



## Santa Rita Hills blossoms growing Chardonnay & Syrah in the Pinot zone

*By Steve Pitcher*

To many connoisseurs of California wine, Santa Rita Hills is synonymous with Pinot Noir. For good reason: When the Santa Rita Hills AVA became official in 2001, it was America's first and only appellation conceived principally for cultivating the demanding grape. Its boundaries had been painstakingly mapped out by Santa Barbara County winegrowers to enclose and define a pure Region I growing area (the coolest of California's five regional climate classifications based on heat summation of degree days over 50 degrees F. calculated during the growing season).

In the five years since its federal recognition, Santa Rita Hills has proved to be a perfect "Pinot zone." When the AVA was subsequently profiled in these pages ["Pinot Paradise," February/March 2004, p. 42], the quality potential of its Pinot Noirs was clearly evident. Revisiting the region last summer for the first annual Sta. Rita Hills Winegrowers Alliance celebration, the tremendous sense of community and camaraderie exhibited by the talented and dedicated individuals who grow the grapes, make the wine and bring it to market was palpable.

The wines poured during the two-day event reinforced the quality standard the AVA has maintained since its inception, and brought into play new and well-established producers (within and outside the AVA) that have expanded the range of offerings available, albeit still in relatively small quantities. At official alliance functions such as this one, however, only Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are poured, an agreement reflected in the group's bylaws. That's understandable, given the origins of the AVA. Yet in the few short years since its establishment, Sta. Rita Hills has become home to additional varieties that thrive in its chilly, foggy environment.

So while Pinot Noir unquestionably remains the star of the AVA, with new bottlings emerging annually that polish the image, the curtain is rising on the region's unique Chardonnays and Syrahs, the character and style of which are markedly influenced by cool-climate growing conditions. There are now also limited examples of Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Gris and Sauvignon Blanc that weren't being made a couple of years ago, and Grenache will debut this year.

The two spellings of the AVA's name are not typos. While it started out as Santa Rita Hills, trademark concerns voiced by Viña Santa Rita (a Chilean winery) at the time petitioners sought recognition - and subsequently - prompted the modification to "Sta. Rita Hills." To avoid confusion, a settlement, brokered by vintner Richard Sanford and approved by the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB), now requires the amended spelling on the AVA's wine labels. (To simplify matters, the AVA will be referred to as SRH from this point forward in the text.)

Legalities aside, it's what's in the bottle that really counts. And, just as the superb Pinots from SRH are distinctive for their intriguing minerality, high-toned strawberry and blackberry fruit and exquisite, seamless texture, so, too, the Chardonnays and Syrahs made from the AVA's fruit are like none other in California.

Compared to Syrahs made from eastern Santa Ynez Valley grapes, which, for the most part, are fairly bursting with ripe blackberry fruit and display opulent textures, the SRH versions are mostly slightly more restrained and nuanced, but still offer luscious black fruit and white or black pepper spice accented by floral notes reminiscent of lavender, underpinned by shimmering minerality. For the lover of Aussie Shiraz, it's much like the distinction between Barossa and McLaren Vale Shiraz.

The SRH Chardonnays exhibit brisk acidity and mineral notes that lend themselves to a variety of styles, from no oak/no malo to full-blown, complete malolactic, barrel-fermented creations.

In the aforementioned 2004 article, SRH winemaker Richard Longoria roughly estimated that the AVA's varietal make-up "would be around 65 to 70 percent pinot noir, 20 to 25 percent chardonnay, 5 to 10 percent syrah with minor plantings of other varieties such as pinot gris and viognier." Most of the local vintners and growers queried for this follow-up article agreed that's still pretty much the case.

While some of the region's syrah has recently been grafted over to chardonnay or pinot - for example, some seven acres in Fess Parker's Ashley's Vineyard (now renamed "Gaia" under new owner John Zahoudanis in honor of the Greek earth goddess) because it had difficulty ripening consistently in the chilliest, far-western part of the AVA - other plantings have come on line to make up for the losses.

At the Ampelos Cellars' estate vineyard, established in 2001 in the slightly warmer, but still cool, eastern portion of the AVA, new sections of pinot noir and syrah, along with small amounts of grenache, viognier and pinot gris, were added in 2004, increasing planted acreage to 25. "I'm convinced that the eastern end of the appellation is a perfect, cool-climate area for these varieties," notes vintner-proprietor Peter Work, who's also president of the SRH Winegrowers Alliance.

