

# SANTA RITA HILLS: PACIFIC PINOT

Despite being on the same latitude as Tunisia, the Santa Rita Hills AVA is one of California's coolest wine-growing regions—perfect for producing some of the state's finest and most distinctive Pinot Noirs. Anne Krebiehl MW meets the growers and winemakers now thriving in a climate and culture far removed from the California clichés

Only the brilliant sunshine and a certain easy, laid-back charm fit the Southern California image. In all other respects, the Santa Rita Hills AVA, a small Pinot Noir-dominated appellation in Santa Barbara County, defies every Californian assumption. In 2016, it celebrates two anniversaries: 15 years as an approved AVA, and 45 years since Richard Sanford planted the first vines in 1971. Here, the swaying palm trees of Santa Barbara and Goleta, just an hour's drive away, have given way to age-contorted, lichen-covered live oaks on vast hillsides. Only rarely is the eye caught by the lustrous sheen of citrus fruit that thrives so bountifully on the coast. Amid cattle ranches, vines, and walnut orchards, beach life seems a million miles away. Yet the Pacific governs everything.

At a latitude of 34°N, the same as central Tunisia or southern Cyprus, the AVA is a very cool Winkler Zone I. Stretching some 8 miles (13km) between Buellton and Lompoc, it occupies two east-west corridors between the Santa Rosa Hills in the south and the Purisima Hills in the north, "the most clearly delineated transverse ranges, from Alaska to Chile, on the Pacific Coast," according to the Growers' Alliance. These were created over a time span of 12 million years, when mountains pushed up by tectonic plate movements broke away and turned clockwise. The soils are mainly marine sediments, covered in clay and sandy loams with compressed silica formations like the local chert. Victor Gallego, director of winemaking at Sea Smoke, puts it aptly: "It's this very odd combination of sunshine and cool climate that does not really exist elsewhere. Imagine the ripening ability of this solar intensity coupled with this climate that allows you to hold on to acidity. It's very unusual. You have to understand from a winemaking standpoint what this really affords you. There's this really unique expression of Pinot Noir here." He is right. Notwithstanding stylistic differences and winemaking choices, there is an invigorating freshness to all the Pinot Noirs here, an arresting fragrance akin to the spicy rosebud pepperiness you get from rain-wet briar; a fresh herbal note that transcends greenness and is instead deeply savory and utterly primal amid all the tart and lush red-fruit flavors.

## Climate and culture

Pioneer Richard Sanford remembers, "I was comparing the climates on these accountancy ledgers with 14 columns—this was before computers. I was interested in the climate between March and October, and so all up and down California I got all these data and compared them on these sheets. I was astonished that this area was showing a cooler climate than farther north. I thought, 'This is not right.' I was sort of hooked on the belief that the closer to the equator, the warmer it's going to be, so then I tried to figure out why. That's when I discovered how horizontal this is," he says, pointing at the transverse range of the Santa Rosa Hills on the map. "People driving from Los Angeles along the coast think they're going north when really they are going west, which is a real geographic anomaly. That's when I recognized that in this whole part of Central California, we've got these different currents that are coalescing here. It's the region where the flora of Northern California changes to the flora of Southern California—it's a transition zone." Every winemaker remarks on it: Steve Clifton, formerly of Brewer-Clifton, says, "We have the influence of the Alaskan current; it comes down the coast and meets at Point Conception with a counterclockwise current that forces all the arctic influence into our transverse ranges. It's a completely unique situation that the marine layers will go 7 miles [11km] inland on most days of the year." Justin Willett of Tyler winery adds that the colliding currents make for "world-class surf spots. There are some really strong weather patterns. What you get is really strong onshore flows, pushing the fog; it really cools down this area." It is Sanford who provides historic context. This part of California was populated by Chumash Indians, seen as the most advanced of all the coastal tribes. "You know that Point Conception was a very serious Chumash site," says Sanford, "so it's rich in cultural identity. But at the same time, it's where all these climates are changing; it's hugely rich in sea-life. And this transition in climates is so important to our grape growing. Few places have this variety of climate at such a short distance."

