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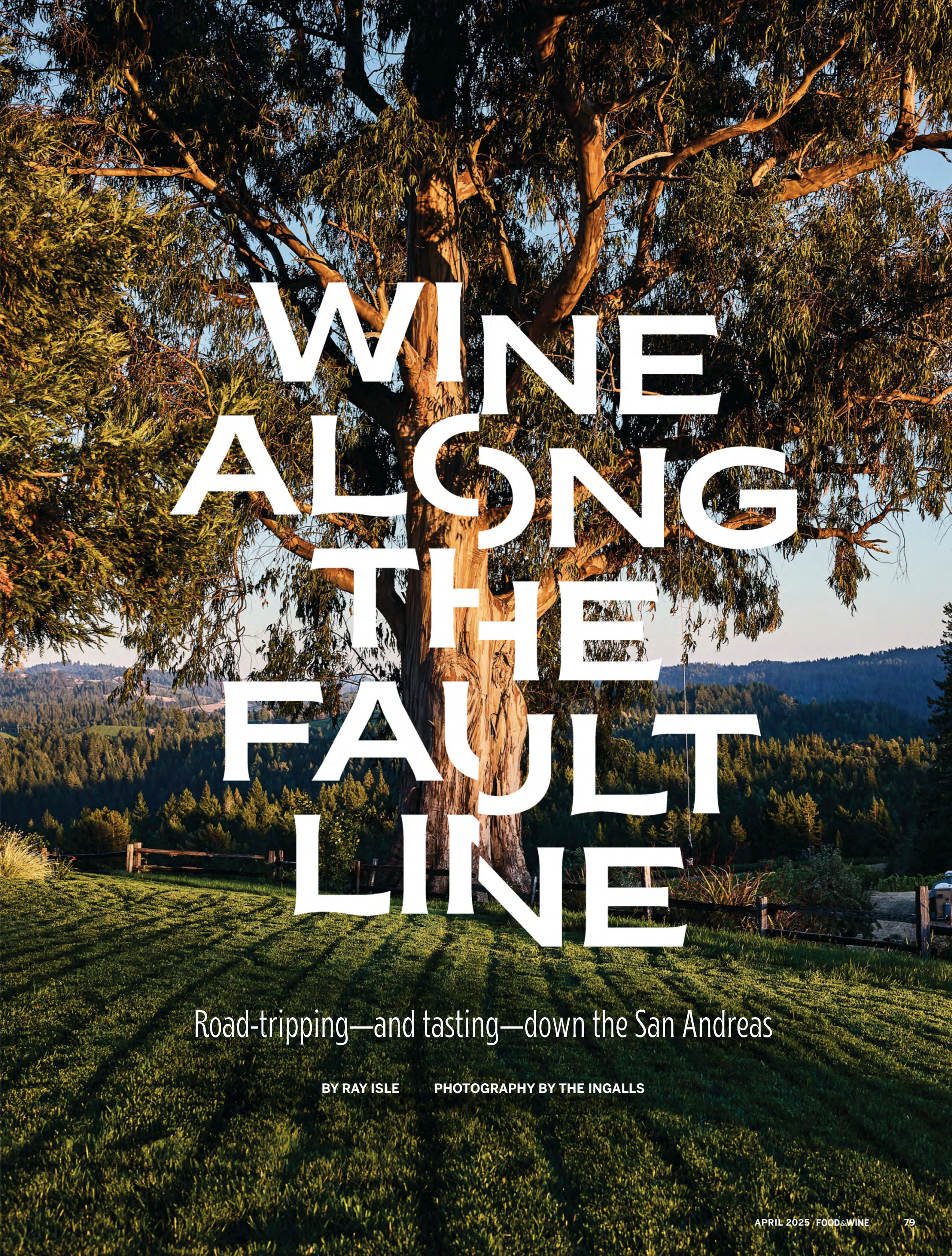
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Fossils fill the soil at Peay Vineyards, which lies on a former inland sea raised into ridges by the San Andreas Fault. RIGHT: A view at Peay looking toward the fault



