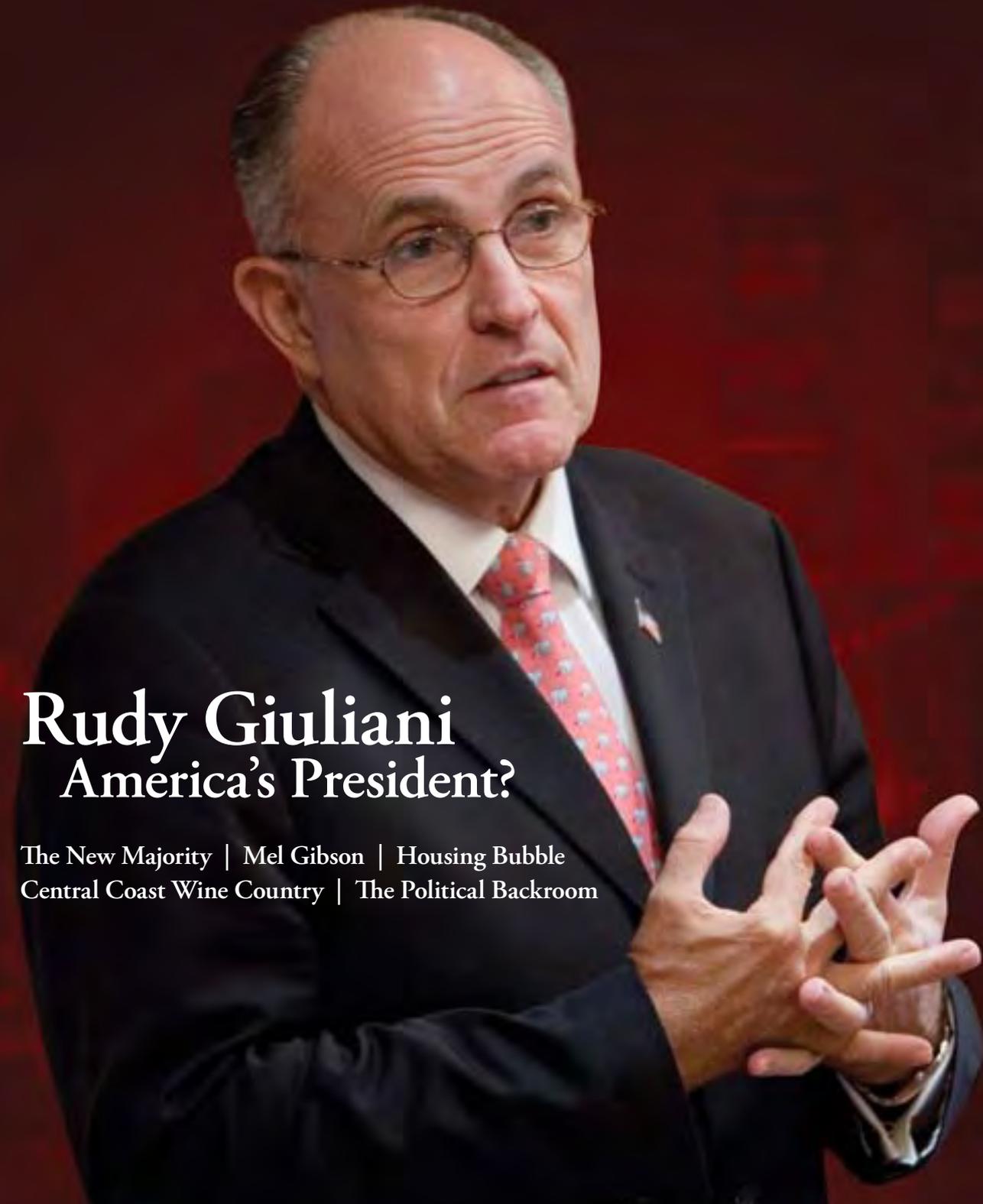


RED COUNTY

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Touring California's Central Coast Without Going Sideways

BY JOE MAGA

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This article will be the first of a three part series on California's Central Coast wine region.

The massive sprawling coastal region between Santa Barbara and Monterey is commonly known as the "Central Coast" wine country. This broad appellation was designated based on the shared cooling influence of the Pacific Ocean, but includes very diverse grape varieties and numerous smaller distinct sub-appellations.

A daytrip from downtown Santa Barbara is only a 45 minute drive. If you are driving to the area from Santa Barbara take Highway 154 (off of Highway 101) into Los Olivos. Not only is the drive quicker, the rolling hills, ancient oak trees, vast cattle ranches and old west feel is outstanding.

The Central Coast wineries are producing Burgundian wines (Pinot Noir/Chardonnay) and Rhone wines (Syrah/Grenache/Viognier) that are easily as high in quality as wines being produced in Napa and Sonoma Counties, but are, in many ways, more inventive. Many of the wineries in this area are new

and some of the winemakers may feel less constrained than their northern counterparts in their winemaking approach. The result has been some inventive blends that are exciting, for both their high quality and the unique characteristics. Although, this area is not generally extolled for its Bordeaux varietals, Beckman and Happy Canyon Vineyards produce good red Bordelais wines, and Brander and Westerly Vineyards produce excellent Sauvignon Blancs.

