

# Antonio Galloni. VINOUS

## September 2016 reviews

Adam Tolmach describes 2015 as an early year with tiny yields and relatively low acidities. Even with the low yields, the 2015s are not especially dense wines. Based on what I tasted at Ojai, 2015 looks stronger for reds than whites. There are a number of terrific wines in this range beyond the Ojai signatures that are particularly of note, including the Sangiovese and Barbera. Among the 2015 Pinots, the Bloom's Field is superb, while the lineup of 2014 Syrahs is consistently outstanding.

**2014 Ojai Vineyard Syrah Roll White Hawk** One of the standouts today, the 2014 Syrah White Hawk Vineyard is an explosive wine of serious intensity. Dark cherry, plum, leather, spice, menthol and licorice provide considerable aromatic savoriness, but today, the 2014 is seriously tannic and forbidding. This is a wine for readers who can be patient.

**95 2020 - 2029 \$49.00**

**2014 Ojai Vineyard Syrah Bien Nacido** A powerful, meaty wine, the 2014 Syrah Bien Nacido Vineyard packs a real punch. Hints of lavender, plum, herbs and leather emerge, but only with considerable reluctance. Readers will have to be especially patient with this structured, tannic young Syrah, but there is quite a bit to look forward to. The 2014 was done with 15% whole clusters.

**94 2020 - 2029 \$49.00**

**2014 Ojai Vineyard Syrah Roll Ranch** The 2014 Syrah Roll Ranch Vineyard is defined by its impulsive, reticent feel. Inward and totally shut down, the 2014 will need quite a bit of time to be at its most expressive. Today, it is the wine's persistence and sheer thrust that stand out most. The 2014 was done with 75% whole clusters. Drops of co-fermented Viognier round out the blend.

**94 2020 - 2029 \$49.00**

**2015 Ojai Vineyard Pinot Noir Bien Nacido** Ojai's 2015 Pinot Noir Bien Nacido Vineyard is bold, punchy and racy. Even with all of its flavor intensity, the 2015 is wonderfully nuanced from start to finish. Sweet red cherry, crushed flowers and earthy undertones add the closing shades of flavor complexity. Drink this attractive midweight Pinot over the next decade or so.

**93 2017 - 2025 \$49.00**

**2015 Ojai Vineyard Pinot Noir Fe Ciega** The 2015 Pinot Noir Fe Ciega Vineyard is a very beautiful, impeccably balanced wine. There is lovely purity to the sweet red berry fruit. Attractive floral and savory notes give the wine its distinctive aromatic signature, but here those elements are subtly layered rather than dominant. Deceptively medium in body, the 2015 is quite reticent and in need of time to fully unwind.

**92+ 2020 - 2030 \$60.00**

**2016 Ojai Vineyard Riesling Kick On Dessert Wine** The 2016 Riesling Kick On Ranch Dessert Wine is an absolutely delicious dessert wine that emphasizes freshness. Orchard fruit, sweet floral notes and mint add brightness and aromatic lift. The 250 grams of residual sugar are not especially evident.

**92 2018 - 2027 \$33.00**

**2015 Ojai Vineyard Pinot Noir Kessler Haak** The 2015 Pinot Noir Kessler Haak Vineyard is one of the most exuberant wines in this range. A rush of dark red and purplish-hued stone fruits, flowers, spices and new leather makes a strong opening statement. This is an especially exotic, flamboyant, dense wine. The 50% whole clusters are felt in the 2015's aromatic intensity, while the decision to vinify only with pumpovers seems to have brought

out considerable fruit intensity.

**92 2019 - 2025 \$49.00**

**2015 Ojai Vineyard Pinot Noir Puerta del Mar** The 2015 Pinot Noir Puerta del Mar comes across as a bit edgy and tightly wound. Then again, that is the personality of this cool-climate site near the Pacific Ocean. Intensely savory and mineral, the 2015 is going to need at least a year in bottle to unfurl. Even so, expect it to remain somewhat angular and austere in its expression.

**92 2019 - 2025 \$49.00**

**2015 Ojai Vineyard Chardonnay Solomon Hills** The 2015 Chardonnay Solomon Hills is the most intriguing of the three 2015 Chardonnays from Ojai because it expresses the natural intensity of the year while retaining plenty of energy and aromatic freshness. There is a lovely sense of oiliness and texture to the 2015, but no excess weight at all.

**92 2018 - 2023 \$38.00**

**2015 Ojai Vineyard Syrah-Grenache (No SO2)** The 2015 Syrah-Grenache (No SO2) is one of the most distinctive wines in the range. Lavender, violet, mint and a host of blue/purplish stone fruits are front and center. Beams of tannin give the wine its shape and overall persistence. This is yet another delicious, juicy 2015 from Ojai and Adam Tolmach.

