

Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara AVA: Beauty, Balance, and Bordeaux

Nestled in a peaceful corner of Santa Barbara County, Happy Canyon's verdant hillside vineyards, abundant sunshine, and oak-studded grasslands make it one of the area's most picturesque viticultural areas—as well as one of the most promising.

The 23,941-acre wine growing region, located in the easternmost part of the Santa Ynez Valley, is recognized for its unique micro-climate and its ability to produce top quality Bordeaux varietals. Designated as an official American Viticultural Area (AVA) by the Trade and Tax Bureau in November of 2009, the Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara is the smallest AVA in Santa Barbara County. It lies north and west of Lake Cachuma and is home to six major vineyards: Cimarone, Grassini, Happy Canyon Vineyard, McGinley, Star Lane, and Vogelzang Vineyards.

The area's warm climate, geography, and soil composition distinguish it from other growing regions in Santa Barbara County. With mid-morning fog burn-off and average summertime temperatures in the low nineties, Happy Canyon's warm micro-climate is the perfect home for Bordeaux varietals like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Sauvignon Blanc, Malbec, and Petit Verdot as well as many Rhône varietals. The soil, a mixture of loam and clay loam with interspersed cobbles, is high in mineral levels while low in nutrients, resulting in small vines and very low grape yields—a circumstance that results in concentrated flavors and excellent terroir expression.

Since the first vintage in 2001, winemakers throughout the county have sought out Happy Canyon fruit for its remarkable quality and flavor profile. "Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara is producing Bordeaux varietals in the category of France and Napa," says Doug Margerum, winemaker for Cimarone, Happy Canyon Vineyard, and owner of Margerum Wine Co. Whereas Bordeaux grapes in other warm climates typically develop sugar before flavor, in the Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara AVA fruit sugar develops subsequent to flavor, producing remarkable complexity and depth. "Happy Canyon is a perfectly balanced place that allows Bordeaux varietals to mature at a pace that brings out the maximum flavor," Margerum explains. "Working with fruit from this appellation is also particularly exciting because it is such a small AVA, with an even smaller farmable area—making the fruit very limited."

Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara's warm, idyllic environment produces high quality fruit with natural acidity and ripe fruit flavors upon harvest—a balance that is gracefully reflected in the resulting wines.