

Ken Zinns'

Wine Touring Notes

Grape-Nutz.com



by Ken Zinns

Ken is a Bay Area architect with a passion for wine. After taking a few wine courses through UC Extension, he started becoming more "serious" about wine in the early '90s. Ken has been taking wine-tasting trips to the Central Coast since early '92, and has come to love the area - not only for the wines, which just get better year by year, but also for the people. Ken's interest in wine is more than passive, and he's been volunteering his help at several urban East Bay wineries since 2001 - and in fact was recently named assistant winemaker for both Eno Wines in Berkeley and Harrington Wine in San Francisco.

Central Coast - January '10

It had been awhile since I'd been able to get away to visit the Santa Barbara County wine country, so even though I couldn't talk any friends into joining me this time, I headed out for a road trip to the Central Coast in late January. The weather had been especially chilly, and the previous week had brought an unusual amount of snow to the coastal hills – something I saw on my drive south from the Bay Area on a Sunday morning. I only made a handful of winery appointments before leaving, so I gave myself plenty of time to play things by ear as I traveled. Since I wanted to make this a relaxing trip, I decided to split up my driving time by stopping in the Paso Robles area on Sunday before continuing on to Santa Barbara County the next day.

Alma Rosa Winery & Vineyards

The heavy rain had let up a bit by the time John and I left Ampelos, though it was still quite chilly. John had to get back to work, so I headed into town for lunch at the Jalama Beach Café in Lompoc, which thankfully has preserved the wonderful "Hi! Let's Eat" sign of its predecessor. Afterwards, I took a scenic drive east along Santa Rosa Road, past vineyards and orchards, until I arrived at Alma Rosa Winery.

Alma Rosa is Richard & Thekla Sanford's label, which they started after they parted from Sanford Winery about five years ago. In that short time, they've already established Alma Rosa as one of the best Chardonnay and Pinot producers in the area. They also make a wonderful Pinot Blanc, a real favorite of mine. It's always a pleasure visiting the rustic old tasting room that Sanford used for so many years. After parking and dodging a few raindrops as I made my way from the car, I was welcomed inside by Mel Lewis. He and fellow tasting room worker John had the wood stove cranked up, and the winery cat was certainly enjoying the warmth!



Alma Rosa produces both appellation wines and vineyard-designates, and most grapes are sourced from their two estate vineyards, which are farmed organically and certified by the California Certified Organic Farmers. Rancho El Jabalí, near the tasting room, was first planted in 1983, and its 7 acres are divided evenly between Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The 100-acre La Encantada Vineyard was planted in 2000, and includes 96 acres of Pinot Noir along with small blocks of Pinot Gris and Pinot Blanc. The appellation wines are in fact sometimes sourced from a single estate vineyard – for example, the 2007 Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir was made entirely from La Encantada Vineyard fruit.

Christian Roguenant, who works with other Central Coast wineries as well, is the winemaker at Alma Rosa. All of the whites are cold-fermented in stainless steel, aged in tank and older oak barrels, and do not go through malolactic fermentation. Pinots are all aged from 8-10 months in barrel, with new oak ranging from a bit under 20% for the separate clonal bottlings up to 40% for the La Encantada Vineyard bottling. I tasted two new clonal bottlings of Pinot Noir – 115 and 667 – and a third bottling will be made from Mt. Eden clone. These will go mostly to wine club members although some is available direct from the winery too. As they have been from the start, all the wines are bottled with screwcap closures.

With his Alma Rosa label, Richard Sanford remains one of the top producers of wine in the Sta. Rita Hills. The wines consistently hit the mark with gorgeous aromatics and great purity of fruit. One of my favorite winery stops, for the relaxed atmosphere, congenial tasting room staff, and the excellent wines.

Current releases:

'07 Pinot Gris, La Encantada Vineyard, Sta. Rita Hills: Very light color, showing bright citrus and stone fruit aromas with lightly floral undertones, good acidity and mineral note on the finish.

'07 Pinot Blanc, La Encantada Vineyard, Sta. Rita Hills: Light color, with pear, ripe apple and citrus on the nose, a rounder mouthfeel than the Pinot Gris, yet retaining a clean and refreshing character. Year after year, I think this is one of the best Pinot Blancs made in California.

'06 Chardonnay, El Jabalí Vineyard, Sta. Rita Hills: From 25-year old vines near the tasting room. Light yellow color, displaying a slightly flinty nose along with fresh citrus and pear, along with just a touch of oak. A bit more full-bodied than the Pinot Blanc, with a creamier texture.

'08 Pinot Noir, Clone 115, La Encantada Vineyard, Sta. Rita Hills: Medium-light color, very aromatic with pretty rose petal, black cherry, and spice character. Fairly light-bodied, this is bright and juicy in the mouth, really a delightful lighter style of Pinot that you don't often find from this area.

'08 Pinot Noir, Clone 667, La Encantada Vineyard, Sta. Rita Hills: Medium color, the nose was tighter on this wine but displayed darker fruits and an earthy.

'07 Pinot Noir, Sta. Rita Hills: Medium color, pretty aromatics not unlike the '08 Clone 115 bottling though with a bit darker fruit profile, this had a smooth silky mouthfeel with good acidity and some mineral character, and a long, flavorful finish. A lovely SRH Pinot that's ready to drink now.

'07 Pinot Noir, La Encantada Vineyard, Sta. Rita Hills: From Swan and 667 clones. A bit darker in color, this featured deeper fruit plus some cola and spice on the nose, with a richer mouthfeel and bigger structure than the SRH bottling.

'06 Pinot Noir, La Encantada Vineyard, Sta. Rita Hills: From Swan and 667 clones. Similar color to the '07, this was not as fruit-forward, with more earth and forest floor character, plus some smoky, plummy notes. The extra year in bottle has mellowed out this wine in comparison with the '07 as well.

To read Ken's full article - http://www.grape-nutz.com/kenz/10_Jan.html.