But there is another thing that strikes you about the Santa Rita Hills. Despite figuring partially as the backdrop of the movie *Sideways*, the AVA still seems like quiet, out-of-the-way farming country. In the past, there were lima beans and hay; today there are broccoli, lettuces, and berries, and surprisingly many horse-racing tracks, evidence of the area's thoroughbred studs. Blakeney Sanford, Richard's daughter, says the area used to be known just as a truck stop. Chad Melville of Melville Winery says his father Ron, a grape grower from Napa Valley, "tasted this Pinot from a region that he had driven by many times but never looked at as a wine region, only really as a place to stop and get gas." Of the total area of 30,720 acres (12,430ha), only 2,877 acres (1,164ha) were under vine in 2013, of which 2,250 (910ha) were Pinot Noir. The people who farm and make wines seem to be mavericks, too. "We're kind of an odd mixture in many ways," says Gallego. "Yes, I'm a Davis-trained guy, but most of the successful people here are not necessarily university-trained enologists. It's because this AVA has been less in the spotlight; there has been less pressure since its inception for people to make a statement. You know we're not selling wines for \$450 a bottle like in Napa. Owners and winemaker-owners have felt comfortable bringing in people who are just passionate and letting them create a name and a style for this place."

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**A ground-breaking, phoenix-like winemaker**

The very first of those was Richard Sanford, completely vital and youthful at 75. His gentle demeanor belies his and his family's dramatic fate, his transition from disaffected Vietnam soldier, to ground-breaking, phoenix-like winemaker.<sup>1</sup> He divined the place on Santa Rosa Road and planted the first vines in what was to become the Sanford & Benedict Vineyard in 1971. "I had started to do some business, but I wasn't comfortable shuffling papers around," Sanford remembers. "I really wanted to be connected with nature. I decided I wanted to be in agriculture and thought I should do something that got better with age." During his time in the US Navy, Sanford got to taste a bottle of Volnay, and it stayed with him. "I started to think about the structure of that Volnay. That was my threshold for a very long time, without even tasting other wines. If there was going to be anything I should grow, it would have that texture, that velvety texture. I had studied geography at UC Berkeley, so I went back in the climate records for 100 years, comparing Burgundy with places in California. It happened to be amazing timing. All this stuff, the whole Vietnam experience, is timing. Driving down the road with a thermometer in my car, I would check the difference in climate as I went toward the sea and back. People thought I was a real nut. But I was doing something a bit counterculture at that time. I didn't have any money, so it was challenging. But there was this beautiful ranch that we found."

He and his botanist friend and business partner Michael Benedict managed to lease it with a buying option.<sup>2</sup> "I decided I was going to be a wine grower and I should go to school at UC Davis, but that would take me four years." Instead, Sanford got every book he could find about grape growing and winemaking and devoured them. "I thought, if I go home and plant the vineyard, in four years I'll have grapes—I was anxious to get on. There was a winery up in the Santa Maria area where I got the first cuttings; they were Chardonnay, Riesling, Cabernet, and Merlot. It was not until 1972 that we planted Pinot Noir. It was the Mount Eden selection, a clone that Paul Masson brought over. The cuttings came from Burgundy and were planted on Mount Eden." It was planted on its own roots. The Cabernet, Riesling, and Merlot were later grafted over.

Sanford's first vintage was 1976, and he has made wine every vintage since. He had to learn on his feet and improvise: "Going back to traditional winemaking, I understood the nature of Pinot Noir fermentation and why in Burgundy fermenters were designed that way. I couldn't find anything here, so I decided to make my own. I had a friend who made hot tubs in Santa Barbara. I found some American white oak, we milled that, made it into tanks, put them in a barn out here, and that was our winery." Sanford says he "looked to Europe for my education in how to make Pinot." A lucky connection with Santa Barbara local Charlie Fairbanks—whose sister is Pamela, wife of

Aubert de Villaine of Domaine A&P de Villaine and Domaine de la Romanée-Conti—proved helpful. "She was able to make an appointment for me to spend a whole day with Vincent Leflaive [of Domaine Leflaive, 1912–93], wandering around his cellars. Being with a person like that, learning about his strategies, coming home, knowing that and applying that—the guys at Davis didn't have that in their framework." Counterculture stayed with him. He credits his wife Thekla with going organic: "We were eating from an organic garden. She said, 'Why don't you just grow grapes organically?' I was not sure if that was possible, but within two years we weaned ourselves off chemicals."

Sanford tells the story of showing his first vintage, the 1976 Sanford & Benedict Pinot Noir, at the Los Angeles Country Club to the California Vintage Wine Society in 1978. "Lots of old leather and smoking rooms—I was nervous as heck. There was that big audience, white tablecloths, waiters pouring my wine, and there was silence. I was just looking around for somebody to say something. All of a sudden someone said, 'Son of a bitch!' That was Hernando Courtright, owner of the Beverly Hills Hotel. 'Son of a bitch! Finally, a Burgundy in California.' It still gives me goosebumps to remember that they appreciated what I had brought. That is a great reflection of the innocence of the whole thing. It wasn't the rock-star style a lot of winemakers aspire to—there wasn't any recognition then; it was a farming activity, it was agricultural, and there is great beauty in that."