Work will debut his first Syrah, from the 2004 vintage, in October. Interestingly, Santa Barbara-based winemaker Craig Jaffurs bought some of Work's fruit from the same vintage and has already released an exquisite 2004 Ampelos Vineyard Syrah under his eponymous label. Jaffurs, who has been making wine in Santa Barbara County since 1989, proclaims on his Web site ([www.jaffurswine.com](http://www.jaffurswine.com)) this wine to be "the biggest, thickest, chewiest, deepest and most primary Syrah of the vintage. It has no new oak, yet gobs of tannin. It's our best vineyard-designated Syrah of the vintage." Jaffurs made only four barrels of this wine from first-year fruit; three of them went into this extraordinary Syrah.

Defining the distinctive SRH climate, Work notes that, "Perhaps the largest influence on the appellation is the fact that it lies in two valleys that run east-to-west and open out to the Pacific Ocean." He says that mornings are typically blanketed by ocean fog, which keeps the early morning temperatures in the 50s or 60s through the summer. When the fog burns off, usually around mid-morning, the temperatures will warm up into the 70s and 80s. In the afternoon, a breeze arrives, which cools things down, and by the time the sun sets, the temperature is usually in the 60s.

Just south of the Ampelos Vineyard, which is close to what is locally called the "246 Corridor" (because Highway 246 runs east to west along the spine of the northern half of the AVA), three other eastern SRH vineyards - Lafond Vineyard (96 acres), Hilltop Ranch (45 acres) and Evan's Ranch (50 acres) - also have an enviable reputation for syrah. Each site is associated with the locally designated "Santa Rosa Road" side, or southern portion, of the AVA.

Veteran Santa Barbara County winemaker Bruce Maguire is "a strong proponent of syrah in Santa Rita Hills." He has eleven acres of the variety in Lafond Vineyard and access to all of the eight acres of syrah in neighboring, separately owned Hilltop Ranch to make SRH-designated Syrah under the Lafond Winery label. The winery also sells syrah fruit to small producers such as Kenneth-Crawford, a boutique winery.

"The southeast quadrant of the AVA is slightly warmer than the western AVA and is less affected by wind," Maguire explains. "With the fruit from that area, I'm searching for Northern Rhône-like black pepper qualities with a background of California ripe fruit that's well structured from the natural acidity resulting from the AVA's cool climate."

In Lafond Vineyard South, on the Santa Rosa Road side of the AVA, syrah was planted in 1997. Shortly thereafter, across Santa Ynez River in the northern Lafond Vineyard, syrah was grafted onto five acres of 34-year-old chenin blanc vines. Lafond's 96-acre vineyard is also home to a small block of grenache and almost 15 acres of riesling, which Maguire uses to make three styles of the varietal under Lafond's Santa Barbara Winery label, including an exciting, almost bone-dry, SRH-designated bottling.

Other than its obvious quality, Maguire believes Syrah's future in the appellation is assured because of profit margins. "While Chardonnay faces an economic disadvantage to Pinot Noir in terms of what it can command at retail - making Pinot far more desirable for the winery - Syrah can, and does, command the same price as Pinot, and is sometimes higher in price." Although it may never surpass Pinot Noir in popularity as an SRH varietal, in part because "it won't have the same 'critical mass' in the marketplace," Maguire observes, it will be "second to Pinot in this area; that's certain."

Winemaker Kirby Anderson of Gainey Vineyard is another SRH Syrah booster. While the winery has its Home Vineyard in the warmer, eastern Santa Ynez Valley, from which it produces Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, Chardonnay and Merlot, it is the newer Evan's Ranch site in the hills above Santa Rosa Road that provides Anderson with fruit for cool-climate-influenced Syrahs and Chardonnays, as well as Pinots.

First planted in 1997, Evan's Ranch is part of a 120-acre tract that was originally used to produce flowers for Rose Bowl Parade floats. From the beginning," Anderson explains, "20 percent of the vineyard has been syrah - we have four clones of the variety." While the winery sold some of the fruit in 2003 and 2004 to Kenneth-Crawford Wines, most of it goes into the Gainey Limited Selection Syrah, the 2004 version of which - probably because of the uncertainty caused by the appellation name flap - is prudently labeled "Santa Ynez Valley," which overlaps this portion of SRH. Anderson notes, however, that, "It's all from Evan's Ranch." The fruit is so exceptional that Gainey probably won't be selling off any more of it.

Winemaker Kenneth "Joey" Gummere sees the writing on the cellar wall. "The Kenneth-Crawford 2004 Evan's Ranch Syrah is most likely the last time we'll make this wine. It seems that [Gainey] has caught on to the potential of the syrah coming out of there and is going to work more closely with it from here on out. We'll continue to try and get them to see the light, but for now, we're done." It's a pity, he acknowledges, because their 2004 Evan's Ranch Syrah "screams cool climate - with its nose giving up classic Syrah aromas of white pepper, black licorice, dried meat and sweet fruit, and a rich palate with mouthwatering boysenberry, plum and currant fruit. A good amount of acidity balanced with soft, round tannins keeps the finish long and intense."

