

California's Central Coast Winemakers Respect the Past But Have Eyes on the Future

BY MATT KETTMANN



Eden Rift Vineyards and the Cienega Valley / Photo by Jimmy Hayes of Eden Rift Vineyards

From the late 1700s, when Spanish friars planted vines in Santa Barbara County, to the end of the 19th century, when French and Italian immigrants established nurseries and vineyards throughout the Santa Cruz Mountains, California's Central Coast has played a prominent role in the rise of American viticulture.

As much of that history slips away with the march of time, a number of the region's wineries embrace these chapters with pride. But the best of these brands aren't content to remind us of yesteryear. They're also focused on the future, evolving constantly to compete with the best wines in the world.

Few projects represent this better than Eden Rift in San Benito County, which has breathed new life into a bucolic property first planted in 1849.

Just to the southwest in the Carmel Valley, Massa Estate has revived the old Durney Vineyard, planted in 1968. Down in Paso Robles, meanwhile, the Dusi family continues a Zinfandel heritage that's a century old.

In southern San Luis Obispo County, Center of Effort has turned a faded Edna Valley facility into a hotbed of high-quality production. And in the Sta.Rita Hills of Santa Barbara County, Peake Ranch pays homage to a former owner, the late artist Channing Peake, and the wine industry itself. It highlights the very spot where regional pioneers first plotted a new appellation more than two decades ago.

All together, these producers teach strong lessons in how respect for the past can be a key strategy for a thriving future.



Eden Rift Vineyards' terraces of Pinot Noir on Lansdale Slope / Photo by Jimmy Hayes of Eden Rift Vineyards

More than 170 Years of History

Eden Rift Vineyards

After trying for nearly two years to find a historic California vineyard to purchase, preserve and promote, wine industry veteran Christian Pillsbury learned of a ranch in the Cienega Valley of San Benito County.

“I could immediately see that this was the right thing,” he says. “It had everything that we wanted to accomplish. It had lost its way and was at risk of being lost forever.”

Frenchman Theophile Vache planted the original vines here in 1849 and was one of the first people to plant Pinot Noir in California back in 1860. The property, which would later be renamed Eden Rift, featured a marvelous mansion and Zinfandel vines, both dating back to 1906 and the joint ownership of Captain Jules Jacques St. Hubert, a winemaker, and a Chicago grain broker named John Dickinson. It endured many peaks and valleys, from widespread renown under Dickinson as well as proprietors named Palmtag and Valliant.



Eden Rift Vineyards' cellar in the property's original farmhouse / Photo courtesy of Eden Rift Vineyards

When he bought the property at the end of 2016, Pillsbury began research that may never end.

“What we’ve done is peel the paint off of this property and just understand what was here and when,” he says. “To find something that is a fount of authentic American and Californian viticultural history, it gets my heart racing.”



In 2017, he and Cory Waller, the winemaker, began to replant much of the vineyard, now about 65% Pinot Noir and 30% Chardonnay. They added terraced blocks of Pinot Gris, some Rhône grapes and a new block of Trousseau, which Vache had also planted. Wines made from those, along with that historic Zin, are sold worldwide.

“If you’re from San Benito County, there is a swelling of pride,” says Pillsbury, who’s from San Francisco. “And if you’re from New York or Chicago or Tokyo, discovering something new that has been lost in the mists of time is fantastic.”



A Cabernet vineyard at Massa Estate / Photo by Alli Pura

Caring for Coastal Mountain Cabernet

Massa Estate

“For a vineyard of this age to be in the coastal mountains and be relatively unknown, but still capable of this quality, is just plain unheard of,” says Ian Brand, winemaker for Massa Estate. He’s helping longtime Monterey County farmers Bill and Laurie Massa, who bought this ranch in 2018, rejuvenate half-century-old vines and reopen a long-shuttered winery.

In the remote Cachagua area of the Carmel Valley, the property was planted with seven acres of Cabernet Sauvignon in 1968. It was known as the Durney Vineyard, and more acres of Cab, Chenin Blanc and Pinot Noir would follow. The own-rooted cuttings, which came from the historic Mirassou Winery vineyards of the Santa Clara Valley, still thrive today.



The chapel and its stain glass window at Massa Estate / Photo by Allie Pura

“The Durney wines have long been the stuff of legend locally,” says Brand, who points to 1978 as a particularly compelling vintage. “But only whispers of that fame extended beyond the region.”