Parting ways with his partner Michael Benedict in 1980, Sanford left the vineyard and started Sanford Winery. He and Thekla planted their home vineyard El Jabali in 1983. In 1990, Sanford got back his original vineyard when new investors asked him to partner and manage it. He planted two further iconic vineyards on the Santa Rosa Road: La Rinconada in 1997, and La Encantada in 2000. He also designed and built an inspiring winery of home-fired adobe. Its completion in 2001

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Photography on preceding spread, this spread, and following spread courtesy of Sea Smoke



coincided with the economic downturn, and Terlato Family Wines came on board as investor. By 2005, they became the majority owners, and Sanford left to start over yet again with his Alma Rosa Winery based on El Jabali and La Encantada, the first two vineyards in the county to be certified organic. Alma Rosa has weathered the turbulence of the most recent financial crisis and has new backers. La Encantada is now owned by an investment group that "maintains all relationships" and continues to farm organically. Sanford & Benedict, La Rinconada, and the Sanford Winery are now owned and run by the Terlato Family. They honor the oldest vines and the original plantings in their Founders' Vines Pinot Noir, an elegant Pinot crafted by winemaker Steve Fennell.

Sanford is philosophical. "We've been through a very big transition. The whole thing for me has become spiritual: my time and connection with nature, giving up my religion and culture after having been sent to Vietnam and not being treated well on returning. All this was huge in my mind until I began reading Joseph Campbell. From then, I became involved in eastern philosophy. Living on that ranch with no electricity for eight years, getting the vines growing—that's where I developed my whole personal philosophy and spiritual connectedness. You can't go there without feeling the energy. I realize that ownership is temporary. Anyway, it's been ups and downs; it's been tragic and joyful, tears and laughter. It hasn't been boring. We've been out here just doing this for a long, long time. It's been our whole life. I feel so grateful to have found something in my lifetime that resonates so much with me. I have been thinking about it recently—the wine is there; I have been able to let it out. It's true, the wine is there—it's just a matter of letting it all happen. That's the approach. I think there is a uniqueness and purity in this approach that's not really guided by any outside force. It's come from the place—that may be the big difference, that's maybe why the wine tastes the way it does." His Pinot Noirs have exceptional authenticity, true Pinot-ness, in the 2013s, as well as in the astonishingly youthful 2005s we tasted together. There is so much more than fruit: backbone and freshness, smoke and iron oxide almost like blood. The 2005 La Encantada shines with white pepper, rosehip, and briar. Sanford says that planting on north-facing slopes of the transverse range was deliberate. The figures speak for themselves: The 2014 Pinot Gris, also from La Encantada, has a bracing natural acidity of 9.2g/l and a finished pH of 3.11—in Southern California.

**The beauty of options**

The south-facing slopes along the Santa Rosa Road, the southern corridor, and Highway 246, the northern corridor, have also been planted. Most of that, however, did not happen until the late 1990s. Ron Melville bought and planted land in 1997. His son Chad explains why there is such a stylistic breadth in the wines, why the growing season is exceptionally long without the usual northern-hemisphere pressures of impending rain and frost: "What is really crazy is the timing when we have bud-break and when we harvest. The season is really, really long. Because of our latitude, we have very mild winters; our vines are only dormant for two to two and a half months. If you think about it, it makes sense that our daytime temperatures are cold; if we had weather like Burgundy or Willamette Valley with this early bud-break, we'd be harvesting in June—but we're

harvesting in September, October, November. You get all these aromas and flavors but keep great acidity, too.” Bud-break usually occurs around Valentine’s Day and the beginning of March. Winemakers can harvest throughout an exceptionally long ripeness window. Even the riper wines hang on to that special briar fragrance and freshness. It is the Melville style, from the start made by Greg Brewer of Brewer-Clifton, to bring structure from stems rather than oak—this accentuates the spice and brightness even more—and deliciously so.

