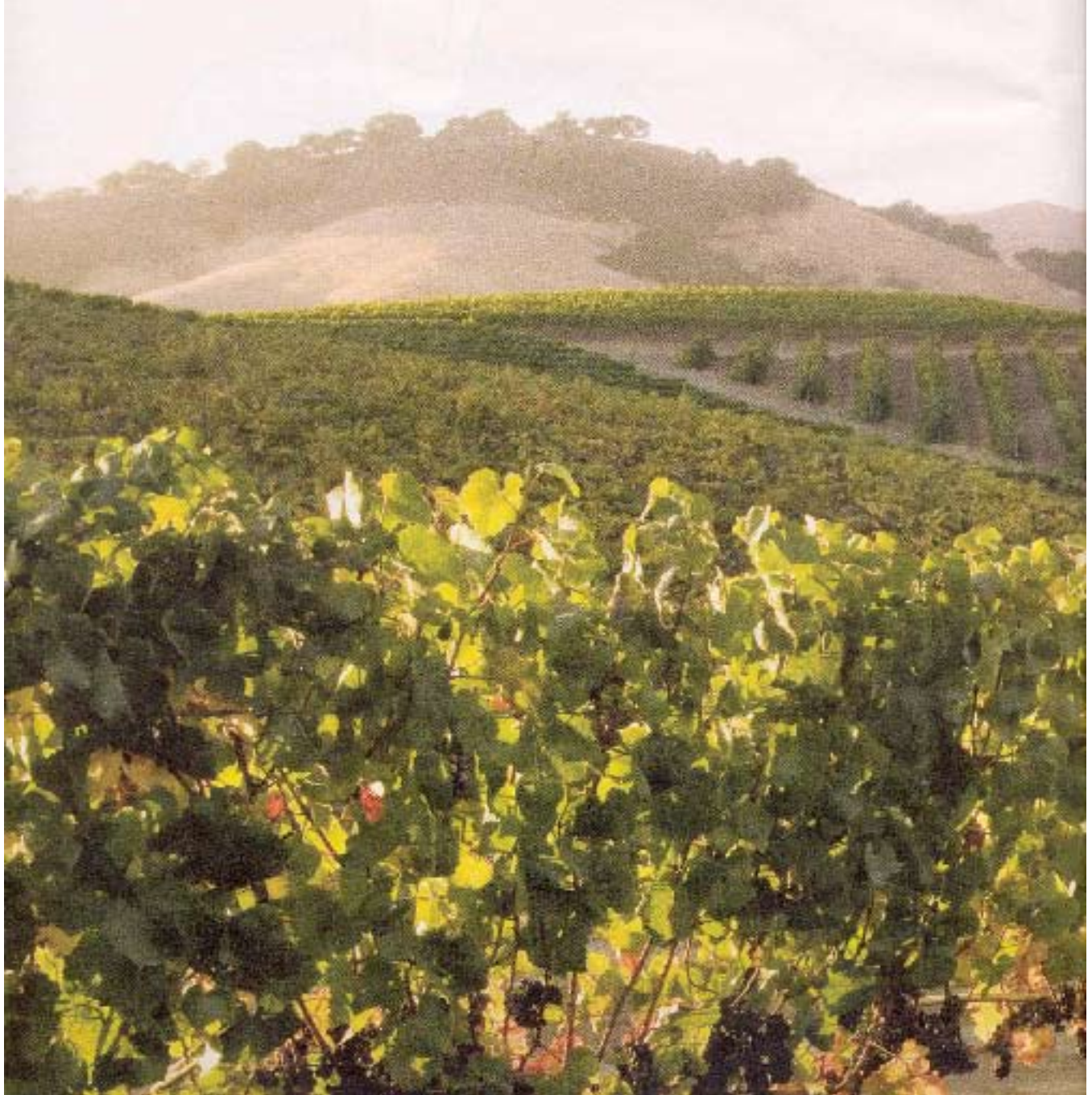


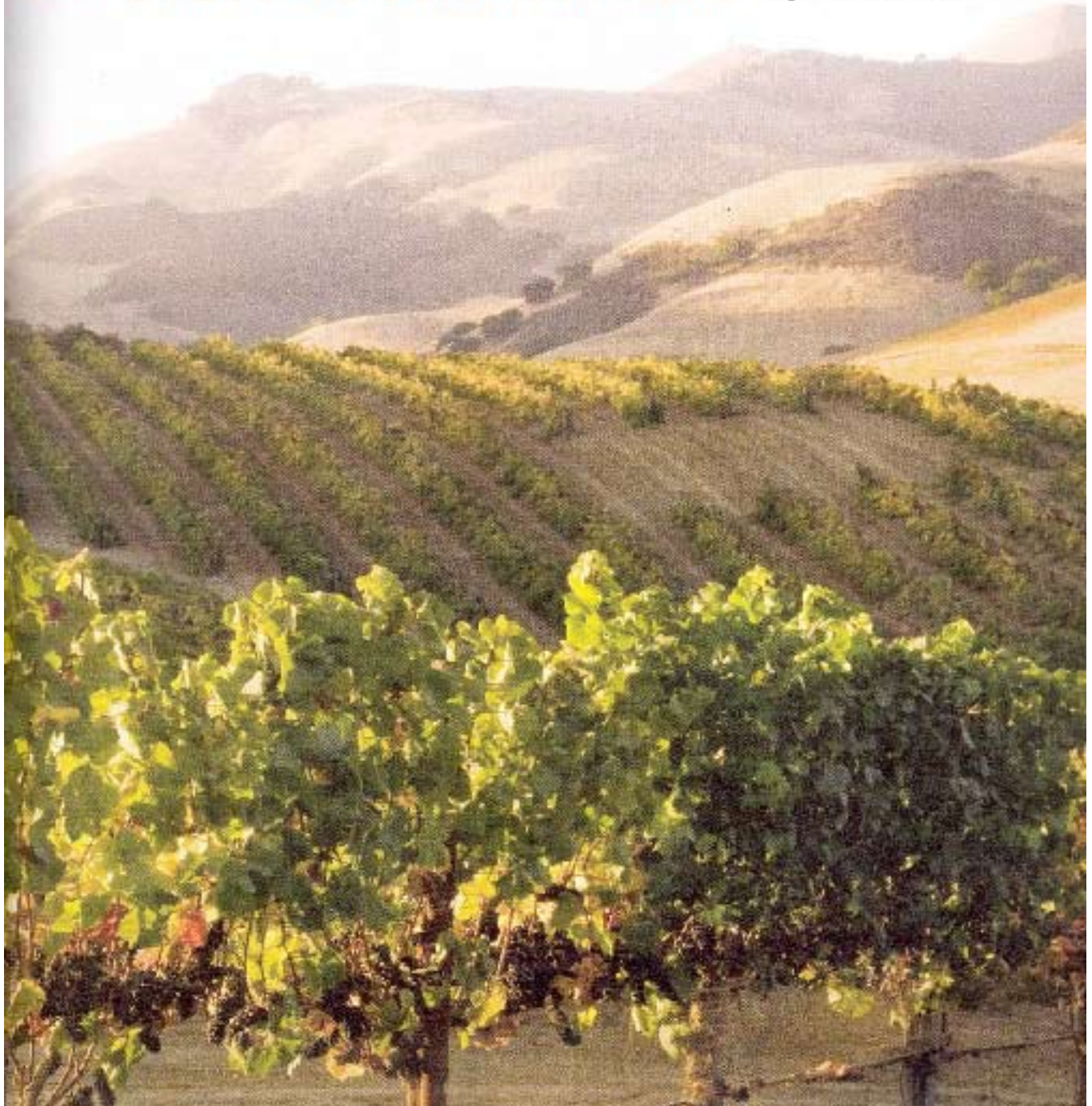
# California's

The Central Coast breaks the winemaking mold while



# New Frontier

offering big vistas and small-town charms By James Laube



**S**ay “Central Coast” to most Californians and you’ll probably get a quizzical expression in return, with some head-scratching to boot. But mention the drive from Los Angeles to San Francisco along the old mission trail known today as Highway 101, and you should notice a warm look of recognition that reflects Californians’ love for the open road.

The vast stretch from Santa Barbara in the south to the Monterey Peninsula in the north can technically, in terms of winemaking, be called the Central Coast. But that moniker has always been vague, and today means less and less given the amazing and inspiring dynamism of the region’s wine districts. With this special report, we give you our guide to some of California’s most distinctive and cutting-edge viticultural areas.

Even more impressive is that the story of the Central Coast, which comprises the Santa Barbara County, Edna Valley, Arroyo Grande, Paso Robles and Monterey County winegrowing regions, is still in its infancy. This is truly California’s winemaking frontier as well as an exciting viticultural laboratory.