Over time, the vineyard has grown to about 85 acres, with a switch to organic farming in 1996, when it was known as the Heller Estate. When the Massas bought the property, the first tasks were to improve vine health and connect grape buyers with the right winemakers. That’s so far included Megan Bell of [Margins Wine](#), Joshua Hammerling of [Blue Ox](#), Matt Nagy of [Benevolent Neglect](#), [Jaime Motley](#) and [Rajat Parr](#).

Plans call to remodel existing structures, which include a small chapel, into a retreat and event space, and to also make the winery functional.



Cabernet Sauvignon vines at Massa Estate / Photo by Alli Pura

“It’s outfitted with all the latest technology from 1980,” says Brand. “The idea is to move all the production back up there.”

He says that several younger winemakers are interested in the fulltime gig when that’s available.

“People want to make it sing again,” says Brand, who’s as excited about the potential at Massa as he is at the many old-vine properties he’s discovered across the region.

“The fact that we can grow in these rugged areas a few miles from the coast and capture the cooling influence of that refracted sunlight and licks of fog, and do it all at elevation is something absolutely unique to California, and unique to this section of the Central Coast,” he says.

“It’s a story that needs to be told and reflected more.”



Harvesting grapes at J. Dusi Wines / Photo courtesy of J. Dusi Wines

Generational Zinfandel

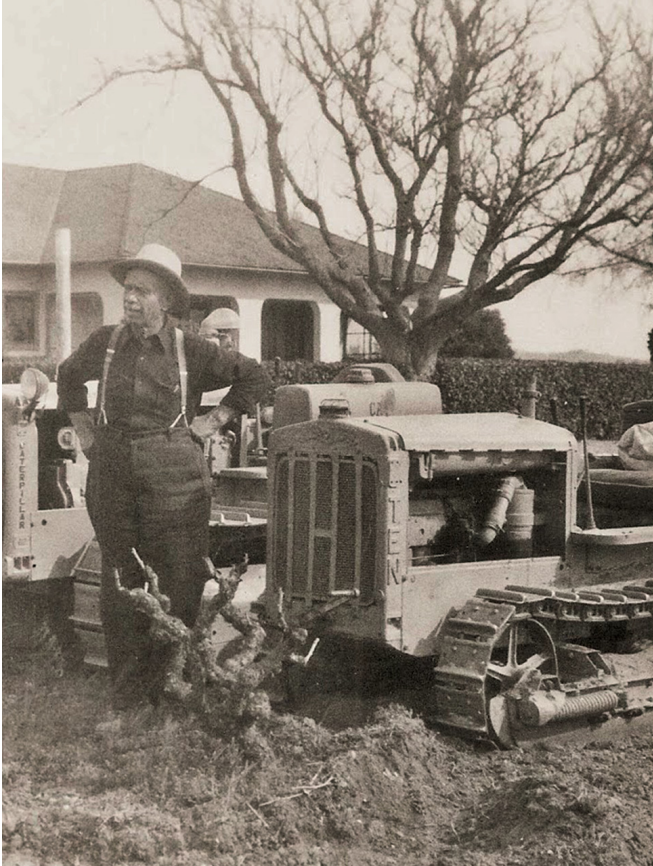
J. Dusi Wines

“Growing up, this was our life,” says Janelle Dusi, minutes after she finished a morning pick of Zinfandel from her family’s Paso Robles ranch on the east edge of Highway 101, planted in 1926.

“We were expected to do everything,” says her brother Matt Dusi. “You’d get shamed if you didn’t show up.”

In 1907, Sylvester Dusi left the Northern Italian village of Ono Degno, near Lake Garda, to work the coal mines of Pennsylvania. He then headed west, where he opened a hotel in Paso Robles in 1921.

The next year, he married Caterina Gazzaroli, who’d come to work in the hotel from Casto, Italy, and they planted vines four years later. Their sons, Guido, Dante and Benito, carried on the family’s hospitality and vineyard pursuits. They planted more Zinfandel in 1945, just west of Highway 101.



Sylvester Dusi on the Dusis' home ranch in the late 1940s and an original Dusi wine bottle from the family's cellar, which was printed in 1942 / Photo courtesy of J. Dusi Wines

Though they mostly sold grapes, the Dusis made commercial wine when grape prices fell in the 1950s. They sold it through a small tasting room on their ranch, the first ever along 101. The structure still stands, its shelves loaded with 50-year-old bottles. The family focused on farming for the next 50 years, and it remains a major chunk of their business, with grapes sold to Ridge Vineyards, Turley Wine Cellars, Tobin James Cellars and other Zinfandel stars.