**92 2017 - 2023 \$38.00**

**2015 Ojai Vineyard Chardonnay Bien Nacido** The 2015 Chardonnay Bien Nacido Vineyard is juicy, supple and forward. Apricot, peach and lightly tropical notes give the 2015 much of its exotic, voluptuous personality. Even so, it retains the classic Ojai midweight style. The 2015 is very pretty, but it needs bottle age to be at its best.

**92 2019 - 2023 \$35.00**

**2015 Ojai Vineyard Chardonnay Puerta Del Mar** The 2015 Chardonnay Puerta del Mar has a bit more focus and energy than the Bien Nacido tasted alongside it. White peach, apple and floral overtones give the wine tension and brightness throughout. This is in an especially fresh style for the year.

**91 2018 - 2023 \$35.00**

**2015 Ojai Vineyard Pinot Noir Solomon Hills** The 2015 Pinot Noir Solomon Hills is a very pretty wine, but it also shows quite a bit of whole cluster influence in this vintage. Dried flowers, tea leaves, mint, pine and sweet dried cherries all lift from the glass, while silky tannins in the background provide a supportive underpinning. Readers who enjoy floral, savory Pinots will find much to admire. I confess I prefer the Solomon Hills when it has a bit more fruit and midpalate stuffing.

**90 2020 - 2028 \$55.00**

**2015 Ojai Vineyard Syrah Santa Barbara** The 2015 Syrah (Santa Barbara County) is a gorgeous wine that punches above its weight. Sweet tobacco, herb, licorice, menthol and dark-fleshed fruit meld together effortlessly. Dark, pliant and inviting, but not at all heavy, the 2015 has much to offer. Floral and savory overtones from a combination of cool sites and 30% stems add notable character. The 2015 is a bit tannic for an appellation-level Syrah. Even so, this is impressive stuff.

**90 2018 - 2023 \$35.00**

**2015 Ojai Vineyard Viognier Roll Ranch** The 2015 Viognier Roll Ranch is gorgeous. Light honey, chamomile, mint, apricot and peach are nicely delineated in the glass. Medium in body and gracious, with good varietal expression, the 2015 is absolutely delicious. Bright saline notes add energy throughout.

**90 2017 - 2021 \$30.00**

# Santa Barbara: Better Than Ever

BY ANTONIO GALLONI | SEPTEMBER 28, 2017

Santa Barbara is one of the most exciting and dynamic regions anywhere in the world. Each year, new vineyards, estates and projects pop up seemingly without end in the expansive pristine stretch of land that encompasses Santa Barbara County. The daring, innovative spirit embodied by the region's young producers and a vast range of first-class sites creates conditions that are ideal for the production of distinctive, pedigreed wines of the highest level. Best of all, with few exceptions, these wines remain under the radar and very fairly priced relative to global peers. On a strictly personal level, these qualities, along with the region's stunning natural beauty, make Santa Barbara one of my favorite places in the world to spend time in. For more, readers might enjoy revisiting my article [Santa Barbara: On the Road](#), which delves into the region's history and geography.



*The gently undulating hillsides of Ballard Canyon*

## A Little Background

Over the last seven years I have consistently increased the amount of time I spend in Santa Barbara. I have never regretted it. Quite the contrary. The wines have never been better. Moreover, the number of new projects and labels continues to grow at a fast pace. Relative to other regions, the price of land and grapes is much more affordable than it is in California's higher rent districts, which means young winemakers and aspiring estate owners have a much easier time getting started here than, for example in Napa Valley, where prices are prohibitively expensive.



*Tasting 2015s from barrel at Sine Qua Non, Oak View*

## **2015 – Challenging And Not Much Of It**

As was the case throughout California, 2015 brought an unusual series of weather events. In the fourth year of a brutal drought cycle, budbreak was very early. Poor weather during bloom took with it a significant portion of the potential crop, on average 30-50% depending on the exact location. One of the attributes of an early harvest – even if the growing season is more or less normal in length – is that fruit ripens under the long, hot days of August, rather than the shorter, gentler days of September and early fall. The combined effect of vines that were carrying abnormally low yields and heat spikes just before harvest caused rapid sugar accumulation in many places which led to a large number of vineyards ripening within a very narrow window. That, in turn, put considerable pressure on producers to pick quickly and/or to make difficult choices about which sites to prioritize over others. The key to 2015 was nailing the pick dates, especially for Chardonnay, which is less

forgiving in a vintage such as this one than Pinot or Syrah. That, of course, assumes producers could physically get their fruit harvested when they wanted to.

