

# Albawhat?

The Central Coast's take on an amazing grape.



Six recent Central Coast Albariño offerings.

[Albariño](#), as a variety, is unknown to many American wine consumers. While it has been produced in Spain for centuries, it gained long-overdue attention of the world wine scene only a few decades ago. Now, it has made its way to California and a handful of winemakers along the coast are experimenting with it.

## Some background

Albariño is the main white wine grape of the Rias Baixas, in the province of Galicia on Spain's Atlantic coast. Its lineage has been traced only to this part of northwestern Spain, but how and when it came there is not known - though speculation abounds. Albariño has also found a home in Portugal where it is one of the varieties made into the lightly sparkling Vinho Verde.

Much of Albariño's recent rise to fame is due to a shift towards winemaking practices which preserve the freshness and liveliness of white wines. Owing, in part, to this success, Rias Baixas Albariño is one of the few European wines to be labeled with the variety and not region name.

No other wine made in the Rias Baixas has distinguished itself like Albariño has, making it the pillar of the regions' viticulture. Rias Baixas Albariño, though somewhat varied in style, is typified by strong acidity, a mineral character and aromas and flavors of almonds, apples, citrus, kiwi, flowers, grass, honey and stone fruit (peaches, nectarines etc). It makes it an excellent companion to seafood.

In the vast majority of instances, Albariño sees little to no oak during elevage, though some producers in Spain and California are experimenting with barrel fermentation or ageing with the goal of giving the wine more depth and complexity. The pitfall in this approach is masking the variety's distinct character or, worse yet, making a wine that tries to pass for a Chardonnay or a white Rhône blend. Generally, Spanish Albariño is bottled as a pure varietal, but a few producers blend in one or more of the region's approved white grapes: Caiño Blanca, Godello, Loureira Blanca, Torrontés and Treixadura. Despite improvements in production technology, Albariño is not generally believed to be suitable for long-term cellaring.

## Albariño in the Central Coast

The Central Coast shares a key similarity with Galicia: both are coastal areas with marine influence. "*Albariño is a coastal variety - unlike Chardonnay, which is a cool climate variety*" points out Eric Laumann, owner and winemaker at Monterey's Cambiata Winery. On the surface, this makes the Central Coast seem like Albariño country. However, a major point of divergence in the climate of the Central Coast and that of the Rias Baixas is that the latter is a wetter and cooler region. It receives in excess of 50 inches of rain annually.

Additionally, Galicia lies on a much more northerly line of latitude than any part of California's Central Coast, which results in its summer temperatures ranging between the 70s and mid-80's (Fahrenheit).

In the Central Coast, Albariño is grown in Monterey County, Edna Valley and Santa Ynez Valley.

There are at least three plantings of Albariño in Monterey County: On the western end, in the Santa Lucia Highlands, McIntire Vineyards grows about two acres of Albariño for Eric Laumann (Cambiata). On the opposite side of the Salinas Valley, the Biodynamic-certified Ca' del Solo Vineyard sits near the foothills of the Gabilan Mountains near Soledad and is part of the Bonny Doon estate. Pierce Vineyards, also within the boundaries of Monterey County, is located in the recently formalized San Antonio Valley Appellation. Among Rhône and Bordeaux varieties grown by Pierce in this southern end of Monterey County, is a small, experimental block of Albariño.

In San Luis Obispo County, two neighboring vineyards grow Albariño: Owned by the Weyrich family (of Martin&Weyrich Winery), Jack Ranch Vineyard, in the middle of Edna Valley is home to five acres of Albariño - which is said to be the largest planting of Albariño in the US. Also in Edna Valley, Paragon Vineyard grows Albariño on the west-facing slopes of the foothills of the Santa Lucia Mountains.

Farther south, in the Santa Ynez Valley two vineyards, Ibarra-Young (next door to Beckmen Vineyards between Los Olivos and Santa Ynez,) as well as Clover Creek,(between the town of Santa Ynez and the Santa Ynez River), grow small amounts of Albariño.

These varying locations and microclimates are fodder for broad stylistic diversity. Never mind that wines sourced from the same vineyard can be made in very different styles. Six Central Coast Albariños were tasted alone and with four dishes to explore the breadth of this diversity.