But in 2005, fourth-generation vintner Janelle, who crafted her first homemade wine at age 13, launched J. Dusi Wines, which returned the family name to a brand. Seven years later, her father, Mike Dusi, bought 360 rugged acres in the Willow Creek District, after a prolonged search for a new vineyard site. He planted nearly 110 acres to 11 varieties across four ridges. Called the Paper Street Vineyard, it quickly became a coveted source of grapes for wineries across Paso Robles.



Grenache in J.Dusi Wines' Paper Street Vineyard / Photo courtesy of J. Dusi Wines

Janelle, Matt and their brother, Michael Dusi, all work in the family business, with those original Zinfandel vines still at its core. They garner deeper attention, as the family works with Cal Poly to better understand older vines versus new ones.

“A lot of sorting isn’t really true to the variety,” says Janelle. “The small berries are too intense, and the big ones are too watery. You need them both to make a complex wine.”

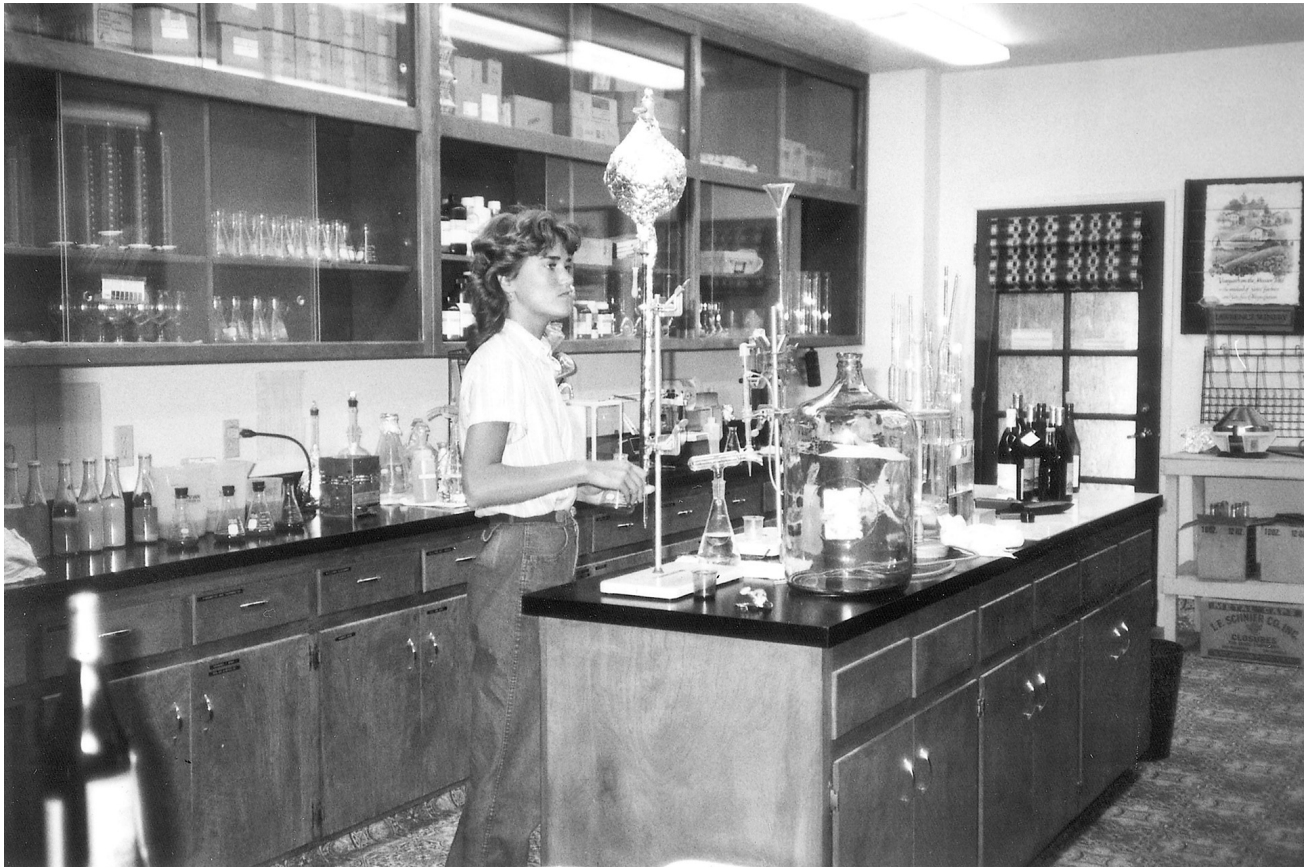


Honing a Historic Facility

Center of Effort

When it was founded as a quarter-million-case facility in 1979, the ambitious Lawrence Winery put the Edna Valley on California's wine map.

