



The gradually ascending path of Highway 33 through Ventura County tours a beautiful range of Mediterranean climate habitats, some of the most fertile and biologically diverse on Earth. Beginning near the ocean and beachside habitats, the highway turns north through the Ojai Valley, winds upward through the foothills into Rose Valley and on to a mile-high pass across the Pine Mountain ridge. The winding way descends into Ozena Valley, then meanders into a rare growing region that has recently been confirmed as one of the most optimal habitats on the planet for wine grapes.

"I love this area. Since I moved here in 1971, I've always thought it was going to become a great wine-producing region," said Larry Hogan, visionary vintner of Stone Pine Estate and Sagebrush Annie's wine. "If you have great fruit you can make a great wine, you have to be sure the flavor of the grapes doesn't get compromised by the winemaker or the winery."

In addition to being recognized this year with a double gold medal at the prestigious San Francisco International Wine Competition, Hogans' Sagebrush Annie's 2004 was selected Best Cabernet Sauvignon of the show. "I'm still floating a little ways off the floor, my feet haven't quite gotten back on the ground," he said. After many years of wine making, Hogan thought he might

someday win a double gold, but never in his dreams did he envision his wine would be judged the No. 1 Cabernet at a major show.

The 2007 San Francisco International Wine Competition drew more than 4,000 wines from more than 1,000 wineries representing 21 countries. Double gold medal winners, the highest award other than Best of Show, were from Australia, Canada, Chile, France, Italy, Mexico, New Zealand, Portugal, and from across the United States with especially strong numbers from California.

Hogan began entering his wine in competitions just last year. They won gold and double gold at the 2006 West Coast Wine Competition, double gold at the 2006 Santa Barbara County Fair, three gold medals at the 2007 Los Angeles International Wine Competition, gold at the 2006 San Francisco International and gold at the 2007 Ventura County Fair, in addition to numerous silver and bronze medals.

“Oh, we’ve been lucky, I think we have a guardian angel,” said Hogan. “I am just a vehicle, I don’t want to take credit for being any kind of a guru or a genius. I’ve gotten ideas from other people, I thank all of the people who have written information and allowed me to glean so much from their work.”

Hogan appreciates the confirmation, after 30 years, of his premise that this area was an undiscovered habitat for premium quality wine grapes. His best-of-show cabernet sauvignon is a product of 25 years of research, experimentation and a continuous overdose of serious work. “Also, I learned a great deal about what not to do, the hard way, by making mistakes.”

Hogan’s original vision of the potential for this region wasn’t just guesswork, it was based on his investigations of local habitat conditions. “I measured our high temperatures during the day and our lows during the night and compared it to areas in the Napa Valley.”

Hogan found a 35- to 40-degree fluctuation from daytime highs to nighttime lows. “During the growing season, because of our altitude here, which is about 3,000 feet, we have more nights that hit into the 40s during the growing season than in some parts of the Napa Valley.”

Hogan has found the colder winter weather is a benefit, partly because it helps put the vines into dormancy. “The winters here are so cold that not even the glassy-winged sharpshooter has been a problem,” he said. This insect carries a disease that is a serious threat to grapes and other valuable crops in warmer habitats, including much of California. “To give you an example, this last winter we had several days in a row that never got above 36 or 38 degrees and we were down approaching zero at night, so those little fellows died off.” This preferred range of temperatures works in concert with the calendar of the local growing season. “It can go all the way into November, if we like, so we have a long season to ripen the fruit.”

Hogan thinks the qualities of the region’s water and soil also make critical contributions to the suitability of the habitat. “We have a lot of things going for us,” he said. “In France, they brag a lot about being on a limestone type of soil, limestone being calcium carbonate. We happen to be on a sandy, gravelly, alluvial fill and we have a lot of calcium sulfate, or gypsum, in our soil and in our water. Sulfates are more readily broken down in water than carbonates are and if there is a benefit from the calcium itself we are getting a better benefit from the sulfates than you would from the carbonates.”



Also, the quantity of available water in this region favors the Spartan requirements of wine grapes. "Of all the crops that could be planted here, grapes use the least water; less than 1.5 acre-feet and in some cases less than 1 acre-foot," said Hogan. "Alfalfa uses as much as 6 acre-feet, carrots can use 4 acre-feet and pistachios use about 3 acre-feet, so grapes use substantially less."

Hogan planted the first commercial vineyard in these hinterlands in 1982 and harvested the first wine grapes there in 1985. "It took me 20 years to get the characteristic flavors in these wines that tells they come from here," he said. "These grapes are tough and resilient and they produce these great wines full of complex flavors. Our cabernet is 100 percent cabernet, we don't blend it with anything."

Hogan is a big believer in lifelong learning, he graduated from California Polytechnic State University-San Luis Obispo in 1958 and he continues to be an enthusiastic student today. "The thing that I learned most by going to a university was, if I get the right reference book, other than brain surgery or rocket science, I can do almost anything," he said. "That's the way I looked at wine making and grape growing. I did a great deal of reading without a professor at hand to help me along the way if I had any questions." Hogan's knowledge of chemical and biological science helped him assimilate his readings of many viticultural publications, particularly from the esteemed University of California at Davis.

Sagebrush Annie's is a popular name for more reasons than wine, it's also the name of the distinguished rustic restaurant Hogan owns and operates with his wife, Karina. Located 50 miles north of Ojai on Highway 33, Sagebrush Annie's is in the heart of this region of premium



vineyards residing along the backcountry border between Santa Barbara and Ventura counties.

Following an afternoon of wine tasting with Hogan, dinner could begin with a round of grilled mushrooms and one of Karina's delectable soups. A small garden salad freshens the palate on the way to another glass of gold-medal-or-better cabernet and one of Hogan's renowned hardwood-fired barbecue steaks.

One recent evening, standing at his hand-built barbecue grill behind Sagebrush Annie's, Hogan was tending to the preparation of steaks for dinner guests.

"At a time in the evening, we get these rose and peach sunsets," he said. "This is the landscape nature intended, it's a huge open space very appealing for anyone who likes to ride horseback or hike."

While looking over the grill and out across hundreds of acres of vineyards to the hues of the mountains, Hogan expressed his appreciation for the many aspects of this special habitat: the sky, the water, the soil, the sense of immense time and space.

"The most miraculous thing is when I see these small buds erupt and already the little cluster of grapes is on the bud as the bud breaks," he said. "No matter how many times I see it, it's a miraculous thing, the reproduction and the vines starting all over; a new year. You know, I like it all, I love it all. It's just awe inspiring."

