

NEW FACES IN LIVERMORE

BY DERRICK SCHNEIDER

East Bay wine lovers may know that vineyards blanket the Livermore Valley, but they don't always believe they can find good wine in the fields east of Dublin. Critics in the early 1900s raved about the Valley's wines; its Bordeaux-esque soil and surprisingly cool temperature promised to make it California's premier wine region. But then Prohibition ground the industry to a halt, and when production resumed more than a decade later, the Napa Valley grabbed the limelight. Today, Bay Area drinkers look north—not east—when they want good local bottles.

That shift in appreciation almost finished what Prohibition started. Lack of demand for Livermore Valley grapes sent many growers packing, and developers traded much-needed cash for former vineyards. In the 1980s, the few wineries that survived, especially Wente Vineyards, fought the suburbs that were paving over the Valley around them. They petitioned for—and won—laws that augmented farmland and preserved it in perpetuity. No development could happen unless offsetting amounts of farmland were put into trust. And though the laws didn't specify what a farmer should do with that land, the Valley's history made grapes an obvious choice.

Twenty years later, Livermore's agricultural policies have made the Valley an incubator for new wineries. In 1999, there were 15 wineries in the Livermore area; today there are more than 40. The Valley's problems have switched from too few wineries to too

many, at least for anyone trying to keep track: Tourist maps are out of date almost before they're printed.

It's impossible to keep up, but here are some wineries worth visiting on your next foray into the East Bay's most local wine region.

LES CHÊNES

You can't usually see a wine region's borders. Could you tell just by looking where Carneros ends and Napa begins? Or where Lodi grapes become mere Central Valley grapes? But follow Tesla Road far to the east, through the Valley's foothills and up their slopes to Les Chênes, and you'll reach the farthest eastern edge of the Livermore Valley American Viticultural Area. "See those vines?" says Candice Dixon, the quick-witted and friendly co-owner of Les Chênes, pointing to the sharp line that separates her vineyard from the surrounding grass. "Where they stop is the edge of the world."

Les Chênes' situation isn't just a geographical curiosity: The eastern location and higher altitude—800 meters above the Valley floor—make it a bit cooler than other Valley vineyards. "It was foggy until nine this morning," said Richard Dixon, the gentle and quiet winemaker and co-owner, on a hot August afternoon. "The fog sort of backs up into the canyons," he adds.





The vines look at home here, washing up the hillside, but like other Valley vineyards, they're a new addition.

So too are the Dixons, who bought the farm in 1999 and cleared out its chicken coops to make room for grapes. They live on the property, and the tasting room, run by Candice, sits just 100 feet from their home. But despite the newness of the

vineyard and Richard's long career in national sales for a large corporation he doesn't name, wine is an old friend of his.

"My dad had a vineyard in Lake County in the 1960s," he says, "and a lot of Italian friends." The family revolved around wine; Candice recalls visiting her future father-in-law's house and hearing him grill Richard about grape varieties and appellations over the dinner table.

But Dixon had to wait for retirement before he could get settled as a winemaker (a title he shares at Les Chênes with Dwight Busalacchi). "Retirement" and "settled" might be a stretch; Dixon works hard in the winery, and its proximity to his house ensures that he's never far away from his wines.

That dedication has rewarded the Dixons with ample praise. Just a few months after the winery opened in March, *Diablo* magazine named Les Chênes "Best New Winery." And everyone who comes to sample the wines in the tasting room falls in love.

One of Dixon's most popular wines is also one of his most unusual. The Deux Rouges defies winery wisdom, as it's made by blending Syrahs across vintages. Dixon wants Deux Rouges to emulate Penfold's Grange, one of Australia's most expensive bottles, but he sells his version for \$19. The price must be right; even though the American market has gotten used to seeing vintage years on bottles, which isn't allowed when you blend across years, bottles of Deux Rouges have sailed out the door. The wine is so popular that Dixon now makes Deux Blancs, a blend of multi-year white wines.

Of course, Dixon makes more-conventional wines as well. In his mind, the Livermore Valley practically demands Rhône varieties, such as Syrah, Viognier, Grenache, and more. Taste his wines, and you'll find yourself agreeing: They make the trip worthwhile.

Les Chênes is open weekends 11:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and by appointment. 5562 Victoria Lane, 925.373.1662
www.leschenesvine.com

PAGE MILL WINERY

There's a scene in the movie *Toys* where the heroes sit in a room while chunks of walls slide inward and push the characters together as they talk.