Two years later, it was renamed Corbett Canyon Winery, which The Wine Group acquired in 1988. It became one of the country's most popular brands, thanks to affordable prices and catchy advertisements that echo in people's ears today.



Winemaking under the ownership of Lawrence Winery / Photo courtesy of Center of Effort

As Corbett Canyon grew, The Wine Group consolidated production elsewhere. In 2008, longtime Raytheon chairman Bill Swanson and developer/vintner Rob Rossi acquired the massive facility, which Rossi helped design, as well as the surrounding vineyards, which had been planted in 1997. They called their brand Center of Effort.

Swanson took full ownership in 2016, and with the guidance from the general manager/winemaker, Nathan Carlson, the vineyards have been replanted and expanded to nearly 80 acres. The winery is a hub of both boutique and larger batch production, and sustainability is centerstage. This year, Center of Effort was declared Sustainability in Practice (SIP) Certified in both the vineyard and winery, only the fourth brand to achieve that dual designation, and the first that includes custom crush clients.



Aerial view prior to the 1978 opening / Photo courtesy of Center of Effort

The focus for Center of Effort remains estate-grown, luxury-level Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, but Carlson returned once-common Chenin Blanc back to the Edna Valley and also experiments with Rhône grapes. In 2019, the property underwent a multimillion dollar remodel centered around hospitality, with a new demonstration kitchen and outdoor entertainment areas.

“It’s about having a place to really tell the Center of Effort story very clearly,” says Carlson, who has grown the wine club steadily, even during the pandemic. “We provide a special place where our members can feel safe and cared for as well.”

While he processes fruit for large clients in the refurbished facility, Carlson rents winemaking space to small brands like Coby Parker Garcia’s El Lugar Wines and John Niven’s Cadre Wines. Niven’s family was the first to plant grapes in the Edna Valley, back in 1973.

“We don’t make a lot of money having Coby and John in here, but they are people we want to support and brands that have integrity,” says Carlson. “We want to see them succeed, and it’s just good for our winemaking to be surrounded by people with good and different ideas.”



Channing Peake, a previous owner the land that became Peake Ranch, drawing under a tree / Photo courtesy of Peake Estates

Cowboy Country Peake Ranch

“We’re certainly very keen to maintain the spirit of the place as an artistic, agrarian mecca,” says John Wagner, who purchased 107 acres of the southeastern Sta. Rita Hills in 2009. He christened it Peake Ranch, in honor of the late cowboy-artist Channing Peake.

Developed in the late 1800s by a Danish dairy farmer, whose stone water cisterns still stand on the hilltops, Peake bought what was then a 1,600-acre ranch in 1938. He spent the next two decades at what he called Rancho El Jabali.

“He would get up in the morning, do cowboy stuff and then, in the afternoon, retire to that studio, which was the old cow-milking barn, and paint,” says Wagner. “Hence, all of the Channing Peake paintings that are floating around Santa Barbara County.” A handful are displayed in Peake Ranch’s tasting room, which opened along with the new winery in 2019.



A tractor pre-pruning Chardonnay vines at Peake Ranch / Photo by Macduff Everton

The old structures were also headquarters for Pinot Noir pioneer Richard Sanford from the 1980s to the early 2000s, where he and others plotted the creation of a new America Viticultural Area (AVA).

“That hay bale barn that Richard built 40 years ago is where everyone met to plan the Sta. Rita Hills AVA,” says Wagner. “We wanted to preserve that because it’s part of our region’s heritage.”

Drawing from his experience as owner of the nearby [John Sebastiano Vineyard](#) as well as Sierra Madre Vineyard in the Santa Maria Valley, Wagner planted the property with 43.5 acres of wine grapes. They’re overseen by vineyard manager Mike Anderson, who for decades ran Oakville Station, a research vineyard for the [University of California, Davis](#), and the winemaker, Wynne Solomon, who grew up in Sonoma County before she moved south.

John’s wife, Jill, guided the winery and tasting room design.

“She was super-committed to building a winery that wasn’t going to be the center of attention,” says Wagner, who prefers to emphasize the vineyard, creek, mountains and old buildings. “We’ve always had the attitude that we wanted the winery to blend in as much as a 15,000-square-foot building can.”

The best evidence they succeeded? Peake’s fifth and last wife, Cherie Peake, visits often. “The history of the place is part of what’s so enchanting,” says Wagner. “For 150 years, people tried to do something in this canyon.”