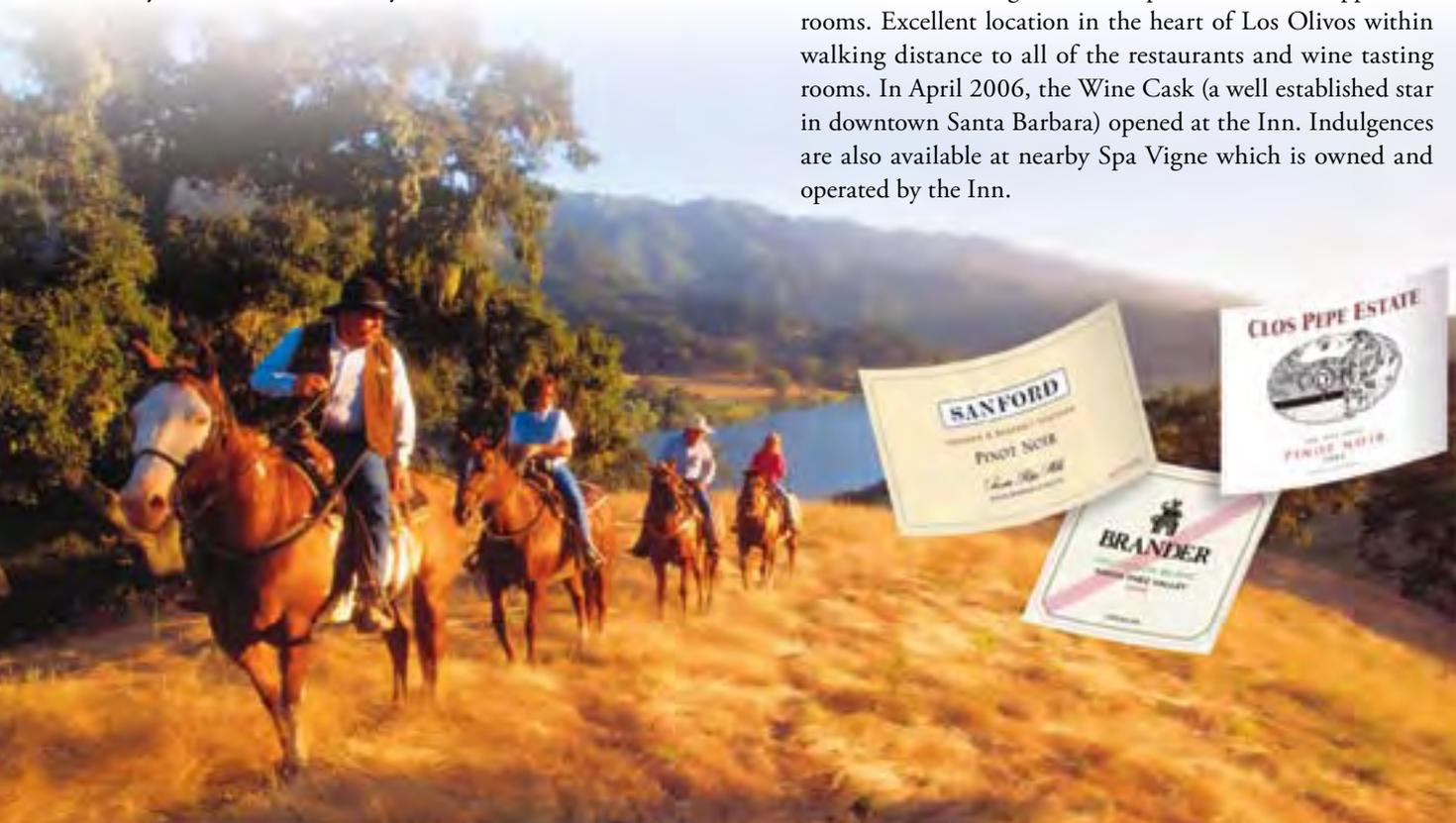
Although the success of the movie Sideways has given the region a more Napa-esque feel (especially those venues featured in the movie), it is still far more casual than its northern counterpart.

The quaint and beautiful town of Los Olivos is a great place to establish a base camp for wine country touring. These days one may notice more Ferraris, silicone, and little lap dogs with jeweled collars than in days past, the fantastic restaurants and hotels remain. The best overall website to review the area is www.sbcountywines.com.

Recommended Hotels

Fess Parker's Wine Country Inn (www.fessparker.com).

Exudes casual elegance, with spacious and well-appointed rooms. Excellent location in the heart of Los Olivos within walking distance to all of the restaurants and wine tasting rooms. In April 2006, the Wine Cask (a well established star in downtown Santa Barbara) opened at the Inn. Indulgences are also available at nearby Spa Vigne which is owned and operated by the Inn.



