



Interview with Richard Sanford, by Michael Cervin  
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-What prompted you to pursue winemaking as a career? If not winemaking, what path would you have chosen?

Upon returning from military service in Vietnam in 1968 I wanted to pursue an activity more connected with the land. During my tenure in the Navy I had been introduced to a wonderful Volnay by a fellow naval officer. That became my inspiration to pursue a career in agriculture and chose winegrowing to attempt to duplicate the quality of that wine. After 40 years as a winegrower I cannot imagine any other path.

-Describe your winemaking philosophy

I have always been interested in the Burgundy varieties of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir and have looked to the traditional French methods of wine production. I believe that the focus should be on growing quality grapes and monitor the progress of the winemaking with little intervention. I believe the finest wines come from excellent quality grapes respectfully treated and in the case of Pinot Noir, open top fermentation, manually punched down, and ageing in French Oak. Balance and elegance are more important to me than impact.

-What wine varieties would you like to see the public embrace more fully?

Wines that compliment food. Lower alcohol Pinot Noir, bright acid Chardonnay, and dry Riesling. I do not embrace sweetness in dry table wines.

-Much has been written and debated concerning the 100 point rating scale. Some say it has empowered consumers, others claim it has distorted wine prices, while still others say it has actually changed the quality of wines being produced. What do you see as being the long term impact of the 100 point rating system?

The 100 point rating system does not encourage consumers to trust their own palate. The difference between an 88 rating and a 91 rating is rather subjective and will differ largely with different tasters. Some winemakers make their wines for the benefit of a few wine writers and are not true to their own taste. I prefer a more general approach to “like” or “dislike” with a series of + (plus) or – (minus) to reflect general quality.

-Rising wine alcohol levels in U.S. and foreign wines concern winemakers and the public. What are your thoughts on the subject?

I believe the most important aspect of wine is balance. Alcohol in wine is directly related to ripeness of the grapes, the higher the sugar in the grapes the higher potential alcohol. Recently there has been a movement toward extreme grape ripeness, consequently higher alcohols. I believe over ripe grapes often produces “hot” wines and particularly prune or raisin Pinot Noir. I am a proponent of lower alcohol, better balance, and raspberry fruit in Pinot Noir rather than prunes or raisins.

-You were the very first to plant in the now recognized Santa Rita Hills in Santa Barbara County in 1972. What was the impetus to plant grapes in what was then a remote and obscure area?

My college degree was in Geography from UC Berkeley. After my Vietnam experience, and deciding to pursue the production of Pinot Noir, my prejudice was that Pinot Noir was planted in areas of California that were too warm. I studied the climates of Burgundy and researched the entire west coast of North America for the perfect growing climate. With my Geography background I recognized that the Transverse Mountain Range of California, north of Santa Barbara was a unique geographic anomaly, trending east to west. The westerly winds of the region blowing on shore create a cool maritime climate I felt perfect for the production of Pinot Noir. I located my vineyard site first with maps, then qualified it with a thermometer, and chose a property with well drained soils.

-You served your country in Vietnam. How did that impact you later as a winemaker?

Upon my return from Vietnam I did not realize the impact of our culture rejecting the servicemen and women who served in the war. My response to that rejection was to abandon the culture and commit to a life in nature. I spent years driving my tractor tending my new vines. I did not realize at the time that I was on a spirit-quest. I developed a great respect and affinity for nature and ultimately a spiritual connection with the Eastern Philosophy of Taoism. That experience and realization of non-attachment has had profound influence on my respect for the quality of the grapes and allowing the grapes to express into wine without intervention.

-Your original winery Sanford, still exists, but was bought out, and now you own and operate Alma Rosa, so you've seen a lot of changes. What has been the toughest learning curve for you in the wine business?

I entered the wine business young, still in my twenties and without the economic wherewithal. Financing has always been my biggest challenge whether banking or equity partners. I have learned that regardless of outward appearance there are people who do not share the same value system. Additionally, recognizing that we have no control over consumer whims and the marketplace.

-What would be your best advice for a new winemaker?

Follow your dreams; dream big. Anything is possible. Be respectful of all points of view and do not take negative comments about your wine personally. Never, ever, compromise your values. Make no apologies for your wines.

-You have championed the use of sustainable and organic farming, even bringing in elements of feng shui into your winery. How important is that to you and do you feel the wines truly benefit from it?

As a novice winegrower I was using conventional agricultural methodology. We were growing our garden organically and my wife, Thekla, encouraged me to pursue organic farming of grapes. I was at first timid, however, began to research growing methods used before the chemicals were invented, before World War II. In two years we weaned ourselves of all pesticides and ultimately became the first certified organic vineyard in Santa Barbara County. I believe we all have a responsibility to preserve our environment for future generations. Winegrowing in harmony with nature provides healthy vines and ecosystems. I believe the vines benefit from the natural rhythms of nature and the resulting wines are truer to character.