WINE ALONG THE FAULT LINE

Road-tripping—and tasting—down the San Andreas

BY RAY ISLE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE INGALLS

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THERE'S NOT MUCH BETTER IN LIFE, as far as I've discovered, than sitting outside on a deck over the water at one of the renovated fishermen's shacks at Nick's Cove, an inn and restaurant on Northern California's Tomales Bay, particularly right as the sun is setting, with a glass of rosé and a dozen raw oysters. The view over the bay turns golden, with darkness just beginning to touch the hills across the water, and all you hear is the light slapping of waves against the piers below you. The place is so peaceful that you'd hardly guess that the San Andreas Fault, that tumultuous collision of two vast tectonic plates, runs directly under the water in front of you. It bisects Tomales Bay, miles below the surface. Have another oyster, another sip of rosé. Then head to the restaurant, as I did, and order some of Nick's Cove's excellent cioppino—the signature seafood stew of San Francisco, as popular now as it was back in 1906, when the San Andreas more or less flattened the entire city.

The San Andreas has been responsible for earthquakes (a little too often) and strings of erupting volcanoes (in the very distant past), but also in many ways it has formed the distinctive character of some of California's best wine regions (not to mention the entire California coast). That influence is why I'd decided to take a road trip down a good portion of its length (see "Take a San Andreas Wine Trip," p. 88). We tend to think of wine travel as heading to a region—the Napa Valley, Tuscany, Bordeaux—and staying put there. But I'd started to wonder if it might be even more interesting to follow a different kind of itinerary. Why not dive into history and geology and build a trip visiting wineries along the San Andreas?

The road to the Sonoma Coast's Peay Vineyards, near where it crosses over the San Andreas Fault
BELOW: Oysters on the half shell at Nick's Cove, with housemade hot sauce





THE SONOMA COAST

I STARTED OFF MY JOURNEY at the Harbor House Inn, in Elk, where 2019 F&W Best New Chef Matthew Kammerer works magic with hyperlocal ingredients in a redwood home originally built in 1916 for a timber company. Harbor House is directly on the coast, and from the inn's deck, you can look out to where the San Andreas runs under the water. (It comes onto land a few miles south, near Point Arena.) Kammerer harvests seaweed offshore for some of his dishes, but most of his produce comes from a small farm that he bought right on the fault line. "It's all basalt up at Harbor House," he told me when I took a visit there, "but here, it's sandy loam, with this rich black soil on top—for farming, that's ideal. I call it carrot soil. The carrots grow nice and straight all the way down."

After waking up the next morning to a breakfast of Kammerer's shirred eggs and foraged mushrooms, I headed south, cutting inland off Highway 1 near The Sea Ranch toward Peay Vineyards. I followed the twists and turns of Annapolis Road through evergreen forests for several miles, and at one point I crossed a small bridge over the dry and not-very-mighty Gualala River: At that point, Andy Peay had told me, I would be directly above the San Andreas.

I got out and walked over to the middle of the bridge, looked up and down the scruffy, tree-bordered riverbed, and thought, basically, that for such a mind-blowing geological feature, this view was pretty unimpressive. Then a plumbing company truck honked and roared by as I jumped to the side. The driver seemed entirely unperturbed by the possibility of turning me into paste. I'd like to think that was for my temerity at being unimpressed by the destructive potential of the San Andreas, but it was probably more because I was standing in the middle of the road on a bridge like an idiot, thinking about rocks.

In my defense, if you care about wine, you really should think now and then about rocks (just not while standing in the middle of a road). Climate occurs aboveground; it's easy to envision its effects. The precise cut of the Pinot Noirs from brothers Andy and Nick Peay and winemaker Vanessa Wong—"density but not heaviness," Andy said—owes plenty to the cooling

The fisherman's cottages at Nick's Cove look weathered on the outside but are gorgeously restored within. ABOVE: Andy Peay talking geology at Peay's tasting room on the estate





Winemaker Jasmine Hirsch pours one of her family's Pinot Noirs. RIGHT: Hirsch Vineyards, on the far Sonoma Coast, owes its terroir to the geological effects of the San Andreas.