Last year, I was excited about the 2015s, the Pinots in particular, but today some of my enthusiasm has waned. Yes, the best 2015 Pinots are stunning, but I also saw quite a few examples where the fruit was picked too late, leading to wines that are overripe and unnaturally forward. I found more to like in the 2015 Syrahs, which benefitted from less challenging conditions at critical times throughout the year. Many 2015 Syrahs have not yet been released, but the wines I have tasted are terrific. In whites, the 2015 Chardonnays tend to be a bit blowsy, but there are quite a few wines that merit serious attention.

Based on what I have tasted so far, 2016, is shaping up to be higher in quality and overall consistency than 2015. The 2016s show brisk acids profiles, more delineation than the 2015s and greater structure that in reds manifests itself in wines with quite a bit of tannin.



*Crown Point Winery, Happy Canyon*

### **What I Liked This Year**

I tasted many wines of note this year, but these are some properties and wines that stood out.

Alma Rosa – Richard Sanford has gone through more ups and downs than most people could handle. It's nice to see quality wines emerging from Alma Rosa.

Andremily – Jim Binns' 2015s are gorgeous. It will be interesting to see what Binns does now that he can focus on his own wines exclusively.

Steve Beckmen's 2015 Syrahs – The wines are rich, ample and strikingly beautiful.

Bien Nacido Estate – Trey Fletcher is making Chardonnays, Pinots and Syrahs of true distinction.

Brave & Maiden – This new project headed by winemaker Josh Klapper and consultant Paul Hobbs appears to be set to achieve great things.

Ryan Deovlet is making terrific wines under his own label at Refugio Ranch.

Chanin & Lutum – Gavin Chanin turned out a bevy of fabulous wines at both Chanin and Lutum.

Diatom – It's great to see Greg Brewer's Diatom back in action with terrific wines that are less severe than those of the past.

Dierberg & Star Lane – In just a few short years winemaker Tyler Thomas has catapulted both estates into California's upper echelon. Readers will not want to miss the current releases.

Domaine de la Côte – The 2015 Pinots are the finest wines I have ever tasted from Rajat Parr and Sashi Moorman at their estate winery.

Dragonette – Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir and Syrah are all superb.

Frequency – Zac Wasserman's 2016s are stellar and full of potential.



*Tasting the 2016s and 2015s at The Hilt*

The Hilt – Matt Dees and his team are doing brilliant work at The Hilt. Dees is arguably the single most talented and versatile young winemaker in Santa Barbara, and perhaps California, today.

Kimsey – For the first time, the Kimsey wines are about finesse and not just power.

Lieu Dit – The two Cabernet Francs and the Malbec are must-haves.

Piedrasassi – Sashi Moorman's 2015 Syrahs are compelling.

Piro Wine Company – Marc Piro is one of Santa Barbara's most promising young Pinot producers.

Presqu'île – The Murphy family continues to step it up with the arrival of Domaine Dujac's Jeremy Seysses as consultant.

Rancho Viñedo – Santa Maria Chardonnays of real distinction.

Storm – Ernst Storm killed it with his 2015 Pinots.

Tyler – Justin Willett’s bottled 2015 Pinots are every bit as thrilling as they were from barrel last year, while the Chardonnays are among the best of the vintage.

The 2016 Vintage – The wines I have tasted so far show quite a bit of energy, freshness and verve.



*Cramped cellars at Domaine de la Côte, Sta. Rita Hills*

### **What I Did Not Like This Year**

Outsourced vineyard management – If the goal is to make world-class wines, farming must be done in house. It’s that simple. What do you think happens in a vintage where all the fruit ripens at the same time?

Palmina – The reds are spending too much time in barrel. Santa Barbara Nebbiolo is not Barolo or Barbaresco.

SAMsARA – The announcement of this sale was handled poorly by all parties.

Sandhi – I find these wines less consistently exciting than they used to be.

The 2015 Pinots – Heat spikes at the end of the season resulted in a large amount of the crop ripening essentially at the same time. This, in turn, put immense pressure on vineyard crews to harvest as much fruit as possible within a very narrow period of time. Naturally, this was impossible, so quite a bit of fruit was picked

later than what would have otherwise been optimal, leading to wines that are overripe and lacking in freshness. Pinot Noir is the most affected grape. The best 2015s Pinots are brilliant, but more wines should have reached that level.

### **How The Wines Were Tasted**

I tasted the wines in this article during a trip to Santa Barbara in June 2017, followed by additional tastings in my office in New York. I strongly believe there is no substitute for being on the ground, seeing vineyards first hand and speaking with winemakers in person in order to gain the perspective that is absolutely essential to render a meaningful opinion on a region, its wines and estates. Of the producers I regularly cover, Arcadian did not have any new releases, while Larner and Hitching Post chose to not show their wines. As always, my tastings were made possible through the diligent work of a number of people on the ground to whom I am eternally grateful and appreciative.