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Two Voices of Pinot Noir

Dave McIntyre is the wine correspondent for the Washington Post. Dave recently visited Alma Rosa Winery & Vineyards and had this to say...

I suffered cognitive dissonance a few weeks ago over pinot noir. I lunched on Monday with Richard Sanford at his [Alma Rosa Winery](#) in Santa Barbara County over beef stew and his 2006 and 2007 La Encantada Vineyard pinot. He had just driven me around the Santa Rita Hills in the Santa Ynez Valley, an appellation he pioneered by planting Sanford & Benedict vineyard in the 1970s and creating Sanford winery in 1980. He explained how the hills running east-to-west – unique in California, where most run parallel to the Pacific – channel the ocean breezes and fog into the valley and moderate the temperatures. Despite being just a two hour drive from Los Angeles, the Santa Rita Hills region counts as a “cool-climate” for winegrowing. Ideal for pinot noir, in other words. Such geography is easy to read about, but seeing is believing.

The Alma Rosa La Encantada 2007 Pinot Noir (\$45) is rich and spicy, and tightly focused in a way that draws you closer with every sip. I gave it three stars (“exceptional”) when I [profiled Sanford](#) in the Post last August. It has what I love about California pinot noir – delightful floral aromas, good acidity and balance, and a lingering, silky finish. And it does not have what I hate about California pinot noir – excessive alcohol that leaves a burn across the palate, or a cloying, brown sugar taste. The 2006 was even better; Sanford described its aroma as “a day-old rose, just at the height of its power and on the edge of decline.” I couldn't disagree.

Two days later, back in snowy Washington, D.C., I had lunch with Becky Wasserman, her husband, Russell Hone, and two of the many Burgundy producers she represents. Wasserman, an American who lives in Burgundy, is an influential broker and exporter of fine French wines, primarily from Burgundy. She was here as part of a U.S. tour celebrating her 30 years in

business. She is as petite as Sanford is tall, but they seem to share a similar aesthetic – a preference for wines grown organically and manipulated as little as possible in the winery in order to achieve the purest expression of the fruit. Only Wasserman's pinots speak French, while Sanford's speak 'Murrican.

And that's where the dissonance came in. After five days in Santa Barbara County, sampling dozens wines in various styles, my initial taste of Burgundy was a shock. It was a Domaine Alain Burguet 2006 Gevrey-Chambertin "Clos la Justice" (\$70), and at first sip it seemed unpleasantly astringent. Where's the fruit? I wondered. But my palate was attuned to California pinot noir; after a few sips, the fruit emerged, then the Burgundian earth and finesse that characterizes the French expression of pinot noir.

As we tasted the Domaine Michel Lafarge Volnay 2006 (\$55), with its subtle, silky texture – for lack of a better word (pinot noir at its best is all about texture) – I thought of my lunch two days earlier with Sanford. Back in the 1960s, when he was looking to use his geology degree after a stint in Vietnam, it was a bottle of Volnay given by a friend that inspired him to plant grapes. He told me he does not remember the producer, but he recalls the flavors, the texture, and the inspiration it gave.

Is the Alma Rosa La Encantada the equal of the Domaine Lafarge Volnay?

Yes – and here's why I say that. The Alma Rosa is not and can never be a Volnay. But it is a beautiful expression of the Santa Rita Hills and of California pinot noir, just as the Lafarge is a beautiful expression of Volnay. Burgundy will always have an advantage in that no one dislikes a good Burgundy, while Burgundy fans will discount California for not having the right soils or climate to make a Burgundy. Sanford has every reason to be proud of his pinot. And if, as he savors his wine and thinks of that day-old rose on the cusp between glory and decay, his memory wanders back to that long-ago bottle of Volnay, who can blame him?