“THE LAND HERE IS LIKE IF YOU SPREAD OUT A THICK BLANKET ON THE FLOOR AND MUSHED IT ALL TOGETHER.”

—JASMINE HIRSCH, HIRSCH VINEYARDS

effect of the Pacific Ocean, four miles west. But vines have roots, and roots grow down, into the soil and the stone. Andy said about his and Nick's impetus to found their vineyard back in 1996, “We wanted more of that florality and tea and earth that you weren't finding in California Pinot in the 1990s.” Those characteristics come from the Sonoma Coast's ocean-driven weather, but also from the effects of the rock-tumbler, fault-derived jumble of geology that lies under vineyards here. “The big factors for all of us out here are the climate, and then geology and geography. And the geology and geography are driven by the fault.”

Hirsch Vineyards is only about 10 miles from Peay, but it took me an hour to drive there. The western Sonoma coast is not a place for fans of straight roads. But it is stunningly dramatic in its beauty, full of dense redwood forests, windswept ridges, and hidden vineyards—utterly unlike the manicured prettiness of somewhere like Napa Valley. (Although in fact, because the winery itself is not currently open to the public, the

best place to try Hirsch wines is at their cozy tasting room in Healdsburg.)

It was a sunny day, so rather than taste indoors, winemaker Jasmine Hirsch and I took several bottles to the top of Block 16, a small amphitheater of vines lying at the western edge of the property. “The land here is folded,” she explained. “It's like if you spread out a thick blanket on the floor and mashed it all together. Nothing's flat. We have every single aspect, every single exposure. And where the fog gets to, and where it doesn't, and the reason we get so much rain here, that's all tied to the topography. And the topography was produced by the seismic activity of the fault.”

For that reason, Hirsch's flagship Pinot cuvée is named San Andreas Fault. “My dad always likes to say that our property was defined by the fault, so that's what he named it,” Jasmine explained. Hirsch Vineyards was established in 1980 by her father, David, on the site of an old sheep ranch, and it is inarguably one of California's greatest Pinot Noir vineyards; Jasmine now makes the wine, while David oversees the viticulture. The San Andreas Fault cuvée is a blend of different blocks from the estate's 72 acres of vines, bright with red berry fruit, layered, and complex. “It's the entire vineyard in one glass,” Jasmine said as we looked out across the vines. The sun flamed in my glass as I took another sip. Past the rows of vines, the land dropped right down to the fault line, then climbed to the next ridge. Then, nothing but the Pacific. “On a clear day from here you can see whitecaps,” she said.

David Hirsch has often said that “the terroir of Hirsch is earthquake terroir,” and while Hirsch Pinots often have a distinctive, brambly, raspberry character (something I find in the Peay Pinots, too), it's important not to oversimplify what makes a wine taste the way it does. You can't really say that Pinot Noirs made on the west side of the San Andreas all taste like raspberries and those on the east side like black cherries, for example; there's no one-to-one correspondence. When a wine has character—real character, not ersatz, industrial, made-in-the-millions-of-cases character—the sources of that character are always complex. But in regard to the fault, something Andy Peay said about his wines seems apt: “Maybe it's just that there's a kind of general energy. There are these two huge plates, the North American and the Pacific, fighting each other, a few miles under our feet. If you get too specific, sure, that's when what you're saying hits the bullshit button. But there must be *something* there.”



