



## **USA, California's Central Coast: Pearl Hunting**

featuring Potek Winery  
reviewed by Lisa Perrotti-Brown

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*California's Central Coast represents a vast swath of viticultural potential—not all of it remarkable, mind you—but wines coming out of the finest pockets are right up there with the greatest in the world. Here, as with anywhere in the wine world, quality first and foremost comes down to site selection and then the insight/vision to marry the right cultivar/clone/rootstock to that site. Get that right, don't screw up the vineyard management and winemaking, and the wine drinking world is potentially your oyster. But, as with real pearls, outstanding and extraordinary regions and sites are, by nature, rare.*

*This report covers a lot of AVAs, grape varieties and styles. The good news is that there are some absolutely stunning pearls being produced in most of those regions and across most of those grapes and styles. But there is also a lot of mediocrity, which—from what I've tasted—seems largely to be the results of quixotic pursuits, amateur approaches and/or lack of resources. I'm not going to talk too much about the latter two reasons. The part-timer/lifestyle/amateur winemakers usually aren't in the faces of consumers too much anyway, tending to fade out of the scene rather quickly, after they've lost enough money and interest. And, let's face it, most of us have to make due from time to time when it comes to resources, a situation that the best winemakers will eventually rise above. It's the army of Don Quixote winemakers jousting vineyards around the Central Coast that really worry me.*

*I'd like to confront the elephant in the room: lean, green, tart and mean wines—in particular Pinot Noirs, Chardonnays and a few Shirazes and Grenaches—from too-early harvested grapes versus those that are actually in "balance." When I was tasting Australia a few years ago, I experienced some winemakers going through a trend of early harvesting in efforts to create*

lower-alcohol, more “elegant,” cooler climate styled wines. The major problem with these “skinny” wines was that—of course—the flavor and phenolic (tannin) compounds weren’t manifested or ripe. So, these wines had little or no flavor, and if the tannins were notable, they were hard and bitter. I see this same trend occurring in parts of California Central Coast. Maybe this group is flying another flag, but it’s the same deal. Fortunately, the Aussies are quick learners, and most if not all of those producers have bounced back to a happy medium, finding more suitable ways of lowering alcohol levels than too-early harvesting.

Let’s not forget that balance is not just a discussion about rising alcohol levels. A great wine has a number of components—body, acidity, tannins, flavors (pleasant ones) and alcohol—all existing in harmony and creating a notion of seamlessness, without any one component standing apart from the other. Every great region/site has the potential to express its greatness with balance. But not every region/site has the ability to make a low alcohol, light-bodied style that is great. This is the choice winemakers face between quixotic idealism and making a wine that expresses the best that a terroir can give.

The above situation does not involve the majority of Central Coast wines. I found most of them to be expressive, flavorsome and harmonious, without being high-octane behemoths. But I do feel that this trend is significant enough to mar the outstanding efforts and reputations of the greater area and its subregions, and so I thought this was a concern that needed voicing.

### **The Tastings**

For this report, I spent the first two weeks of September travelling through California’s Central Coast region, tasting and making visits in Paso Robles, San Luis Obispo, Santa Ynez/Santa Barbara County and Ventura. A large, dedicated Santa Lucia Highlands tasting was done in Napa. Over 1,100 wines have been tasted in total (so far). Most of the reviews will be published with this report, some notes will be published at the end of October, while other wines that did not show well or I didn’t feel were of interest will not be published.

### **The Vintages**

This report features mainly 2015s with a good number of 2014s and 2016s, so I’ll give a brief overview of all three.

**2014** was a very good to outstanding “normal” year for most of the Central Coast. It was a fairly warm and, by all accounts, fairly uneventful growing season. Yields were pretty good too. In the glass, wines across most varieties are relatively elegant and restrained in youth, with ripe tannins and plenty of freshness, promising excellent cellaring potential for the best examples. Tannins needed to be carefully managed this vintage, otherwise the wines can be a touch angular or, in the worst cases, downright hard.

*2015 started off with an early budburst, which would not have been a problem except for the cool weather that blew through in May. The resulting shatter (poor flowering/fruit-set) is something of a recurring theme across the Central Coast and North California for this vintage. Financially, it was a bloodbath. Yields were down in 2015 by upwards of 40% to 60% in places. Apart from this though, it was a fairly warm year and one of the earliest harvests on record in some places. Note, however, that the rush to harvest was not entirely down to a pretty warm August but to the earlier budburst and painfully small crops. Winemakers were biting their nails wondering what kind of wines the vintage would reveal. I think we were all expecting big, monolithic monstrosities across the board. Man, were we wrong. The signature characters of the very best wines for this year are: vibrancy, fantastic delineation, a LOT of layers, an almost electric intensity (without heaviness) plus great freshness and, for the reds, firm (but not overly firm) frames of ripe, fine-grained tannins. The problem with this vintage is that it is not as consistently great as 2014 or 2016. Warmer sites and vineyard managers who were not on the ball saw some berry shrivel. Of course, the raisins should have been sorted out on the sorting tables, but I can imagine that it is hard to toss away any fruit when your yields are already pretty low. So, there are some examples out there of baked berry characters and some pretty hard, unresolved tannins.*

*The 2016s I've tried to date were mainly barrel samples, but thus far this is looking to be an outstanding and consistent vintage. It was warm, but not excessively warm. Harvest was early, but not excessively early. Yields were back to something close to "normal." Best of all, the nascent wines are looking phenomenal—packed with generous fruit, great structures and simply firing on all ripeness cylinders!*

### **2015 Potek Bien Nacido Vineyard Chardonnay**

Opening with exuberant lemon pie, white peach and green guava notes with hints of struck match, croissant and almond tart, the 2015 Bien Nacido Vineyard Chardonnay has an elegant medium body and buckets of freshness framing the intense flavors, finishing long and zesty. **(91 points)**

### **2015 Potek Riesling Kick On Ranch**

The 2015 Riesling Kick On Ranch is intensely scented of lime cordial and lemon curd with hints of honeysuckle, orange blossoms and beeswax. Dry, light-bodied and wonderfully approachable in the mouth, it features lovely harmony and texture without being too crisp or angular, and renders the finish long and lemon-laced. **(90 points)**

**2015 Potek Mormann Vineyard Chardonnay**

The 2015 Mormann Vineyard Chardonnay opens with slightly subdued fresh apples and pear notes with touches of nutmeg, lightly browned toast and hay. Medium-bodied with lovely purity and great freshness, it gives a good amount of apple and savory flavors with a slight nuttiness on the finish (**89 points**)