Santa Ynez Inn (www.santaynezinn.com)

Very elegant and beautifully appointed 14 room Victorian inn. Located in the heart of Santa Ynez.

Alisal Guest Ranch (www.alisal.com)

An upscale dude ranch outside of Solvang. The 800 acre ranch has horseback riding, fishing on a private lake, and its own golf course. A fantastic place to go if the kids are in tow.

Ballard Inn (www.ballardinn.com)

A place that is definitely not for the kids. A quiet and romantic bed and breakfast style inn in the tiny township of Ballard (outside of Los Olivos) where their historic red school house has been in continuous operation since 1883. Ballard Inn also has its own restaurant specializing in Asian fusion fare. Make sure you and your significant other sit on the patio at sunset and enjoy the local wines.

Recommended Restaurants

Brothers at Mattei's Tavern (www.matteitavern.com)

The absolute "must" restaurant in the area. Beautiful ambiance in an old stage coach stop, with world-class food using local ingredients. Very extensive wine list. The restaurant is only open for dinner and reservations are highly recommended.

Trattoria Grappolo (www.trattoriagrappolo.com)

This is an excellent Italian restaurant located in Santa Ynez. Great place to go with a group of boisterous people.

Los Olivos Café (www.losolivoscafe.com)

Featured in Sideways, it is difficult to get a table. However, the food is good and there is a great, albeit expensive, wine store next to the restaurant with many hard to find local wines. The patio with a Wisteria trellis provides wonderful outdoor ambience.

Patrick's Side Street Café (www.patrickssidestreetcafe.com)

Good quality food is inventive yet has a "home cooked" feel. Dishes often contain fresh local ingredients. Well-chosen and reasonably-priced wine list focusing on local wines. Ask Patrick about Grenache.

Favorite Wineries

The Santa Barbara County appellation within the Central Coast, has three distinct sub-appellations. The number of wineries in recent years has exploded, but here are some of my favorites:

Los Olivos (Santa Ynez Wine Trail)

The Santa Ynez valley appellation is bordered by the Purisima Hills and San Raphael Mountains to the north and the Santa Ynez Mountains to the south. Favorite wineries are Beckman, Brander and Rusak. For picnics, Beckman has three gazebos overlooking a pond, and Rusak has tables amongst ancient oak trees overlooking vineyards.

Foxen Canyon/Santa Maria Valley (www.santamariawines.com)

The Santa Maria Valley appellation has an east-west orientation allowing coastal breezes and fog to permeate the valley, resulting in an extended growing season. The drive along Foxen Canyon Road from Highway 101 north up to Santa Maria is a beautiful trip to another era. The trip will take some time along windy roads, but is especially rewarding in the spring when the hills are vibrant green. You can break up the drive with stops at the Rancho Sisquoc and Foxen Canyon

wineries. Although the Fess Parker winery was spoofed in Sideways as a low grade winery called "Frass Canyon", this winery produces some good quality value wines.

Santa Rita Hills

(www.staritahills.com)

Santa Rita Hills is the newest (est. 2001) and most acclaimed appellation in the region. The area is located west of Highway 101 and consists of a series of east-west rolling hills between Lompoc and Buellton receiving cool Pacific fog and strong ocean breezes. Winemakers throughout California clamor for grapes from vineyards in this appellation—you will see multiple winemakers producing wines from the Cargasacchi, Rio Vista, Close Pepe and Sanford & Benedict vineyards. A lot of the wine is made in several industrial warehouses in Lompoc affectionately named the "wine ghetto" and "pinot prison" and so many of the wineries are unfortunately not open to the public without an appointment. However, the tasting rooms for Melville, Sanford, Lafond and Palmina are all recommended. The Italian varietals produced by Palmina are arguably the best in all of California.

Cult Wineries

There is a growing trend in the wine industry for high quality wines produced by small artisan winemakers to become "cult wines"—extreme following with little supply. Typically such a winery has no tasting room and very little retail distribution. One must obtain the wine from a mailing list and the amount of wine (if any) one is allocated is extremely low. Here is my list of cult wines from the Santa Barbara County area:

Brewer-Clifton (www.brewerclifton.com)

Seasmoke (www.seasmokecellars.com)

Ambullneo Vineyards (www.ambullneovineyards.com)

owned by Orange County's own Greg Linn

Native 9 Winery (www.native9wine.com)

Bonaccorsi Wine Company (www.bonawine.com)

Clos Pepe Estate (www.clospepe.com)

Tantara (www.tantarawinery.com)

Ojai Vineyards (www.ojainvineyard.com)

Gourmet Market

No trip to the wine country is complete without a picnic at a winery enjoying local foods and wines. I highly recommend buying local cheeses, fruits and supplies at the gourmet Los Olivos Grocery Store (www.LosOlivosGrocery.com). There is a substantial selection of local cult wines sold at fair prices.

P.S. If you still really want to go on a Sideways tour of the area, feel free to log onto www.SantaBarbara.com/winecountry/ for all the details.

Cheers!

J.L.M. ■