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: The airy, crunchy kouign-amann at Manresa Bread; single-vineyard cuvées from Thomas Fogarty Vineyards in the Santa Cruz Mountains; chef Brad Briske's squid-ink orecchiette with clams and pork belly at Home in Soquel; winemaker John Benedetti of Sante Arcangeli Family Wines



THE SANTA CRUZ MOUNTAINS

FROM HIRSCH, I FOLLOWED THE LINE of the fault to Tomales Bay and the waterside inn and restaurant Nick's Cove, then on down through San Francisco to the Santa Cruz Mountains. There, I stopped for the night in Los Gatos. That was mostly, I admit, so that I could make a breakfast pilgrimage to Manresa Bread, the source of the crunchiest, butteriest kouign-amann pastries anywhere. (Fight me—head baker Avery Ruzicka is a genius, and I stand by that.) But Los Gatos was also where, back in 1989, my aunt Amy was living when the Loma Prieta earthquake hit and tossed her house down the side of a mountain. (If you think of the San Andreas Fault as a big river running north to south, then the Loma Prieta fault is one of its minor tributaries.) She'd gone grocery shopping and was in the driveway, just getting out of her car when this happened.

My aunt was unharmed, and she had earthquake insurance, but it's worth noting that afterward she moved to Bodega Bay and lived the rest of her life on the water. I was thinking about this story as I drove along Skyline Boulevard, a scenic ridgetop road much loved by both cyclists and motorcyclists apparently for the many opportunities it affords to achieve hair-raising speeds and yet not die. My destination was Thomas Fogarty Winery, just past the Windy Hill Open Space Preserve, and when I got there, I asked proprietor Tommy Fogarty Jr. if he remembered the Loma Prieta quake. "Absolutely. I wasn't here myself, but we figured out pretty quickly the quake sure was," he told me. "Our winemaker was driving down to Santa Cruz, and buildings started landing on the road on Highway 17."

Even so, and even with my aunt's story in mind, mass destruction was hard to envision as we stood there on the winery's redwood-railed deck, surrounded by tables of weekend wine tasters, all cheerfully chatting while sipping Fogarty wines. Bay Area residents live with the prospect of earthquakes the same way everyone I knew growing up in Houston lived with the idea of hurricanes: They happen sometimes, no question, but on a day-to-day basis, you just get on with your life. Below us, the Fogarty vineyards stairstepped

down the slope: Portola Springs at 1,920 feet, Rapley Trail at 1,650 feet, Razorback Vineyard at 1,400 feet. The fault itself lay buried at the bottom, under a lot of multimillion-dollar Silicon Valley homes. I sipped one of the Fogarty Chardonnays in the glass I held. It tasted like white wine, not like houses falling onto a highway.

When I left Fogarty, I headed south, crossing the spine of the mountains to the Santa Cruz side. Outside Corralitos, Sante Arcangeli Family Wines winemaker and owner John Benedetti and I clambered up a rickety ladder to stand on the roof of an old barn at his Split Rail Vineyard. An unparalleled view over forests and vineyards toward the Pacific spread out before us, making me less conscious of the fact that I was standing on a sloping unrailed roof with a 40-foot drop to the ground below. Being speared on a Pinot Noir vine would be an ignominious (though possibly appropriate) end for a wine writer.

"We're standing on an uplifted piece of the Pacific Plate—old lake bottom from the Pliocene, Purisima sandstone," Benedetti said. "You'll find fossilized shells here." He pointed toward the next ridgeline, toward the ocean. "But that mountain is mostly Franciscan clay. And behind us," he said, turning, "the east side of the appellation over there, on the North American plate, that's an entirely different world. In other words, it's San Andreas Fault all the way around us." That evening, I met Benedetti for dinner at Home restaurant in Soquel, a do-not-miss spot where chef Brad Briske relies on coastal California ingredients for quirky, brilliant dishes like squid-ink orecchiette with clams and pork belly in a cider-chile-miso broth. Dining at one of the picnic tables in the expansive backyard on a warm night can't be beat. Benedetti and I poured his Split Rail Vineyard Pinot against his Lester Family Vineyard Pinot, the former spicier, darker-flavored, the latter lighter, more red-fruited. Soil? Geology? The age of the vines, the direction the rows face, different microclimates, different harvest dates? Hard to pinpoint, though plenty of fun for a pair of wine geeks to debate, which we proceeded to do late into the night.

