

The Sta. Rita Hills AVA: Perfecting the Place of Pinot Noir

By Matt Kettmann

By now, thanks to an Oscar-winning Hollywood movie and nearly 40 years of critic-pleasing experience, anyone who knows anything about Pinot Noir realizes that the Sta. Rita Hills is home to some of the most promising cool climate vineyards on the planet. Comprised of rolling hills and two east-to-west running valleys — one cut by Highway 246, the other by the Santa Ynez River, but both opening onto the blue Pacific, which delivers brisk breezes even on the hottest of summer days — the appellation is home to a divergent pattern of soils, patchwork of shade and sunlight, and dramatic elevation shifts that result in tremendous expressions of *terroir* in the most classic sense. A vineyard that grows berry-prominent fruit, for instance, might be right across the road from one whose grapes throw off more of a gamey flavor. While the exact formula for these variations happily remain a mystery, it's becoming increasingly evident that, as more and more winemakers turn to the Sta. Rita Hills for Pinot Noir, the region is perfecting Pinot Noir's sense of place.

The original mystery, of course, was where to grow Pinot Noir in Santa Barbara County. That was solved by the region's pioneer Richard Sanford, whose interest in the geography of wine compelled him to research 100 years of weather reports from Burgundy, France — from which Pinot originally hails — and then drive through the Santa Ynez Valley with a thermometer outside of his car window. "I was interested in finding a place that was cool enough for Pinot Noir," explains Sanford, who realized that Santa Barbara County's Transverse Ranges allowed such temperatures. "It's one of the few places in the world where you have such a dramatic climate change in such a short distance." Sanford, who now owns Alma Rosa Winery, planted Pinot Noir in 1970, and harvested the first vintage in 1976. "The Pinot Noir was immediately successful," said Sanford, who helped champion the move to get the Sta. Rita Hills named its own appellation in 2001. "That's one of the best vintages I ever made."

Those early years were formative ones for Richard Longoria, who entered Santa Barbara's wine business in 1975 as a winemaker for Firestone Winery's first vintage. "The stars immediately were the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir," recalled Longoria. "The Sanford & Benedict wines became an overnight sensation." Though he began buying Sta. Rita Hills fruit— working with Sweeney Canyon, Huber Vineyard, Mt. Carmel, Clos Pepe, Rancho Santa Rosa, and others — it would be more than 20 years from that first vintage before Longoria was able to plant his own vineyard in the region. In 1996, Longoria serendipitously met the owners of a little mesa that he thought was "picture perfect for a vineyard" at a barbecue, and by 1998, he'd planted the Fe Ciega — or "blind faith" — Vineyard. "I knew it was the right spot for Pinot Noir," said Longoria. "I was willing to stake my reputation on it. I felt pretty certain we would have great wine."

He was immediately vindicated in 2001, when he took the small amount of available grapes and made 12 cases. "It was immediately apparent, just from that vintage, of how unique the vineyard was," said Longoria. "It had this character that was unlike any vineyard around it. I was excited from day one." That character, said Longoria, resembles the coastal sage that grows on the coastal hillsides, but also features some animal-like earth tones. "That's the best I can come up with describing it," laughed Longoria, who was the first winemaker to stake a claim in Lompoc's so-called "wine ghetto," a spread of industrial warehouses where now dozens of winemakers blend their juice.

Though Stephen Russell graduated from UC-Davis with a degree in enology in 1960, he did not begin making his own wine until he planted a vineyard on Santa Rosa Road in 2001. Calling his operation Prodigal Wines — a nod to his return to the trade after decades as a veterinarian and academic — Russell planted mostly clone 667, and was happily surprised. “The vineyard just does wonders with that clone,” said Russell, explaining that it’s known for earthy, black fruit, and berry flavors. “Ours accentuates all of that.” Just down the road, however, Russell said that another vineyard’s 667 clone does not offer the same experience. “That’s one of the intriguing things about the Sta. Rita Hills,” he explains, positing that it might be the “strikingly different” geology of the appellation, which ranges from heavy clay to sandy loam to nearly pure diatomaceous earth. Whatever the reason, the terroir allows Russell to focus on making the more Burgundian style, “less in-your-face fruit-bomb” style of Pinot Noir. “Philosophically, we are committed to producing Pinot Noirs that are the more sophisticated, nuanced, lighter style than the heavy, overly extracted Pinots that are often seen from Northern California,” said Russell.

One of the most distinct aspects of the western Sta. Rita Hills is that diatomaceous earth, which literally crumbles out of the mountainside in some place. On what was once his family’s lima bean field, Peter Cargasacchi planted grapes atop those soils in 1998, and now his 45-acre vineyard provides distinctive juice to both veteran winemakers such as Ken Brown and the Hitching Post and relative newcomers like Dragonette Cellars. “The vineyard is literally growing in decomposing rocks,” said Cargasacchi, which allows for lots of drainage and a “devigorating” chemical composition. “The end result is very small berries, so there’s such a higher ratio of skin to fruit that you end up getting wines that have a lot more flavor and a lot more color and a lot more tannins, which means that they have a better aging potential.”