### **The spectrum of character of Central Coast Albariño**

Wine should be considered in regional context as well as in sight of a point of reference. For Albariño, that benchmark is the northwest of Spain. The six Central Coast Albariños were tasted alongside two Spanish Albariños readily available in local stores (2007 Martin Codax and 2008 Salneval). The goal of this was not to find carbon copies of Rias Baixas wines but rather to describe the current character of Central Coast Albariños while understanding them relative to their Spanish counterparts.

The first Central Coast Albariño in the line up was the 2008 [Ca' del Solo \(Bonny Doon\)](#) Monterey County Albariño. Composed of 75% Albariño, 21% Loureiro and 4% Treixadura, it is finished with a screw cap, clocks in at 12.8% ABV and retails for 20 dollars. Opulent aromatics of white flower, peach and light citrus abound. In the mouth, candied lemon and honey make up the core of the flavors. Slight minerality carries into the warmer, long finish where the acidity really picks up.

The second wine was the 2008 [Cambiata](#) Monterey Albariño. 100% varietal, it is finished with a natural cork, comes in at 13.5% ABV and retails in the range of 18 to 25 dollars. It offers very pretty, rich aromatics of nectarines, gardenias and distinct honey notes. The honey persists in the mouth, where it is accented by an interesting, almost briny, minerality which continues into the warmer finish. The acidity is well proportioned throughout the rich palate.

The 2008 [Longoria](#) Santa Ynez Valley Albariño is made from 100% Clover Creek Vineyard fruit, it finished at 12.4% ABV and is closed with a natural cork. It retails for 23 dollars. Yellow peach aromas dominate hints of lemon. There is a note of wet hay as well. This wine is among the less corpulent examples in the lineup. Citrusy, with a very distinct, snappy mineral character, it is round with good, well proportioned acidity. Just a touch of heat rises in the finish.

The fourth wine was the 2008 [Pierce Vineyards](#) San Antonio Valley Albariño. Estate fruit from this newly designated AVA was picked very early for an 11.5% ABV, dry wine. The bottles are closed with a natural cork. Very pale, it offers aromas of petrol and hay over white peach and a hint of citrus. It is surprisingly rich and expressive in the mouth, with honey, petrol and a bitter note - all of which are in the forefront of the stone fruit flavors. This is the leanest wine of the lineup but not unflatteringly so. It has good acids and distinct minerality well into a dry finish. Retail price: 16 dollars on the winery's site.

The 2008 [Silver Horse](#) Edna Valley Albariño comes from Jack Ranch Vineyard. It is finished with a screw cap, registers 13.5% ABV and retails for 27 dollars. This offering has a vaguely effervescent quality underlying the candied lemon and ripe stone fruit aromas. The effervescent quality persists on the palate where it mingles with lemon flavors, a hint of minerality and detectable sweetness. In fact, 0.05% residual sugar balances the acids which declare themselves fully on the finish. This is accompanied by some minerality.

The 2008 [Tangent](#) Edna Valley Albariño is closed with a screw cap, comes in at 13.5% ABV and sells for around 14 dollars. Grassy aromas with just-underripe kiwi and floral hints distinguish this wine from the rest of the group. Pleasantly green flavors of underripe kiwi are complemented by white peach hints. Bright acids, a touch of effervescence and light minerality and no appreciable sweetness make for a pleasant, dry core. A longer, citrusy finish comes after a slightly hollow spot on the back palate.

### **Central Coast Albariño with food**

Four dishes were selected as representative of the typical pairings with Albariños: a Thai "Jungle Curry" (made with red curry, coconut milk, bamboo shoots, mushrooms, eggplant, green beans, Thai herbs - including basil, and chicken); Combination Fried Rice; Crab cakes in Dijon Honey and Lemon sauce and a mango salsa and a "Mini Clam Bake" of mussels, clams, scallops cooked with potatoes, spinach and onions.

The Ca' del Solo competed with the basil aromatics of the Jungle Curry and didn't accentuate or tame the spices. It worked well with the Combination Fried Rice, blending in seamlessly. It worked the best with the Crab cakes, matching the salsa very well. It also worked fairly well with the scallops and clams in the Clam Bake, but clashed with the mussels.

The Cambiata also had an aromatic clash with the Jungle Curry. It was a bit overpowered by the Combination Fried Rice and its acidity was a bit lost in the pairing. It worked very nicely with the Crab Cakes. However, it was a bit of an aromatic clash with clams and mussels but its structure held up. The florals and rich aromatics fared the best of all the wines when paired with scallops.