**"THE EAST SIDE OF THE APPELLATION OVER THERE,
ON THE NORTH AMERICAN PLATE, THAT'S AN ENTIRELY
DIFFERENT WORLD. IN OTHER WORDS, IT'S SAN
ANDREAS FAULT ALL THE WAY AROUND US."**

—JOHN BENEDETTI, SANTE ARCANGELI FAMILY WINES

THE CIENEGA VALLEY

I WASN'T GOING TO FOLLOW the San Andreas all the way to where it petered out near Southern California's Salton Sea, but the final leg of my fault jaunt did take me to entirely different terrain. The Cienega Valley is dry and hot, 22 miles from the ocean and about 10 miles south of Hollister. It's home to a lot of farmland, but also Eden Rift Vineyards, an oasis of vines embraced on three sides by hills covered in oaks. No evergreens here. When I took the turn off Cienega Road to Eden Rift, I passed the old Almaden winery, built in the 1950s. The fault runs directly under it, and its walls no longer touch in places due to seismic activity.

Owner Christian Pillsbury named his winery Eden Rift both as a nod to John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* and as a reference to the rift—the fault—that runs right through it. Vines have grown here since 1849, when a Frenchman named Theophile Vaché planted some Mission grapes, making this the oldest continuously planted vineyard in California. Pillsbury said, "It wasn't like Vaché looked at this place back in the mid-1800s and said, 'Well, there's this tectonic action here that's amazing, so clearly it's a perfect place for wine grapes.' But that's more or less why it is." Topology and topography: the slant of the hillside terraces, the bowl of the valley, the earth and rock. "The soil here is all shattered granite and limestone," Pillsbury said. So much limestone, in fact, so much ocean floor hurled violently upward more than a millennium ago, that the roads threading the property are bright white in the sun.

Eden Rift is remote, as wineries go, but worth the time it takes to get there. I sat outside, tasting Pinots at a picnic table outside the Dickinson House, a lovely example of early-20th-century Prairie School architecture, built for that era's owner. Pillsbury's wines were excellent; I was impressed both by them and by the property's profound silence. As I sipped, a hawk soared far overhead and disappeared into the empty sky. Then nothing moved. Nothing made a sound. Miles below me, vast continental plates were grinding slowly against each other, perhaps building cataclysmic pressures in the process. But there was no evidence of that at the moment, except, perhaps, in the particular precise tension of the flavors in my glass of wine.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Eden
Rift owner Christian
Pillsbury and his dog Zoe; the
Eden Rift winery, flanked by
palm trees; Eden Rift's vine-
yards, surrounded by hills, are
bisected by the line of the fault.





1

ELK

San Andreas Fault

2

3

4

SANTA ROSA

SONOMA

California

SAN FRANCISCO

Pacific Ocean

5

6

7

SANTA CRUZ

8

9

10

MONTEREY

TAKE A SAN ANDREAS WINE TRIP

This map shows the course of the San Andreas Fault. I started in the north and headed south, but the reverse would work, too.

1. THE HARBOR HOUSE INN

2019 F&W Best New Chef Matthew Kammerer does magical things with local ingredients (tempura maitake mushrooms with lace lichen, black cod smoked over bay laurel, marigold ice cream) at this luxurious inn and restaurant on the coast near Elk. Start a San Andreas journey here with a glass of Champagne on the porch overlooking the Pacific; the fault runs under the ocean in the distance. (theharborhouseinn.com)

2. PEAY VINEYARDS

In the far north of the Sonoma Coast appellation, Andy Peay, Nick Peay, and Vanessa Wong make stellar Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Syrah from their gorgeous organically farmed estate. Andy Peay says, “We weren’t necessarily looking for a spot that was beautiful, but we got super lucky.” Tastings by appointment. (peayvineyards.com)

3. THE CASINO BAR & GRILL

Stop at this historic bar in Bodega for anything from a can of Bud to a glass of Arnot-Roberts rosé. It’s as old school as old school gets, with wallpaper from 1939 and a pair of pool tables that are almost as venerable. (facebook.com/thecasinoabarandgrill)