At Sea Smoke, first planted in 1999, 168 acres (68ha) of vines are farmed biodynamically; the deck at one of the most elevated points of the south-facing vineyard is a perfect vantage point across the southern corridor of Santa Rosa Road with a panoramic view of Fiddlestix, Sanford & Benedict, La Rinconada, and La Encantada. “When I first got down here from Northern California and was looking at the numbers, I thought, ‘This is wrong, go and recalibrate your pH-meter, there’s no way you’re harvesting at these ripeness levels with these acid numbers, it makes no sense.’ But this is what this AVA does for you,” says Gallego. Winemaker Don Schroeder adds, “We are fortunate in that we can do what we want in Santa Rita Hills: There are guys who pick intentionally early, we do the style that we prefer, and there are some guys who take it further than we do. But that’s the beauty, that you have all these options.” Gallego describes their style: “Our object is complexity with elegance that is firmly California; we want ‘yummy.’ Yummy drives everything that we do. We’re not picking at 23° Brix; we’re not trying to emulate the Old World; we’re not using native ferments; we’re not using stem contact.” Their Pinots are more plush but, according to Gallego, used to be even plusher. He candidly acknowledges a stylistic step-change: “Since the 2007 vintage, we have pursued a path of slightly less new oak and slightly lower alcohols. Our alcohols used to be quite a bit higher; we were all around at that time and all agreed to put them into the bottle and loved them. The problem was that as they were aging, as the natural evolution occurs and the fruit was falling off somewhat, they became more oaky and alcoholic than we were comfortable with. So we started each year dialing back slightly to find where our sweet spot is. Everything’s been at 14.5%, which is still relatively high, particularly in the world of global Pinot Noir, but it’s kind of where our inflection point is between yumminess and some restraint.”

Steve Clifton, a former rock singer from Laguna Beach and co-founder of Brewer-Clifton, now heads his own Palmina and La Voix labels. He also learned on the job, by starting work at Rancho Sisquoc Winery in Santa Maria Valley in 1991. “I went to school for communication and drama. My wife says I communicate very dramatically,” he jokes. He remembers, “Fifteen years ago, most of the hillsides were pasture land.” He sees himself, Greg Brewer, and Sashi Moorman (Domaine de la Côte) as “the next stage. We’re the middle children. There were all these amazing grapes from these amazing, different vineyards, but nobody let me bottle them individually. They wanted them to be blended into a Santa Ynez Valley or a Santa Maria Valley Pinot Noir. Brewer-Clifton was started in 1996 out of that frustration: specifically to make single-vineyard Chardonnay and Pinot Noir from what is now called the Santa

Rita Hills.” The wines then were labeled Santa Ynez Valley. “They were all made in a completely static fashion, so that the only difference would be site specificity. As many factors as possible were made static—the same yeast, the same day of racking, bottling, the same neutral Sirugue barrels—so that the site would become the most important factor. Initially, people started glossing over after the sixth wine, but with time they started getting it. I think these wines were great tools for people who were planting here; they could see the difference from the western to the eastern side, the northern corridor of Highway 246, the southern corridor of Santa Rosa Road, and the differences from east to west on either of these corridors.”

Clifton talks eloquently about Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noir: “It’s more of a feeling, a specific aroma that hits in a certain register. There is an abundance of fruit, and structure is what it needs. You can do that in a lot of different ways, whether it’s limiting yield or introducing oak tannin, but stems have really worked in giving a grounding for all the fruit that sits on top of it. The fruit needs to be harnessed, kind of corralled in a way, and stems are the best way in my opinion. But that’s a whole other farming direction. You cannot just pick grapes and ferment them whole-cluster; it has to be something you start a couple of years before those grapes are fermented,” he explains. “Leaves have to be pulled at exactly the right time. That’s typically right when fruit has just set. Acclimation to sunlight is the most important part of the whole process. You have to acclimatize the berries *and* the stems before the sun is severe. That is the basis of the theory, but the timing of it is so crucial. No tannin integrates into a wine like the tannin that comes from the plant. These tannins start taking on all those different tea-like characteristics...” Clifton describes how this learning curve and evolution occurred through farming: “This is the coldest part of the state for growing Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Acidity levels can be so bracing here, especially if you’re not farming for pH balance. In the early days, I just tried to balance acidity. We had Pinot Noirs at 15.5%, and I don’t think that’s necessary; we were picking for balance. When we were farming ourselves, we started seeing how we could raise the pH and pick



Right: “You cannot just pick grapes and ferment them whole-cluster; it has to be something you start a couple of years before those grapes are fermented”—Steve Clifton



at a lower ripeness level [encouraging more mineral uptake to buffer acidity]. All that started in 2005, when we really, really focused on that aspect. How much can these wines be farmed, so I can do less in the cellar? And that affected alcohol levels as well. There's a lot of risk, but all those nuances that we talk about, the finesse and the difference, it's not about making something that is consistent; it's about making something that excels." His La Voix wines do indeed excel. This label is reserved for Pinot Noir, while his Palmina label is dedicated to Italian varieties—he makes gorgeous and utterly convincing Nebbiolo. He is excited about the AVAs future: "I think Santa Rita Hills is refining, refining, refining, toward a more nuanced style. You can manipulate a wine to a point where you lose the story. I want the story to be the vineyard and the vintage, and I see that more and more." His former business partner Greg Brewer echoes Clifton's sentiments exactly. It becomes clear that the two men learned and evolved as farmers and winemakers side by side. "Stem participation is like architecture," says Brewer. "To source tannins from the grapes' own system allows me to obviate oak. It's a different provenance of tannin." Just like Clifton, he keeps striving: "Now the question is one of refinement. It's easy to do things. It's difficult to do less." The Brewer-Clifton Pinot Noirs are striking. Brewer also comments on the abundant fruit: "You cannot corset something that does not have enough curvature."