For Richard Sanford, this evolving understanding of the Sta. Rita Hills is only more proof of his foresight. But while he’s on the verge of celebrating his 40th year as a winemaker, Sanford refuses to dwell on the past. “Young winemakers have recognized that there is an allure to Pinot Noir, that there is a challenge, and they recognize that this cooler climate has the potential for really stunning wines,” he said of the emerging class of younger vintners. “There is a whole group of young enthusiastic winemakers who are really going to make a mark on the region. From a consumer standpoint, it’s only going to get much better.”

Where to Taste Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and More

Alma Rosa Winery & Vineyards: Tasting room open daily, 11 a.m.-4:30 p.m. 7250 Santa Rosa Road, Buellton; 805-688-9090; www.almarosawinery.com; info@almarosawinery.com

ampelos cellars: Tasting room open by appointment and on Saturday, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. 312 North 9th St, Suite A, Lompoc; 805-736-9957; www.ampeloscellars.com; info@ampeloscellars.com

Babcock Winery & Vineyards: Tasting room open daily, 10:30 a.m.-4 p.m. 5175 Highway 246, west of Buellton; 805-736-1455; www.BabcockWinery.com; info@BabcockWinery.com

Casa Cassara: Tasting room open daily except Tuesdays, 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. 291 Valley Station Road, Buellton; 805-688-8692; www.casacassara.com; barbara@ccwinery.com

Cold Heaven Cellars: Tasting room open Friday-Monday, noon-4:30 p.m. 92 #A Second Street, Buellton; 805-686-1343; www.ColdHeavenCellars.com; info@coldheavencellars.com

Demetria: Tastings by appointment only. 6701 Foxen Canyon Road, Los Olivos; 805-686-2345; www.demetriaestate.com; inquiries@demetriaestate.com

Dierberg: Tasting room open daily, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. 1280 Drum Canyon Road, Lompoc; 805-736-0757; www.DierbergVineyard.com; info@DierbergVineyard.com

Dragonette Cellars: Tasting room open Thursday-Monday, 11:00a-5:00p; 2445 Alamo Pintado Ave., Los Olivos; 805-693-0077; www.dragonettecellars.com; info@dragonettecellars.com

Fiddlehead Cellars: Tastings by appointment only or, on Saturday, 11 a.m. - 4 p.m. 1597 E Chestnut Avenue, Lompoc; 1-800-251-1225; www.FiddleheadCellars.com
info@FiddleheadCellars.com

Flying Goat Cellars: Tastings by appointment or, Thursday-Sunday, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. 1520 East Chestnut Court, Unit A, Lompoc; 805-736-9032; www.FlyingGoatCellars.com;
info@FlyingGoatCellars.com

Foley Estates: Tasting room open daily, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. 6121 E Highway 246, Lompoc; 805-737-6222; www.FoleyWines.com; info@FoleyWines.com

Fontes & Phillips: Tastings by appointment only. Alan@Terravant.com

Hitching Post Wines: Tasting room open daily from 4 p.m. 1406 East Highway 246, Buellton; 805-688-0676; www.HitchingPostWines.com; info@HitchingPostWines.com

Huber Cellars: Tastings by appointment or Friday-Sunday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. 4892 Hapgood Road, Lompoc; 805-736-3854; www.HuberCellars.com; info@hubercellars.com

Ken Brown Wines: Tastings by appointment only. 805-688-4482; www.KenBrownWines.com;
Ken@KenBrownWines.com

La Vie Vineyards: Tasting room open Friday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. and Sunday by appointment. 308 North 9th St, Unit D, Lompoc; 805-291-2111; zionvines@hotmail.com;
www.lavievineyards.com

Lafond: Tasting room open daily, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. 6855 Santa Rosa Road, Buellton; 805-688-7921; www.lafondwinery.com

Longoria Wines: Tasting room open daily, 11 a.m.-4:30 p.m. 2935 Grand Avenue, Los Olivos; 805-688-0305; www.LongoriaWine.com; info@LongoriaWine.com

Melville Winery: Tasting room open daily, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. 5185 East Hwy 246, Lompoc; 805-735-7030; www.MelvilleVineyards.com; info@MelvilleVineyards.com

Prodigal Wines: Tastings by appointment only. 805-688-0476; www.ProdigalWines.com;
info@ProdigalWines.com

Sanford: Tasting room open daily, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. (winter), 11 a.m.-5 p.m. (summer). 5010 Santa Rosa Road, Lompoc; 805-735-5900 or 800-426-9461; www.SanfordWinery.com; info@sanfordwinery.com

Sea Smoke Cellars: No tasting available. www.SeaSmokeCellars.com

Sweeney Canyon: Tastings available by appointment. www.SweeneyCanyon.com; chris@sweeneycanyon.com

Thorne Wine: Tasting available at Avant Tapas & Wine; 35 Industrial Way, Buellton; Thursday-Sunday, 11:00a-3:00p; www.thornewine.com

Zotovitch Family Vineyards; 1500 E. Chestnut Street, Suite B, Lompoc. Tasting Room open Thursday – Sunday 11-4 or by appointment. 805-736-1600 www.zotovitchcellars.com; info@zotovitchcellars.com