

The Next Frontier

THE WINE GROUP PLANTS ITS FLAG IN CALIFORNIA'S PAICINES AVA

by Wanda Mann

COULD THE TINY and virtually unknown Paicines AVA be the next frontier in fine wine? "I've been in [the business] now for 25 years, and for years we looked outside California for what's next," says Jessica Tomei, vice president of winemaking at The Wine Group. Well, not anymore: "Paicines is really exciting because it's undiscovered for the most part in California," she enthuses. Why does she consider it "a new treasure for us to explore in our backyard"?

Tucked away on the Central Coast in San Benito County, Paicines is just 29 miles from Monterey Bay. Although it became an AVA in 1982, it lacks the name recognition of higher-profile California wine regions; however, insiders like Tomei have long been impressed by the grapes it yields and have blended them with fruit from other areas to boost wine quality. "In a concerted effort to improve wine quality and grape supply, we started exploring fruit from different regions," she explains.

"Obviously, quality starts in the vineyard. We dedicated a few years to sample and work with growers in different areas in the Central Coast, exploring where we could achieve the best quality for the price." When Tomei tasted grapes from Paicines, she thought, "There's something special here."

Ideal climatic conditions contribute significantly to Paicines' grape-growing prowess. "Due to the proximity to the coast [in this] unique location, you achieve warm days and a cooling effect at night without the dampness of the fog often found in neighboring Monterey County," explains Tomei. "This balance of heat and cool, along with a long growing season, promotes robust phenolic ripeness." Consistently pleased by the fruit it was sourcing, The Wine Group began purchasing vineyards in Paicines and now owns 1,681 acres, of which 1,280 are planted with vines. "The Paicines vineyards offer a great blend of water security, scale, production,

quality, and overall value as an asset to produce coastal red and white wine—grapes for our wine programs, [which are] currently met with strong demand," says John Sutton, CEO of The Wine Group.

In addition to enjoying a favorable semi-arid climate, the Paicines properties boast an abundant range of soil types—gravel, loam, clay, and limestone—which were formed by the remnants of an ancient inland sea. "We've created four distinct vineyards due to soil diversity, climate, [and] slope exposure. There is a Goldilocks effect: Many varieties do well, specifically due to the microclimates found in the vineyard," explains Tomei.

The Wine Group currently grows ten varieties at its Iron Spur, Palisades Trail, Strike Slip, and Chalk Crest vineyards in Paicines, all four of which are sustainably farmed and SIP (Sustainability in Practice) certified. The Gabilan Mountain protects them from the impact of excessive fog and humidity.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE WINE GROUP

The Wine Group's Strike Slip Vineyard in the Paicines AVA.



Iron Spur Vineyard

Set on 84 acres at elevations of 682–1,236 feet, Iron Spur is planted to Merlot, Malbec, Chardonnay, and Pinot Grigio. While The Wine Group

has long drawn on fruit from Paicines to enhance its other Central Coast wines, the **Benziger 2023 Running Wild Chardonnay (\$33)** is its first Paicines AVA wine; the grapes were sourced from this vineyard, where the Chardonnay blocks are on steep, sun-drenched slopes that can only be hand-harvested. The Diablo clay soil, mixed with some silty clay loam, aids in water retention and lends the wine its terroir-driven character. "It's not a super-buttery California Chardonnay," says Tomei. "It has a Burgundian taste profile, [with] the balance, the depth, [and] the structure true to the terroir of Paicines." To achieve this style, 100% of the wine underwent malolactic fermentation and bâtonnage for four months to build texture. Aging in French oak provided structure and subtle notes of spice and warm vanilla without overpowering the wine. Iron Spur is also the source of grapes for the highly anticipated release of **As One Cru 2023 Paicines Project Chardonnay**, which aged for four months in stainless steel to retain freshness followed by eight months in oak barrels to add complexity. The Paicines Project is spearheaded by Chris Radomski, founder of As One Cru. "There are many aspects of this region that are very attractive from a climate and viticultural aspect," he says. "The weather patterns, soil structures, and the elevation variations all combine for an optimum growing environment for the various varietals. This is very rare in a region; in fact, Paicines embodies elements that are found also in Napa



and Sonoma, which allow the varietals to flourish at a very high level while maintaining some regional attributes—the best of both worlds but at a lower cost."

Palisades Trail Vineyard

At 779 acres, Palisades Trail is the largest of The Wine Group's Paicines vineyards. Located between 647 and 1,271 feet in elevation, it is primarily planted to Chardonnay (374 acres) and Cabernet Sauvignon (200 acres), with smaller plots of Merlot, Malbec, Petit Verdot, Cabernet Franc, and Grenache. "At Palisades, the uniform sands of the Mocho loam are well-drained, with well-rounded sand grains. We have a variety of varietals that are grown on the vineyard, and [those] soils allow deficit irrigation techniques to restrict vigor and concentrate fruit," explains Tomei. Palisades Trail is the source of the fruit for the **As One Cru 2022 Paicines Project Cabernet Sauvignon**, which aged in barrels for 20 months: "To be able to take 25 years of Napa knowledge and DNA and apply it to our Paicines vineyards is an opportunity to redefine and put a tremendous amount of quality, value, and excitement back into wine," adds Radomski.



Strike Slip Vineyard

In Strike Slip, which encompasses 250 acres at 723–1,316 feet above sea level, "the soil is significantly dark, rich clay that bears the signature of the proximal fault and associated morphology—sag pond clays and fault gouge," says Tomei. "This is the type of clay that dries out in summer, and you can see the cracks in the earth. The vine roots are forced to search through the soil for water, putting stress on the vines, which helps to concentrate the fruit for rich flavors and dark colors. Bordeaux varietals are grown here," including Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Franc, and Petit Verdot.



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Chalk Crest Vineyard

Chalk Crest's 167 acres, ranging from 784 to 1,737 feet in altitude, are planted exclusively with five different clones of Pinot Noir. As implied by the chalk in its name, "[These] marine limestone deposits were intruded and metamorphosed by the granitic rocks that correlate to the Sierra Nevada mountains. [They] have been displaced to their current location by the tectonic motions between the Pacific plate and the North American plate, but the slow weathering of the limestone deposits at uplifted elevation have resulted in the soil profile of Chalk Crest," explains Tomei, who is "especially excited" for the day when The Wine Group produces Pinot Noir under the Paicines AVA: "It has a specific profile that is unique to the area, that wine drinkers need to try!" namely a "bright expression of fresh acidity layered with red raspberries, bramble berries, ripe plum, layered with tea leaves, and a supple and soft texture with a mineral finish.

Although the majority of the grapes grown by The Wine Group in Paicines are currently used to enhance its wines from other coastal regions, the Benziger Running Wild Chardonnay and As One Cru Paicines Project are pivotal steps toward a long-term goal of building a portfolio of high-quality Paicines AVA wines. "We're really looking to produce a range of luxury wines and brands that are going to reinforce the quality from an area that is the next frontier within wine," adds Tomei. **\$J**