

Tangent wines arrive on cool ocean breezes



California clan takes a new tack in Edna Valley

By **MICHAEL LONSFORD**
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Call them the white knights of California's Edna Valley, because they're as cool as a Pacific Ocean breeze — almost literally.

If that sounds like I'm going off on a Tangent, I am. As in Tangent wines. You may not have heard of them, but you will.

Edna Valley is on California's Central Coast, south of Big Sur, only four miles from the ocean. The valley is unusual in that it runs east-west, which allows cool Pacific air and fog to slide in overnight, making it one of the coolest winegrowing regions in the world. This makes for a longer growing season, which means that by the time the grapes get truly ripe, they have terrific acidity.

We're talking white-wine grapes for Tangent — no reds allowed. No chardonnay, either. Tangent makes sauvignon blanc plus nonmainstream wines such as pinot gris, pinot blanc — even albariño — as well as a white blend called Ecclestone.

This is a new venture from cousins John Niven and Michael Blaney, as well as French winemaker Christian Roguenant. Niven was in Houston recently, introducing the wines to his distributor, Prestige Wine Cellars, and calling on key accounts. We talked briefly one afternoon.

"I'm the third generation involved with wine," he said. "My family used to be in the grocery-store business, but ... my grandfather sold out and decided he wanted to grow grapes. ... Eventually he focused on Edna Valley, and in 1973 he planted Paragon Vineyards. At first he grew many varietals but eventually focused on the two he thought would do best there: chardonnay and pinot noir."

Eventually the family made business connections with Dick Graff and Phil Woodward of Chalone Vineyards, farther north in Monterey County.

Not to be outdone, Niven's grandmother wanted her own venture, so she planted 3 1/2 acres of her frontyard. This would become the family's Baileyana Winery, which makes excellent pinot noir, chardonnay and syrah.

"A couple of years ago we made a sauvignon blanc at Baileyana that didn't fit the winery profile," Niven said, "so we came up with Tangent." A fitting name for a project going along the path less traveled. Roguenant has a history of making sparkling wines, which have high acidity. That's the way he makes the Tangent wines: Old World techniques with New World *terroir* and technology.

All the Tangent wines are fermented in stainless steel — no oak. Their alcohol content is less than 14 percent, which means you can actually drink more than a couple of sips without getting fatigued — or hammered. And they're bottled with convenient screwcaps.

And best news of all: These wines are extremely affordable. It almost sounds too good to be true.

But it's the truth — straight, no chaser.

Wines from Tangent and Baileyana

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Here are the wines from Tangent and Baileyana handled in Houston by Prestige Wine Cellars. The only unavailable Tangent is the sold-out albariño. Prices are approximate retail.

- **2005 Tangent Pinot Blanc** — * * * * — made from grapes purchased from neighbor Laetitia, very crisp, clean, ripe but not clumsy; \$17.
- **2005 Tangent Pinot Gris** — * * * * 1/2 — more Italian than Alsatian in style, very crisp with an underlying minerality. It has enough fruit to satisfy chardonnay lovers, but a more interesting taste profile; \$17.
- **2005 Tangent Sauvignon Blanc** — * * * * * — wow — definitely Loire Valley in style, but more like a pouilly fumé than a sancerre; citrus, grapefruit, minerals and a touch of smokiness. Consumers, take note: If you're looking for the grassy style or cat-pee style of sauvignon blanc, you'll be disappointed. But if you're looking for an Old World style with flavor and complexity, step right up; \$14.
- **2005 Tangent Ecclestone** — * * * * — a white-wine blend of viognier, pinot blanc, pinot gris, riesling, muscat canelli and albariño, it's a bit off-dry on purpose; good as an aperitif or with spicy foods; \$20.

• **2004 Baileyana "Grand Firepeak Cuvée" Chardonnay** — * * * * — interesting wine with some tropical-fruit nuances, but also an underlying leanness, and a nice, long finish; \$30.

• **2004 Baileyana Pinot Noir** — * * * * 1/2 — really interesting version, with enough black cherry and cranberry to satisfy pinot lovers who like 'em big, and enough red fruit, as well as cinnamon and beetroot, to satisfy those who prize finesse and subtlety; a steal at \$25.

• **2003 Baileyana Syrah** — * * * * 1/2 — even better than the pinot noir, with lots of violets and hints of cassis, as well as spice, white and black pepper and just a hint of earthiness; jump on this puppy for \$19.