4. NICK’S COVE

This nearly 100-year-old hotel and restaurant on Tomales Bay started as a herring smokehouse, and they still smoke fish for the sublime smoked black cod dip on the menu. (Today, it’s done over Pinot Noir barrel shavings.) Also, don’t miss the excellent cioppino. Stay in one of the cottages sitting over the water—a private deck is an excellent place to ponder the geology of the fault, which runs straight down the bay. (nickscove.com)

5. THOMAS FOGARTY WINERY

From its perch atop Skyline Boulevard near Woodside, the Thomas Fogarty Winery makes terrific single-vineyard Pinots and Chardonnays, thanks to the talents of owner Thomas Fogarty Jr. and longtime winemaker Nathan Kandler. It’s a popular weekend destination for Silicon Valley locals. (fogartywinery.com)

6. MANRESA BREAD

This is a crucial morning pit stop in Los Gatos before visiting wineries. Get the delicately crunchy kouign-amann, though also don’t miss the flaky almond “escargot” or the luscious whole-wheat chocolate chip cookies. And pick up a loaf of levain for later. (manresabread.com)

7. HOTEL LOS GATOS

As a home base for visiting Santa Cruz Mountains wineries, you would be hard-pressed to do better. (hotellosgatos.com)

8. HOME

Chef Brad Briske serves some of the best food on either side of the Santa Cruz Mountains at his spot in Soquel, relying on coastal California ingredients for ambitious (but never fussy) dishes like Marin Miyagi oysters with habanero-apple granita. His housemade charcuterie is also stellar. (homesoque.com)

9. SANTE ARCANGELI FAMILY WINES

On the mountainside in Pescadero, winemaker-owner John Benedetti pours his top-notch, terroir-driven Pinots and Chardonnays in a 140-year-old barn at Harley Farms, a working goat farm—the cheese is not to be missed, either. (santewinery.com)

10. EDEN RIFT VINEYARDS

At this oasis of a winery, 20 miles inland from Monterey in the Cienega Valley, you can sit outside the 1906 Dickinson House and taste the winery’s excellent Pinots, Chardonnays, and Syrahs (and possibly its limited, 100-year-old-vines Zinfandel). Or book an ATV tasting and explore the entire property, glass in hand. (edenrift.com)

Wines to Buy

PEAY VINEYARDS

Red fruit and blood-orange flavors last in the focused **2022 Scallop Shelf Pinot Noir** (\$80), named for the fossils found throughout the vineyard, but also check out the cool-climate, peppery **2021 Cep Estate Syrah** (\$40), from Peay’s more affordable second brand.

HIRSCH VINEYARDS

The **2022 San Andreas Fault Estate Pinot Noir** (\$65) has bright red raspberry and red cherry notes, hints of fresh herbs, and streamlined tannins. The lively and more affordable **2023 Bohan-Dillon Pinot Noir** (\$45) is also a great introduction to Hirsch’s wines.

THOMAS FOGARTY WINERY

Founded in 1981, this winery has long been a source for top Santa Cruz Mountains wines. Look for the poised, minerally **2021 Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay** (\$52), or step up to one of the single-vineyard wines, like the creamy, lemon-zesty **2021 Langley Hill Vineyard Chardonnay** (\$85).

SANTE ARCANGELI FAMILY WINES

John Benedetti draws on both the Split Rail and Lester Family vineyards for his **2023 Santa Cruz Mountains Chardonnay** (\$45), a flinty, bright white. Or splurge on his sublime single-vineyard **2022 Split Rail Vineyard Pinot Noir** (\$60).

EDEN RIFT

The fragrant **2021 Estate Pinot Noir** (\$48) offers distinctive black tea and spice characteristics—pepper, anise—to go with the inviting black-cherry flavors. The winery’s jasmine-scented, vivid **2021 Estate Chardonnay** (\$42) is also not to be missed.