the Pacific and race through the Santa Rita Valley. Those cooling breezes also promote a long, slow growing season, which produces the intensely flavored fruit that characterizes winemaking in Santa Barbara County.

To sample a cross-section of the local fare, drive to Los Olivos, which is the equivalent of an outdoor mall for wine geeks, so plentiful are the tasting rooms and wineries. I was escorted there by two savvy Central Coast veterans: Eric Bolton, winemaker at Greg Linn Wines, and his girlfriend, Kari Ziegler, who owns Gather, a wine bar in the inviting hamlet of Arroyo Grande. (Yes, everyone on the Central Coast seems to have some connection to winemaking.)

That morning, Bolton and I had played at Monarch Dunes in Nipomo, 35 miles to the north – roughly the midpoint of the Central Coast wine region. Monarch Dunes sits four miles inland on a eucalyptus-shaded, residential tract. With its pleasing rumples and intentionally unkempt dunes that frame the holes, it is utterly distinct from other



COURTESY OF LEE TOMKOW

courses in the area.

As we played, I picked Bolton’s brain about the business and what makes a good winemaker. He offered this advice as we walked off the 10th green: “Don’t trust a winemaker who can’t cook, because it’s all the same thing, blending flavors and pulling out the flavors in the wine.”

On our winery-hopping tour, Bolton’s tasting acumen was on display, as he picked out the cherry aroma typical of a Santa Maria pinot or the pepper of a syrah. Before we tasted the Qupé viognier, Bolton tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Think Froot Loops when you taste that one.” He nailed it.

I had my own sense of déjà vu when we pulled up to the outdoor tasting bar at Foxen, a winery in Santa Maria.

“This is ‘Sideways’ country,” Ziegler reminded me.

A scene from the 2004 movie, about an ill-fated tasting trip to Santa Barbara County by a pinot-loving protagonist, was shot at Foxen.

“Now we need someone to make a movie about grenache,” said Matt Trevisan, owner of Linne Calodo, one of the Central Coast’s most celebrated wineries. At the time, we were walking the front nine at Hunter Ranch Golf Course in Paso Robles, 85 miles north of Lompoc.

Our playing partner, Terry Hoage, agreed. “Grenache,” he rhapsodized, “is a like a beautiful, elegant woman.”

Hoage was a two-time All-American safety at the University of Georgia – he finished fifth in the 1983 Heisman voting – who spent 13 seasons in the NFL. For the past decade, Hoage and his wife, Jennifer, have operated Terry Hoage Vineyards on a 26-acre tract on the west side of town.

Sounds glamorous, right? Think again. By Trevisan’s formulation, winemaking is “90 percent cleaning, 5 percent art, 5 percent science.” He was



COURTESY OF MIKE POWELL

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<<< Central Coast, P45 explaining this as we putted out on the par-4 fourth, where the neighboring vines of Arciero Winery provide the backdrop.

Hunter Ranch is La Purisima's sister course, but they're distant relatives. Whereas La Purisima's angles, curves and semi-blind looks create a succession of uncomfortable shots, Hunter Ranch has an inviting, straightforward mien. It also has the sort of wine list and lunch menu –

Kobe burger or almond-crusted filet of sole, anyone? – that befits the culinary standards of Paso Robles' vintners.

Trevisan and Hoage share a similar wine-making sensibility. Trevisan went to nearby Cal Poly with the intention of building airplanes, but by his sophomore year he became immersed in the Paso wine business.

In wine circles, he's viewed as a trailblazer with his rule-bending blends. Many vintners stick to form – “This is our cabernet, and this is our chardonnay” – to great effect. But Linne Calodo isn't about hitting fairways and greens; Trevisan is more akin to Bubba Watson, taking an unconventional path to make birdie.

“Winemaking,” he says, “isn't about replication. A vintage is a liquid photograph of a year.”

My job has taken me to many of the great courses in America and Europe, as well as more exotic locations in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. But I'm not sure any of that was cooler than watching Trevisan siphoning samples from all corners of his barrel room, and assessing each combination as he searched for an interesting blend.

Hoage loves to mix the so-called Rhone Rangers. In each vintage he fine-tunes varietals such as syrah, grenache, mourvedre and picpoul.

“France has had centuries to do it,” he said as we toured his vineyard. “We're doing it in decades.”

The name of each Hoage wine is a double entendre – The Pick, The Gap – that reflects his football background. The long hours spent building Terry Hoage Vineyards was “much harder than football,” he said, but the payoff has been a string of well-regarded vintages.

Before leaving the Central Coast, I joined Alex Villicana for nine holes at Hunter Ranch, then visited his eponymous winery. In 1993, when Villicana started making wine in Paso Robles, his recollection is that the area had 17 wineries, no movie theater and only one restaurant of note, AJ Spurs.



COURTESY OF MATT TREVISAN

Matt Trevisan



COURTESY OF ALEX VILICANA

Alex Villicana and his still

Hotel Cheval



COURTESY OF HOTEL CHEVAL

If you go ...

Where to play

>> Central Coast Golf Trail:
centralcoastgolftrail.com;
877-679-1122

Where to stay

>> Hotel Cheval:
Hotelcheval.com; 866-522-6999

Now Villicana Winery is one of more than 300 wineries throughout the Central Coast, and their products are showcased in fine restaurants that have popped up throughout the region. Opening next month: the 3,300-seat Vina Robles Amphitheatre, visible from the back nine of Hunter Ranch.

Like Trevisan, Alex Villicana also is shaking up the local industry. A few years ago, he got the idea to buy up other winemakers' saignée – juice removed prior to fermentation – and use it to make grape-based gin and vodka in a German still. By the end of this year, he anticipates that his craft spirits business, called

Re:Find, will be twice the size of his wine business.

“A lot of people get to see wineries, a lot of people get to see breweries,” he says. “Not a lot of people get to see distilleries. We're definitely on that first phase of the wave of this craft-distillery movement. It's exciting to be a part of that.”

‘Winemaking isn't about replication. A vintage is a liquid photograph of a year.’

– Matt Trevisan, owner of Linne Calodo