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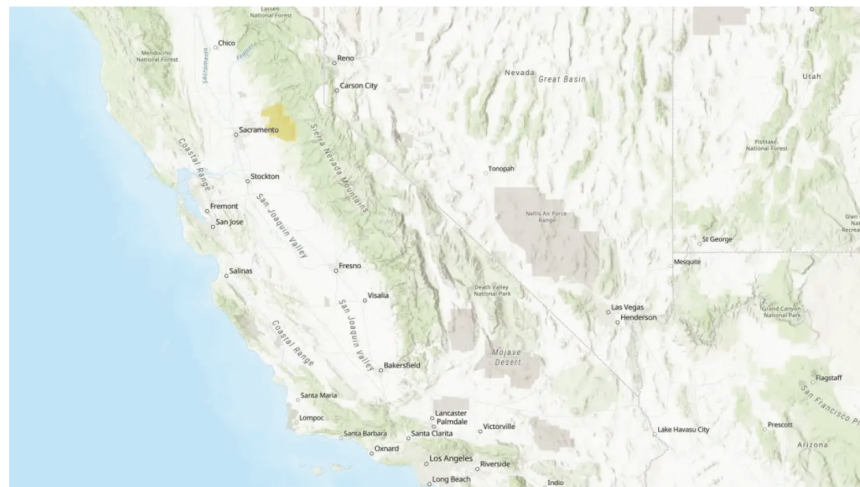
California's high-country wines



Alder unearths vinous treasure from the land of El Dorado.

The phrase ‘alpine wine’ is on the lips of many a sommelier these days. Thanks to the exigencies of climate change, not to mention the surge of interest in lower-alcohol, higher-acidity wines, mountain-grown wines everywhere are having a moment.

Despite the lack of the word ‘mountain’ in its name, the Sierra Foothills American Viticultural Area (AVA) hosts most of California’s highest-elevation vineyard sites. And within the Sierra Foothills, a good many of those sites can be found within the El Dorado AVA, whose vineyards begin at 1,200 feet (366 m) and go up to 3,300 feet (1,006 m) of elevation.



El Dorado AVA shown in gold

El Dorado County was quite literally put on the map in 1848 when James Marshall discovered gold there at Sutter’s Mill, launching California’s Gold Rush and forever changing the fate of the entire state. Within 20 years, El Dorado County hosted nearly 2,000 acres (809 ha) of grapevines, planted with the hopes of slaking the thirst of a ballooning population.

But El Dorado's prominence as a vine-growing region faded quickly. By the turn of the 20th century, most vineyard projects were abandoned, like so many failed mining claims. The onset of Prohibition in 1920 represented the final nail in the coffin for El Dorado's (and most of California's) wine industry.

Barring a few experimental plantings, El Dorado's wine industry wouldn't really get started again until Boeger Winery opened in 1973. Plantings grew slowly after that, but began to pick up steam in the 1990s. In 1993 the county crushed 3,334 tons of grapes from roughly 780 acres (316 ha) of vines. In 2022, 6,235 tons of grapes were harvested from a total of 2,941 acres (1,190 ha). Needless to say, yields have come down considerably since the early 1990s as growers have become more sophisticated and quality-minded.

The improvement in quality and growth of plantings has been driven by both the roughly 60 local wineries, but also increasing demand from wineries outside the area looking for mountain-grown fruit.



Autumn colours at Madroña Vineyard

Steve Edmunds of Edmunds St John winery in Berkeley was one of the earliest '[Rhône rangers](#)' to seek out El Dorado fruit, making Syrah from the Fenaughty Vineyard, white Rhône blends from several vineyard sites, and eventually Gamay from the Barsotti and Witters Vineyard, planted at his request. The 1997 Edmunds St John, Fenaughty Vineyard Syrah remains one of the greatest California wines I've ever tasted.

Many tiny producers have followed in Edmunds' footsteps, finding in El Dorado County a unique combination of climate, granitic or volcanic soils and, perhaps most importantly, high-quality grapes that don't cost a fortune. This formula, perhaps combined with plantings of Gamay (the primary grape of Beaujolais, where natural wine got its start) and more than 90 other grape varieties has made the region especially attractive to those making natural wines.

The percentage of wines made by producers outside the county continues to rise, with almost 40% of the county's grapes now going to wineries based elsewhere in the state. In some ways, El Dorado has become a bit like the [Anderson Valley](#), where many of the best wines that demonstrate the true potential of the place are made by outside producers.

I regularly purchase El Dorado-sourced Syrah and Gamay from some of my favourite California wineries, but it has been a while since I've tasted more broadly from the appellation, so I was particularly excited to sit down and taste through 60 or so wines from the region and find out how things are developing.

I also wanted to give the region a bit of love, as they've had a pretty rough time of it lately. The area was inundated with smoke from the Fork Fire in 2020, the Caldor Fire in 2021, and in the spring of 2022 killer frosts dropped yields by more than 50%, only to have the Mosquito Fire fill some already-struggling vineyards with smoke last September.

