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CALIFORNIA PINOT NOIR
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NEW ZEALAND
 SAUVIGNON BLANC & MORE
U.S. VALUES 110 EXCITING WINES

Sarah's Vineyard

Pushing the envelope at the fringes of Silicon Valley

Santa Clara County is home to Silicon Valley and the headquarters of Apple, Google and Facebook. But it also has a winemaking history that dates to the 18th century, as well as a new wave of modern winemaking that in the 2015 vintage yielded a pair of outstanding Pinot Noirs from Sarah's Vineyard.

Owner Tim Slater bought Sarah's in 2001 from Marilyn "Sarah" Otterman, who founded the winery in 1978, keeping the name to carry on her legacy. "She was trying to make Napa Valley-quality wines in the middle of what was then not a region known for winemaking," Slater points out.

Slater didn't start out in wine. "I'm a Silicon Valley guy, a scientist and inventor," he says. Slater, who grew up in the Los Angeles area, worked in the field of micro machining, developing optical micro components for telecommunications. He is the owner of dozens of patents.

For Slater, wine comes with a strong emotional component. "The wine industry kind of saved my life," he says solemnly. While a student at University of California, Santa Barbara, Slater had an undiagnosed eating disorder. "I didn't like food, I didn't like eating. I was 6 feet tall and weighed 120 pounds." A wine class made him curious about pairing wine with food. "That got me finally interested in eating. I started appreciating food more. Before you know it, I was watching cooking shows, and later took a class at the Cordon Bleu in Paris."

His interest in food and wine was still just a hobby when he

purchased Sarah's Vineyard. But he made the switch to full-time vintner in 2004, replanting the original vineyard and planting two additional blocks; 23 acres are now under cultivation, mostly Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

Sarah's is situated along Highway 152, west of the town of Gilroy in southern Santa Clara County, where agriculture is still an important part of the landscape. The property is located along a low mountain pass across the Santa Cruz Mountains known as Hecker Pass, in the foothills of Mt. Madonna. The pass fills with fog and howling winds from the nearby Pacific Ocean, regulating temperatures and extending the growing season. "We don't get rain until pretty late, like November," says Slater. "That means we can let the grapes hang late."

The vineyard has a few types of heavy clay, but Slater insists the *terroir* is driven by the climate—just a few miles north or south and there is no influence from the wind or fog, giving him a unique pocket of cool temperatures. "The fruit gets bold but the tannins are soft," says Slater of the style. "The [Pinot Noirs] are red fruit-driven," he adds.

The switch to full-time winemaking was an adjustment for Slater. "It was a tough battle getting used to the wine industry," says Slater. "I'm used to working under tight control and with precision. The wine industry has an 'oh, this is pretty good,' very different attitude." Online classes from UC, Davis, helped with the fundamentals.

"I'm not doing anything outlandish," says Slater of his winemaking decisions. He starts with a wild yeast fermentation, then inoculates to avoid stuck fermentations. Punch-downs take place three times a day, and sometimes there's a touch of stem inclusion. He's starting to experiment with warmer fermentations.

"We're kind of isolated out here, I'm a bit of a hermit. Just recently there are enough wineries that it's taking on a collegial atmosphere. Many of these are Silicon Valley people who bought the land and are interested in making wine." He describes Santa Clara County as having a "renaissance." Says Slater, "My goal is to be the leader of quality wine in the area."

—MaryAnn Worobiec

93 Pinot Noir Santa Clara Valley 2015	\$45
91 Pinot Noir Santa Cruz Mountains 2015	\$44



Tim Slater of Sarah's Vineyard