



With Organic Focus, Vintner Is a Quiet Revolutionary

By Dave McIntyre
Wednesday, August 26, 2009
Washington Post

Richard Sanford is in his third incarnation as a winemaker. For a follower of Eastern philosophy who practices tai chi and considers himself a spiritual Taoist, reincarnation is not a far-fetched concept.

He's a California wine pioneer, among the first to plant pinot noir in Santa Barbara County in the 1970s as a fledgling vineyard owner. He walked away from his second winery in 2005 in a dispute with his business partners over organic viticulture. Today, as winemaker and co-owner with his wife, Thekla, of Alma Rosa Winery & Vineyards, he is part of a growing counterrevolution in California wine.

Richard Sanford's Alma Rosa Winery produces good-value organic wines. (Photo By Roe Anne White)

Sanford is a quiet apostle of organic wine: grown and made sustainably. He spurns the excessive alcohol levels prevalent today, preferring elegant wines that play well with food over blockbusters that win high scores from critics. And he prices his products affordably; though not cheap, they are uniformly good values.

He's a soft-spoken man in his late 60s who still carries the bearing of a Navy veteran from a three-year stint as a destroyer navigator during the Vietnam War. That experience shaped him in other ways, as well; already inclined to a profession tied to the land from studying geography at the University of California at Berkeley, Sanford was drawn to the solitary farming life when he returned home in 1968.

"I had rejected the culture that sent me to that war, and people here at home were rejecting those who had been drafted and gone to fight it," Sanford recalled recently. "It was not a comfortable adjustment."

Sanford's love of wine was kindled by a bottle of Volnay, a leading Burgundy, that a friend had given him. From that bottle, he knew he wanted to grow pinot noir. Combing the state with a pickup truck and a thermometer, Sanford realized that the east-west mountain ranges of Santa Barbara County drew cool air off the Pacific and moderated the Southern California

temperatures. The cooler western areas of these valleys, he concluded, would be ideal for growing pinot noir. The Sanford and Benedict Vineyard, co-owned with Michael Benedict and bankrolled by investors, was the first one planted in what today is known as the Santa Rita Hills viticultural area. He was not solitary for long. Other vintners followed his lead, and Santa Barbara County, now known for its starring role in the 2004 movie "Sideways," became famous for its pinot noir.

The Sanfords expanded their vineyard holdings in the 1990s, at about the same time they embraced organic viticulture. Moving to organics fit their philosophy but was a tough marketing decision.

"I was shy about talking up organic farming in those days because people didn't like it. They believed the wines oxidized easily," Sanford recalled. "Now, organic is very much a positive."

As the new winery, called Sanford, prospered, he expanded production and built a state-of-the-art facility. It was completed just before the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks sent the fine-wine market spiraling downward. It was not a good time to be in debt, and Sanford took on a majority partner who did not share his enthusiasm for organic farming and wanted to return the vineyards to conventional viticulture. In 2005, the Sanfords left their namesake winery and started Alma Rosa. Fortunately for them, they had kept some of the vineyards in their own name rather than the winery's, and their new venture was based on the vineyards they still owned. (Sanford is reluctant to discuss the schism, citing a nondisparagement agreement, other than to say that the dispute centered on whether to remain organic.)

Starting over on a smaller scale, the Sanfords are producing wines that buck the current California trend of big, syrupy monsters, especially with pinot noir. He picks the grapes a little earlier to avoid high alcohol, uses less new oak than most wineries do and avoids the secondary malolactic fermentation in all of his white wines to preserve freshness and fruit flavors.

"When I was a young winemaker, I wanted to make big, bold, 'statement' wines," Sanford said. "This time around, we have an opportunity to have a whole new palate. Instead of imposing a style on these grapes, we decided to preserve their natural high acidity and freshness and create wines that are really focused on the quality that can be achieved from our region."

Sanford was wrong about one thing: His wines definitely make a statement. They speak loud and clear for organic viticulture, moderate alcohol levels, gentle oak aging and pure expression of fruit.

Dave McIntyre can be reached through his Web site, <http://www.dmwinline.com>, or at food@washpost.com.