There are, fortunately, other sources for this tiny operation, which also buys syrah from Lafond, where Gummere is the assistant winemaker. "The Santa Rita Hills, while ideal for cool-climate grapes like pinot noir and chardonnay, is pushing the boundaries for a variety such as syrah," Gummere observes. "Like many things in life, when you live on the edge you are often rewarded with special results."

Along the 246 Corridor, northwest of the Ampelos Vineyard, eight acres of syrah are planted at Foley Winery's huge, 230-acre Rancho Santa Rosa Vineyard, more on Babcock's 80-acre estate vineyard and on about six of Melville's 85-acre estate vineyard. Babcock's fruit goes into its popular, Central Coast-designated Syrah called "Black Label Cuvee," while Foley and Melville make SRH-designated Syrahs. Melville also sells syrah fruit to other wineries, including Ojai Vineyard and Jaffurs Wine Cellars, both located outside the AVA.

Chad Melville manages the family estate and is also the assistant winemaker. He's particularly fond of Donna's block, a 5.8-acre section on sandy loam soil planted to two syrah clones, Estrella and Clone 1 Shiraz, Melville's total syrah planting in SRH (they have another syrah block called "Verna's" in Los Alamos Valley, just north of the AVA). Noting that some growers say syrah grows everywhere and is fairly easy to farm, Melville takes the opposite view: "In this [western] part of Santa Rita Hills, it's not like that at all. Syrah requires a lot of attention, as much as pinot, and it struggles here because of often strong winds and the cold climate. The block is densely planted [1,812 vines per acre], which creates vine competition, but results in great fruit intensity in the wine." The yield is a meager 2.2 pounds per plant.

Santa Barbara financier Bill Foley, driven by the dream of producing world-class Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, in collaboration with longtime winemaker Alan Phillips, established his vineyards and winery in 1998 on an historic site in the middle of SRH called Rancho Santa Rosa, formerly a thoroughbred horse ranch. The property has the steep, south-facing hillsides and limestone-laced soils that are perfect for pinot and chardonnay, which were planted there first - pinot in the highest reaches of the ranch, with elevations to 1,000 feet, the chardonnay on the rolling hills surrounding the winery. Eight acres of syrah were subsequently planted in two blocks (each with its designated clone) on a southeastern-facing, sheltered hillside close to Highway 246 at the western edge of the property.

While Phillips makes several Chards and Pinots (including single-clone bottlings), he crafts but one estate Syrah, a white pepper-accented, fleshy charmer designated as "Rancho Santa Rosa" and produced in limited quantities (under 600 cases). By contrast, there are four current-release Foley Chards: two single-clone bottlings, a barrel select and the estate - all made with the same techniques of complete barrel fermentation and 100 percent malolactic fermentation. "We have lots of different clones to work with, plus several rootstocks," Phillips notes, "so working this vineyard is a constant learning experience - determining which clone does best on which rootstock in which block. We may have most of the answers in 40 to 50 years."

Phillips sees a certain continuity in SRH Chardonnays. "It's the bright acidity mainly, and minerality to a greater or lesser degree, based on site. Oak doesn't dominate these wines, even when barrel fermented and barrel aged." Melville, who works closely with winemaker Greg Brewer at Melville Estate and also has his own label, Samsara, focusing mostly on vineyard-designated Syrahs, adds, "High-acid Chardonnay is indicative of Santa Rita Hills. In fact, it's hard to get these wines to go through malolactic fermentation naturally; it has to be induced most of the time."

Greg Brewer's passion for Chardonnay is obvious in the many different versions he makes for Melville, Brewer-Clifton (his small-production collaboration with Steve Clifton that, in 2004, produced six vineyard-designated Chards from SRH) and his new Diatom project, which, in 2005, produced two vineyard-designated SRH Chards in a minimalist style. He discusses the varietal in a tone that is both urgent and reverential, making it clear that he prefers a pure expression of Chardonnay with neither mololactic nor oak to obscure the pristine fruit.

In making Melville's Clone 76-Inox Chardonnay, he explains, "As soon as the fruit was whole-cluster pressed, it was transferred into two small, stainless-steel tanks where it remained until bottling without any contact with oak. The wine fermented for three months at an average temperature of 38 degrees to capture and enhance the fruit's elegance and beauty." Subsequent cold storage prohibited the onset of malolactic fermentation, which he says was avoided for the same reasons. The wine then remained on its lees, without any disturbance, for five months before being filtered and then bottled by gravity. "Inox - French for stainless steel - is a suitable title for this wine," he concludes, "and a minimalist winemaking approach protects the purity and precision of such a designation."

The most Brewer (whose middle name could well be Chardonnay) allows himself to stray from these techniques is exhibited by the Melville Estate Chardonnay, which he barrel fermented with 20 percent new French oak and put through partial (30 percent) malolactic; for all that, it is still laser crisp.