#### Defined by fog and wind

The youngest generation, already living the legacy of Sanford—being both inspired and actively encouraged by him—is represented by Justin Willett of Tyler Winery (Tyler being Willett's middle name). This history-of-art and architecture graduate started apprenticing in 2004 for Joe Davis at Arcadian Winery. He made his first own eight barrels in 2005. "In 2007, I went out on my own completely and never looked back," he says. "Santa Rita Hills wines are wines of the sea. There is a sea-driven minerality and brininess to the Chardonnays and that same mineral presence in the Pinot Noir. When picked

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at more restrained levels, it is very red-fruited. I like to pick at a point where I can still retain a lot of that feminine precision and beauty. It's something cool, fine, and precise; there's always a real clarity to the juice during fermentation that I don't find in other places. It's just very, very strong fruit in its constitution. The skins tend to be thicker; it tends to have more acidity; it tends to be more tightly wound; it rewards more time in the cellar. These soils are exceptional, very well drained with solid water-holding capacity. That's one of the reasons we can get away with the low rainfall we have in Santa Barbara County—the average is about 12 inches [300mm]. We are really fortunate to have strong aquifers." He buys fruit from La Encantada, Sanford & Benedict, La Rinconada, and other vineyards. He is just planting the first 26 acres (10.5ha) of his own vineyard on Highway 246. "I feel really fortunate because I am the first generation of producer around here to really get to work with vines that are 40+ years old. There is no way to quantify that, but there is something very special—just a difference in the texture, palate presence, and aromatic profile of wines from these older vines. Now, 45 years later, I do really think that Richard and Michael selected the best spot out there." He has been a member of the IPOB movement since its inception in 2011 and pursues a restrained, haunting style.<sup>3</sup> "I liken it to making tea, just getting out the really fine stuff," he says about his winemaking. He first went to Burgundy in 2008. "It's been really eye-opening how similar the processes are," he observes. "I am really excited about what the future holds here. It's hard saying that a new, unproven region is really important, but with every vintage we have under our belt here, the wines prove to me that there is something really special happening. It's the work that Sanford and his generation did—these guys did the heavy lifting to make this place at least visible—and I hope that my contemporaries and I should drive that further."

Sanford, Melville, Clifton, and others got together to propose the AVA in 1997, along borders that, as Brewer puts it, "were defined by fog and wind." In a country where people still argue about the value of AVAs, this one is really distinct. Excitingly, a few winemakers are turning their attention to making sparkling wine as well. Sea Smoke's 2012 Sea Spray, a 100 percent Pinot Noir rosé with zero *dosage* bodes exceptionally well. So, too, do Sanford's Pinot Blanc and Chardonnay-based blanc de blancs and brut rosé.

Sitting under an oak in bright spring sunshine, Sanford, who divined this spot along the Santa Rosa Road and had the courage to follow his hunch, looks back: "You know, when you're in your 20s, you think you can do anything. With my background in geography I was able to put this climate thing together, do the research, and suggest that this would be the place before anybody else thought about it. Everybody thought it was stupid, but that didn't bother me because my activity was being in nature, taking care of this beautiful place. People ask, 'Aren't you surprised?' No—I am sort of amazed, but I am not surprised, because that was the whole project. It just happened that it turned out correctly, but for a good reason, an academic reason. It was sort of lonely, but it was just beautiful. There's a magic in Pinot Noir; it's a lifelong pursuit. While Cabernet is in front of grand homes, Pinot Noir is in peasant plots. Pinot Noir is of the earth. There's that part of Pinot Noir that is decay. There's a sort of fleetingness about it, there's a purity. It's refreshing. It's without clutter." Just like the Santa Rita Hills themselves. ■

Richard Sanford. Photography by Blakely Sanford

<sup>1</sup> Matt Kettmann, "Visionary Vintner," Santa Barbara Independent, April 19, 2012. <sup>2</sup> www.rtwine.com/pinot-noir/evolution-of-sanford-benedict. <sup>3</sup> IPOB—In Pursuit of Balance, http://ipobofbalance.com