

Wish I was here: a love letter to the Central Coast

by Amanda Slavin

It all started with a 1984 Zaca Mesa Chardonnay. Pulling the cork out, I wait: this is the moment. I close my eyes and breathe in the edges of a time spent in paradise. You people are lucky – you live in a place where earth, lavender and sunlight combine to come slipping out of a bottle. I stare at the glass of golden liquid and when I'm not savoring, I'm remembering – but most of all, I'm plotting my earliest return to that tenderloin slice of heaven along the Pacific that is the Central Coast.

I don't live here. But I can say, to some degree of accuracy, that I intimately know your blessed turf. Since my parents moved to Santa Barbara almost 20 years ago, we were regular visitors to what was then a burgeoning town. The hillsides were still sufficiently vacant, no sprawling mansions had yet cut and keloided the avocado groves.

Saturday morning I would find my mother at the open air market, disappearing behind women in cotton pinafores, beaten straw hats and Birkenstocks. Oh my lord, look at these strawberries, she would intone, admiring the ruby chunks with the meditative reverie of a monk. A vendor hands me a cluster of champagne grapes and I feel their knobby weightlessness in my hand. Cradling thick bunches of cornflowers my mother smiles, part hiding from the predacious camera, part proud that she had the good sense to move to paradise before she died.

Another memory snapshot: a family wine country weekend, we traipse through the late October fields of Talley Vineyards. Exhausted and muddy, I sit in the car and watch my father approach through a soft steady rain with an armload of albino pumpkins for his three youngest grandsons who grimace their best jank-o-lantern smiles for the camera. Through the lens the usual high relief of cobalt skies and emerald hills gives way to a parfait of saffrons, ambers and charcoals blurring strokes across an impressionistic

canvas. No matter. Like a burlap bag on a supermodel, even bad weather looks good here.

I remember seeing the full moon plunge into the cold Pacific in that silverplate gray of early morning; I cross the beach at Cambria and hear the wind talking to me. There is still potential here. It has not been cut up into strip malls, dissected into subdivisions, plaqued over by asphalt. Your ragged coastline edges still chew at the Pacific in that terrifying, satisfying way that is the mark of the untouched. There is still rawness here, there is still beauty, there is still mystery. There is still something waiting to be found. There are still secrets.

The bees hang innocuously around my head as I unfold the butcher's wrap from the freshly cut sandwiches. The yellow hills of Paso Robles enfold us like a mother. We drink the wine, bite into drippy plums and lean back, watching the lizards do their push-ups and letting the sun work its magic. You couldn't escape with eyes closed, even if you wanted: a distillation of pasture, bark and cinnamon invading my senses. I'll take this back with me. Yes, in a bottle – but more enduringly in a place between my head and my heart.

In a state where everything Hollywood is new, new, new, it is a relief to find that something primeval lies just

beneath the surface. The ancient volcanoes surrounding San Luis – the seven sisters, rolling across the landscape like the spine of an antediluvian creature – are testimony to a prehistoric consciousness that suffuses the land here. As an archaeologist, I have the fortune of working in Greece, another place where rock touches sea in that tortured, enchanted way. Your slice of coast is another place that possesses that magic. It is where spirits gather to sing the praises of a perfect balance of water, earth and light. Physics calls it a singularity – I call it heaven.

So, do this Midwestern expatriate a favor; one fine morning, cruise Highway One and let that salty wind whip through your hair. My Missouri dawns are precious, but they wane in the brilliance of a Central Coast moment. Yet I'll have that moment all over again when I leaf through faded photos of my mother at the Sunday art fair, enveloped in turquoise light, when my memory hears the delicious angry ocean tearing at the rocks at Morro Bay – or when Big Brown arrives with my latest shipment from Firestone Vineyards. I'll wait for the right moment, uncork a bottle, and, through an alchemy of taste, smell and memory, I'll whisper to myself once again:

Wish I Was Here.