With mountainous terrain, however, comes many variations in mesoclimates, exposures and wind patterns. Which means that damage from both frost and smoke was far from uniform, and a number of producers managed to make perfectly good wines in recent years. But not everyone was so lucky. Which is why you will see a good number of 2019 and 2018 wines below, rather than more recent vintages.

While select vineyards in Napa, Sonoma and the Santa Cruz Mountains are planted above 2,000 feet, El Dorado, backed up against the Sierra Nevada mountain range, offers a unique set of growing conditions at higher elevations that can make for truly distinctive wines that I hope you will seek out and enjoy.

The 44 tasting notes below are ordered alphabetically by producer (sur)name, but you can reorder them as you wish.

Donkey & Goat, Eliza, Barsotti Vineyard 2019 El Dorado

18

A blend of Clairette, Picpoul, Vermentino, Roussanne and Grenache Blanc grown at 2,700 ft of elevation. About 7% of the wine sees 10 days of skin contact.

Fermented with ambient yeasts. Aged in neutral oak for 9 months and bottled unfiltered. 225 cases made.

Light gold with a hint of green. Smells of Asian pears, greengage plums and melon layered over a touch of wet stone. Wonderfully bright flavours of greengage plum, white flowers, apples, and hints of spices mix amidst vibrant acidity and a silky texture. Gorgeous, frankly, with an alluring and mysterious shimmering tapestry of flavours, plus a hint of minerality. (AY) 11.3%

Drink 2023 – 2030

\$42 producer's website

Donkey & Goat, Stone Crusher Roussanne 2019 El Dorado

16.5

Orange wine. Fruit comes from the Elen Ridge vineyard at 2,400 ft of elevation, featuring fine-grained loam and acidic residuum weathered from granite. Skin-fermented for 9 days in an open-top wooden vat, then aged for 10 months in old oak barrels, bottled unfiltered. 274 cases made.

A hazy dark gold with hints of amber. Smells of sweet flowers, peach nectar and chamomile. Tangy and zingy flavours of apricot, Rangpur lime, chamomile and pastry cream. Nice acidity and a faint powdery tannic texture. (AY) 11.2%

Drink 2023 – 2029

\$53 producer's website

Donkey & Goat, The Bear 2019 El Dorado**17.5**

A blend of Counoise, Cinsault, Mourvèdre, Grenache, Syrah, Viognier and Marsanne grown between 2,700 and 2,900 ft of elevation on decomposed granite with red clay loam. Fermented with ambient yeasts and aged for 10.5 months in a mix of neutral and second-use French oak and clay amphorae. Bottled unfiltered and unfiltered. 398 cases made.

Light ruby with a fine haze. Smells of peaches and berries. Bright sour-cherry and peach flavours mix with redcurrant and a hint of cherry. Excellent bright juicy acidity brings in citrus-peel flavours and a hint of herbs that linger through a long finish. Mouth-watering and delicious, not to mention a little mysterious.

(AY) 12.2%

Drink 2023 – 2028

\$42 producer's website

Donkey & Goat, Five Thirteen 2014 El Dorado**16.5 +**

A blend of 39% Grenache, 18% Mourvèdre, 17% Syrah, 16% Cinsault and 10% Counoise. Fermented with ambient yeasts, aged in old oak barrels with no additions save sulphur dioxide. Bottle unfiltered and unfiltered. 7,896 bottles made.

A cloudy, opaque medium garnet. Smells of dried red-apple skins, mulling spices, sawdust and river mud. Flavours of red-apple skin, dried cherries, dried redcurrants and dried herbs have a wonderful powdery tannic texture and stony minerality. Ageing beautifully and very compelling. (AY) 14.1%

Drink 2017 – 2026

Donkey & Goat, Twinkle Mourvèdre 2022 El Dorado**16**

Grown at 2,800 ft of elevation on decomposed granite with red clay loam. Fermented with ambient yeasts. Aged in neutral oak for 4 months and then bottled unfiltered and unfiltered. 398 cases made.

Light garnet with a slight haze. Aromas of flowers and blueberries. Juicy, bright berry flavours are backed by powdery tannins and crunchy acidity. The chalky dryness of this wine suggests carbonic maceration. Done in a light, chillable-red style, there's a hint of spice and herbs that lingers in the finish. (AY) 11.5%

Drink 2023 – 2026

\$30 producer's website

Donkey & Goat Grenache Noir 2019 El Dorado**16.5**

A blend of fruit from the Girard and Fenaughty vineyards, planted at elevations between 2,600 and 2,800 ft. A mix of Aiken, Hotow and Argonaut Loam soils. Fermented with ambient yeasts in wood vats and then aged in neutral oak for 7 months before being bottled unfiltered and unfiltered. 247 cases made.

A cloudy pale ruby in colour. Aromas of strawberries and herbs. Tangy, bright sour-cherry and strawberry flavours have the tartness of raspberry as they head for a citrusy herbal finish. Exceedingly light-bodied with only the very faintest powdery texture of tannin. Drink with a chill. Delicious. (AY) 13.1%

Drink 2023 – 2028

\$38 RRP