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TASTING CORNER

Hidden Values

California's Central Coast Offers Plenty of Choice

BY LAURA HOLMES HADDAD

With more than 14 varietals planted on over 90,000 acres encompassing four million acres total, it's hard to believe that California's Central Coast flies under the radar in the wine world. Values abound and the array of varietals is astounding, setting the stage for the region to emerge from the shadow of its better-known neighbors, Napa and Sonoma.

The Central Coast is actually comprised of three unofficial areas: the northern (which includes Santa Cruz, Alameda and Contra Costa Counties); the middle (Monterey and San Benito) and southern (San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara Counties).

The northern region is dominated by Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, with some of the more well-known producers being Ridge Vineyards and Bonny Doon. The middle region produces similar varietals: Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Pinot Noir dominate but Riesling is a top white. Producers like Chalona, Morgan, J. Lohr and Mirasou are some of the most established wineries. In the southern region grapes like Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel are plentiful along with Rhône varietals such as Syrah, Mourvèdre, Grenache, Rous-

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Austin Hope, president and winemaker of Hope Family Wines in Paso Robles, thinks variety is the region's

PRICE EFFECTIVE WINES

For winemakers, it's the climate that sets the region apart. "The key to the Central Coast, unlike Napa and Sonoma, is that we have a very strong maritime influence, and that really defines the varietals we grow and the style of wine that we make," says Fintan du Fresne, winemaker at Chamisal Vineyard in San Luis Obispo. But he also points to the economic realities of the region, which allow the wineries more flexibility in their pricing. "Because we are a newer region we can afford to plant for lower sums, and our overhead is lower so we do offer exceptional value," he says. Du Fresne thinks the consumer is shifting, especially during a slowing economy. "Our region offers incredible value, especially Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Cabernets from Paso Robles AVA."

ue. "Without the history of a Napa or Sonoma, the Central Coast wines have to earn their respect instead of depending on the appellation to dictate a price point," says Keogh.

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