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Wine: California's Santa Rita Hills

By Dave McIntyre
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The climate of Santa Barbara County has helped vineyards in the Santa Rita Hills flourish. (Mark Gail/The Washington Post)

Talk to any Santa Barbara County winemaker, and before long he or she will probably remind you that when you stand on the beach at Santa Barbara and gaze at the Pacific Ocean, you are facing south. And that the Santa Ynez Mountains behind you run west to east, unlike most of California's coastal ranges and river valleys, which are oriented north to south, parallel to the coast. A few miles west of Santa Barbara, where the coast makes a northerly right turn at a promontory that locals fondly call "Reagan's Nose," the mountains funnel the cool ocean air and fog inland through the Santa Ynez Valley, moderating the Southern California temperatures and creating ideal conditions for grapes to ripen.

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The next thing your winemaker friend might tell you is that as you head east from the town of Lompoc, near the ocean, through Buellton, Solvang and Los Olivos (made famous in the 2004 film "[Sideways](#)"), the average temperature rises one degree per mile. That's a dramatic change in the world of wine grapes, and it influences a grower's decision about which grape varieties to plant. Pinot noir and chardonnay thrive at the western, cooler end of the Santa Ynez Valley, a region known as the Santa Rita Hills, while the warmer areas to the west are hospitable to Rhone varieties such as grenache and syrah. The county's other major wine area, the Santa Maria Valley to the north, also benefits from ocean influences guided inland by the San Rafael Mountains.

This unique microclimate gives winemakers exceptional fruit to play with, and the best are producing wines of great intensity and focus. During a recent visit to Santa Barbara

County, I was particularly impressed with wines from the Santa Rita Hills, a place that received federal recognition as an American Viticultural Area in 2001. (The appellation is spelled Sta. Rita Hills on wine labels, a compromise reached with the Santa Rita wine empire of Chile.)

The SRH, as winemakers also call it, stretches west to east between Lompoc and Buellton. Its northern border follows State Route 246; at the southern end is the Santa Rosa Road, twisting among the canyons of the Santa Ynez Mountains, where it is not uncommon to drive around an outcropping of rock and brush and be confronted with acres of stunning hillside vineyards.

Richard Longoria makes wine with grapes from throughout the county, including pinot noir from Fe Ciega Vineyard in the SRH and Spanish varietals such as albariño and tempranillo from the warmer end of the Santa Ynez Valley, about 25 miles to the east. The grapes' expression varies from region to region, he said.

"In the Santa Maria Valley, pinot noir has a more pronounced herbal quality, with red-fruit flavors. In the Santa Rita Hills, pinot has more of a black-fruit character," he said. Think blackberries instead of strawberries or plums.

Greg Brewer makes some of the best chardonnay and pinot noir in the Santa Rita Hills. His wines -- whether under his Brewer-Clifton label; under the label of Melville winery, where he is the winemaker; or under his own separate label called Diatom -- pulse with energy and somehow convey a sense of purity. Brewer credits his minimalist winemaking style. For his chardonnay, he uses either non-oak or neutral (used) barrels, and he avoids malolactic fermentation and lees stirring, two techniques that yield California chardonnay's traditional rich, buttery profile.

"I get a lot of inspiration from sushi chefs," Brewer said. "They say that every time you touch the fish, you take something away from it. Stirring the lees would be like banging the fish against the table."

Richard Sanford of Alma Rosa Winery is celebrating his 40th year as a winemaker in the Santa Rita Hills. And though he makes some of the region's best chardonnay and pinot noir, he is also producing some top-notch pinot blanc, an underappreciated variety wherever it is grown. Like Brewer, Sanford expressed a Zenlike appreciation for his wine. "I like the emptiness pinot blanc has, with a modest varietal flavor," Sanford said as we tasted his pinot blanc from the Santa Rita Hills.

He was the one being modest. The wine seemed pretty mouth-filling and delicious to me.

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