Taking a contrary view, Bryan Babcock, who's been making wine in SRH for some 25 years and was a member of the vanguard that planted the region, harks to 1983 to make his point. "Jim Clendenen [founder of Au Bon Climat] made the first Chardonnay from Babcock Vineyard. He really liked the look of the fruit, and was convinced that it would make a great 'full-blown' Chardonnay - barrel fermented, full ML, aged in barrel for a year, that kind of thing. The public response to his Chardonnay was enthusiastic," he recalls. "A common reaction was, 'It's so Burgundian!' For 20 years, I tried to duplicate that wine - unsuccessfully. Twenty-five years later, I've finally learned how to farm [grapes] without sulfur and learned how to properly ferment in barrel with Montrachet yeast. The raw materials of the Santa Rita Hills lend themselves to this style of Chardonnay."

Even so, the three current Babcock Chardonnays, including the Grand Cuvee, which blends 50 percent SRH fruit with 50 percent from the Los Alamos Vineyard to the north of SRH, are somewhat removed from the full-blown style; only one, called Top Cream, is 100 percent barrel fermented, but with just 57 percent malolactic. Rita's Earth Cuvee is 80 percent stainless steel fermented, 20 percent barrel fermented with 20 percent malolactic. The Grand Cuvee is 50 percent barrel fermented, 50 percent malolactic.

The region's cold-climate acidity is a blessing for minimalist, stainless steel, as well as full-blown, barrel-fermented styles of Chardonnay, and versions in between. Wes Hagen, vineyard manager and winemaker at Clos Pepe Estate on the 246 Corridor, is convinced that SRH is actually a better growing region for chardonnay than pinot noir. "Pinot was planted in the best, south-facing hillside sites from the beginning, with chardonnay going into what might be described as mostly less-desirable sites. But what if that were reversed - or amended? Chardonnay from Santa Rita Hills would be even more awesome than it is today."

He has a point, demonstrated by an SRH Chardonnay called Gratis, which is never sold, per se, but always donated to charity auctions or given away as part of allocation packages of Sea Smoke Pinot Noir. One block of Sea Smoke's otherwise exclusively planted pinot vineyard is devoted to chardonnay, and thrives in virtually the same conditions as its purple-skinned neighbor. Borrowing Hagen's adjective, the resulting wine is truly "awesome."

Winemaker Steve Clifton, who was the wine buyer for a restaurant in San Diego in the late 1980s and early '90s, recalls his chance meeting at the Sanford tasting room in 1991 with then winemaker Bruno D'Alfonso. "Bruno took me on a tour of the area in the vicinity of the Sanford & Benedict Vineyard on Santa Rosa Road and said, unequivocally, that one day these hills will be covered with pinot and chardonnay vines." While things have changed significantly at Sanford Winery - founder Richard Sanford has departed to start his new Alma Rosa Winery, and D'Alfonso left to focus on his Badge and di Bruno wines - D'Alfonso's prediction has come to pass, more so than either men could have imagined at the time.

Today the hills and much of SRH's plantable lower elevations are covered with established and newly planted vineyards. The pinot noir and chardonnay clearly love the fog; the syrah needs a bit more convincing. Yet all three develop slowly - and often majestically - in the temperate days, cool nights and maritime mists that converge in this special place that has become Sta. Rita Hills.

"We wake up each morning and get to make wine in Utopia," enthuses Clifton. For a winemaker, it doesn't get much better than that.

### *Tasting Bar*

Except where noted, the wines that follow were tasted blind at Gypsy Canyon Winery in Sta. Rita Hills. Most are limited production (under 500 cases). Barrel samples are scored by a quality term that represents a point range within the BuyLine scoring system. A wine labeled with an AVA other than SRH (e.g., Santa Ynez Valley) is nevertheless from SRH because of its origin in a vineyard, designated on the label, within the SRH AVA. Many of these hard-to-find wines may be purchased at [www.winecask.com](http://www.winecask.com), a Santa Barbara County retailer with an enviable stock of the county's bottlings.

*Syrah* (Decanting and airing for at least two hours is recommended for the Syrahs that follow.)

Ampelos, 2004 Syrah, G ("Gamma"), Sta. Rita Hills - \$34: Forward, fragrant, appealing scents of freshly crushed wild blackberries, shy mocha and a framboise high note. Luscious and velvety smooth with firm, supple tannins and nicely extracted blackberry fruit; fine balance and length with a mineral undertone emerging in the finish. An elegant, yet generous Syrah. October release. Score: 92

Wine News  
P.O. Box 14-2096  
Coral Gables, FL 33114  
Telephone: 305.740.7170  
Fax: 305.740.7153  
[www.thewinenews.com](http://www.thewinenews.com)