To hear Dane Stark talk about Page Mill Winery's former location, it sounds like he understands the feeling. The youthful winemaker, who looks like a surfer out of water, jokes with his business partner Gary Brink that they should install a beam in their new, lofty-ceilinged tasting room (a former car repair shop) that they can lower to six feet so long-time customers feel at home.

Dane's father, Dick Stark, started Page Mill in 1975 after he visited Germany's stellar Rheingau region. The tiny wineries there inspired him to switch overnight from selling lasers to crushing grapes. He built his winery in the excavated cellar of his home in the Los Altos Hills, seeking out grapes from around the state to transform into wine. "My dad was looking for good combinations of grape variety and growing condition before almost anyone else," says Dane, and the wines earned a devoted following. But as Page Mill's reputation grew, the basement winery struggled to keep up with its popularity. Residential zoning laws prevented the Starks from opening a tasting room. The hills prevented them from building a bigger winery. And Dick Stark's investment in the property prevented Dane Stark from taking it over completely. "I couldn't afford to inherit it," he says. "It was their nest egg."

"In 2004, we realized we needed to move," Dane says. He looked around the state for a new location that would give him space to grow—he's ratcheted up from 2,200 cases to 3,000 with plans to level out at 3,500—while staying close to his established fan base on the Peninsula. "We looked in Santa Cruz, Healdsburg, and even Paso Robles," he says, "but Livermore rose to the surface." The prestigious wine region attracted him with high value for his dollar and its commitment to the Valley's farms. "We want that agricultural feel, the open space, and the wine country lifestyle," he says. "It feels like I've come home."

And he's not just moving in for cheap land: He's buying Livermore grapes and singing their praises. The new winery came with two acres of Petite Sirah that Stark started harvesting; he's just released the first wine from those vineyards. And he's terminated the winery's long-standing contract with a Paso Robles Sauvignon Blanc grower, replacing its grapes with Livermore fruit. His new Cabernet Sauvignon will feature grapes from three Valley vineyards. "We're still going to get our Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from Santa Barbara," he says, "and our Zinfandel from Napa, but as we think organically and sustainably, local grapes make more sense."



Photograph: Janet Flemer

The Page Mill tasting room is open weekends from noon to 4:30 p.m. or by appointment. 1960 South Livermore Ave., 925.456.7676, www.pagemillwinery.com

CHARLES R WINERY

If it weren't for the signs, you'd think you had gotten lost on the way to Charles R Winery's tasting room. The dirt road at the end of Crane Ridge Road seems to wander off into nowhere, but follow it down and you'll find yourself at the small and rustic building that houses the crowded tasting room.

Unlike many other Livermore winemakers, Charles R's Randy Bartlett isn't a Valley newcomer. "I've lived here my whole life," he says, "and my family has been in the Bay Area since the turn of the century."

But the winery is only about a year old. Before that, Bartlett rented out his building to other wineries that wanted to store their bottles; a small winery doesn't have room for both equipment and inventory.

Though Bartlett planned to open a winery, he anticipated it happening in 2008 or 2009. A medical condition required him to retire from his full-time job, however, and he opened the winery in 2006.

When asked about his winemaking philosophy, Bartlett doesn't jump right away into talk of barrels and terroir, the word that signifies a wine that tastes of its vineyard and that dominates the marketing lingo on California wine. Instead, he talks about his family, and how he involves them in the process. "We're all in this together," he says, "and we're all proud of each other." His father maintains the winery and operates the forklift. His mother does the paperwork. His older sister runs the tasting room. Even the name of the winery shows his connection to his kin. "I wanted to keep the family name in there somehow," he says, "but it didn't work out. So Charles R is named after my father."

Kindred counts, but Bartlett is also committed to the Livermore

wine country. He buys grapes from around the Valley, entering into long-term contracts when he finds vineyards he likes. And he boasts of Livermore's potential, echoing the swarm of winemakers now taking advantage of the Valley's benefits. "We produce some very good, if not world-class, wines," he says. "I think that within the next five to eight years, it's going to tell the story. We'll be back to where we were in 1890."

The Charles R tasting room is open Friday through Sunday, noon to 4:30 p.m. and by appointment. 8195 Crane Ridge Road, 925.454.3040, www.charlesrvineyards.com

Derrick Schneider is a freelance food and wine writer whose work has appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle, The Art of Eating, The Wine News, and more. He is also the publisher of the popular blog An Obsession with Food (www.obsessionwithfood.com). He teaches wine appreciation classes through UC Berkeley Extension.