These appellations share much in common, primarily their proximity to the cooling influences of the Pacific Ocean. But each is also unique.

It’s amazing to think that an area as new as Santa Rita Hills in Santa Barbara County is now considered one of the state’s premier areas for Pinot Noir, the hottest wine in California today. Or that Edna Valley in San Luis Obispo County, a rugged area of rolling hills and stiff coastal winds, could produce inky-dark Syrahs that are arguably among the world’s finest.

Or that Santa Lucia Highlands has escaped the image of Monterey as too cold to produce great red wines and now routinely offers elegantly styled Chardonnays, Pinots and Syrahs. Then there’s Paso Robles, a cow town growing up fast with big Cabernet- and Syrah-based reds.

**T**hank goodness for the Central Coast’s wines and vines—without them California might be defined solely by its Napa Valley Cabernets and its Chardonnays from Sonoma. But make no mistake, this is indeed a quieter and calmer part of the Golden State, far from the glitz of Los Angeles and the high-tech centers of the Bay area. On the Central Coast, you can visit old Spanish missions, savor small-town life

and gaze over a mostly unspoiled landscape that harkens to the romantic images of pastoral California.

“The whole [Santa Ynez] valley was agricultural,” recalls Richard Sanford, 65, who began making wine there in 1971. His winery was located in, of all places, Lompoc—a temperance colony—and the gastronomic draw was Pea Soup Andersen’s. “We used to gauge where we were [on 101] by the Pea Soup signs that indicated how many miles until Buellton,” he says.

Unlike the main hubs of tourism in wine country in Napa and Sonoma, there is little glamour in the Central Coast cities along Highway 101. This four-lane thoroughfare bends and winds through miles of wide-open territory, passing dramatic mountain ranges cut by precipitous canyons as well as lonely stretches characterized by austere hills and broad valleys.

In between, you’ll find inviting towns and down-home meals. If you love a great steak and want to hang out with local vintners, nothing rivals the Hitching Post in Buellton (it’s the restaurant featured in the film *Sideways*). Once beyond Buellton, there’s San Luis Obispo, a hip college town close enough to the ocean (both Pismo Beach and Morro Bay) to call itself “surf city.” Farther north is Paso Robles; while it’s getting hipper, with several good dining spots, it’s still a rural haven where cowboys in pickup trucks round up cattle. (For our complete guide to touring the Central Coast, see “Exploring 101, beginning on page 70.)

The Central Coast is in the midst of a major metamorphosis in terms of wine, dividing into a series of viticultural areas that are supplying wine lovers with a much clearer view of the appellations and the wines they produce. And as the wines make gains in quality and join the ranks of California’s elite, they are bringing an exciting new dimension to the Golden State’s vast viticultural matrix.

Vines have been part of this picturesque landscape since the late 1700s, when Spanish missionaries planted the first vineyards. The potential for great wines has long



existed, dating in modern times to the late 1960s and early 1970s.

But in recent years, the focus on both vineyard-designated and appellation wines—and on grapes such as Pinot Noir and Syrah, which have thrived here—has intensified, with more and more success stories being told through a growing number of brilliant wines. What vintners have found, mostly through trial and error, is that the early red-wine stars of California—Cabernet and Zinfandel—do not here work the magic they do in Napa and Sonoma.

**T**ake the case of Paso Robles, which has nearly 26,000 acres of vines. Its hot, inland climate has long been considered ideal for the Zinfandel grape, which has been part of the Paso Robles wine scene since the late 1800s. But the new headliners are Syrah and other Rhône-style reds, which have made the most compelling wines of late, fueling a debate on where the best new vineyards are or should be planted. The changes underway in Paso reflect the tectonic shifts underway in the entire Central Coast region.

In the pages that follow, we will explore each of these four regions through the profile of a winemaker or grapegrower who represents some of the most exciting and interesting

trends in their respective district: in Santa Barbara, Peter Cargasacchi of Cargasacchi Vineyard; in Edna Valley and Arroyo Grande, the winegrowing Talley family; in Paso Robles, François Perrin and Robert Haas of Tablas Creek winery and Stephan Asseo of L’Aventure; and in Monterey County, vintner Gary Pisoni.

At the edge of the continent, the cutting edge of American grapegrowing and winemaking is being redefined.