The structure of the Longoria wine paired well with the rice and curry, although there was some aromatic clash with the basil in the curry. It did not impact the spice of the curry significantly. This wine worked particularly well with the crab cakes, cutting through the sweetness. It also held up to the clams and mussels - better than any of the other wines - but it clashed a bit with the scallops.

The Pierce Albariño worked differently with each dish. With the combination rice, its hay and petrol characteristics were accentuated. It tamed the spice of the curry while its hay aromatics were accentuated. It worked well, structurally, with the crab cakes and blended with the aromatics of the crab meat and tropical salsa. When tasted with the clambake, it stood unobtrusively by the clams, clashed a bit with the mussels and cleansed the palate after both. I was a fairly good structural match with the scallops. In this pairing the wine's hay character was accentuated.

The Silverhorse wine was a fairly good match with the combination rice. The acidity came through nicely, without dominating, and cleansed the palate. The savory character of this type of dish and the fruit of the wine may make for an aromatic clash for some. It tamed the heat of the curry very nicely - the best of all the wines in the flight, in fact. The floral aromatics in the wine were amplified by the herbal components of the curry. It

worked well with the crab cakes, although its acids seemed the softest in the flight when paired with this dish. It worked fairly well with the clams but its sweetness and aromatics may clash with the clams for some. The sweetness dominated the mussels but there was not aromatic clash. By contrast, when paired with scallops, its structure integrated with the food but may find that the aromatics clash.

The Tangent Albariño accentuated the smokiness of the fried rice while its acidity softened with the food. It enhanced the aromatics of the basil in the curry while its structure held up to the dish. This wine matched the tropical salsa and the richness of the crab cakes. Its structure worked with the clams and mussels but clashed a bit aromatically with both. It paired well, structurally and aromatically, with the scallops.

## General impressions

Compared to their Spanish relatives, Central Coast Albariños tend to be a bit bigger and more aromatically intense while maintaining good varietal fidelity and structure. Nevertheless, the weight of the tasted wines does not seem to coincide with hallmarks of excessive ripeness (brown apple or heavy honey aromas, for example). The Central Coast Albariños were also a bit higher in alcohol than the Spanish examples (2007 Martin Codax: 13% ABV, 2008 Salneval: 12.5% ABV). Within the spectrum of styles, the common distinguishing characteristic of Central Coast Albariños is very good acidity. In some instances, this may be more prominent than it is in Spanish offerings.

A touch of effervescence noted in the Tangent Albariño is not out of the range of normal - both for Spanish and Central Coast Albariños. The 2008 Salneval displayed a slight amount of fizz. Additionally, a 2006 York Mountain Edna Valley Albariño - tasted in the past but not part of this flight - was slightly effervescent as well. This character, then, would appear to be deliberate.

These wines would most likely do best with rich seafood such as shrimp, scallops, lobster and may be better suited for sweet and spicy dishes that have a dominant peanut element. The fried rice dish tasted with these wines likely contains fish sauce, which tends to be both sweet and smoky. These wines seem to augment some of those characteristics. Both the richer and leaner examples seem to clash with strongly aromatic herbs such as basil. Conversely, they seem to work well with rich, tropical components of a dish - such as the mango salsa.

The Central Coast Albariños tasted display a considerable breadth of stylistic spectrum - and rightfully so, as California is known for stylistic variation within appellations. This variation is likely rooted in the individualism of the people who make these wines. It is difficult, at this time, to tie these variations in styles to climate or soil. Regional typicity for these wines cannot be detected or described with any accuracy based on such a limited tasting. One could draw parallels between a stereotypical Santa Lucia Highland Pinot Noir and the Cambiata Albariño, where the weightier, lower-toned aromatics and pronounced minerality of both could be said to reflect the *terroir* of that AVA. It could also be said that acidity is more prominent in the Santa Ynez and San Antonio Valley Albariños because the hot climate of each AVA result in a unique proportion of sugar and physiologic ripeness and the acid levels that occur in those circumstances. More extensive tasting - both vertical and horizontal - would take this out of the realm of speculation.

And that is what is needed: more Central Coast producers should make Albariño and more people should seek out these wines and try them. Stylistic variation aside, Central Coast Albariños are quality wines with very good varietal fidelity. In large part they are a good value and offer good food friendliness. 🍷