



Alma Rosa – The Valley of Giants

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How do you measure a man? How do you judge his life's work? Is it by wealth, by notoriety, the opinions of others? For the banker, is it by the quantity of his assets, or the doctor by the lives he saved? What about the winemaker, is it his vineyard, his winery, his wine?

How do you measure a man?

It is a personal question that is shaped by our social and moral upbringing. Throughout the ages, man has admired men for their bravery, their acts of love, their knowledge, and their art. Each culture sets its own unwritten code of admirable values and accomplishments. Some are genuine accomplishments, while others are pure vanity, like striving after the wind.

They say, show me a man's friends and I will show you the man, but what of a man's heroes, his inspirations? I have asked that of winemakers throughout California, "who has inspired you?" There has been inspiration in wine's rich history, in those who came before. Others find it in their mentors both past and present. Some, in a husband or wife. However, many have told me they find inspiration in a soft-spoken pioneer of grape growing from the Santa Rita Hills, Richard Sanford.



Richard has accomplished much in his decades as a Santa Barbara County grape grower. Probably most notably, he was the first to plant Pinot Noir there, leading a revolution in grape farming that eventually lead to

the recognition of the Sta. Rita Hills as one of the greatest Pinot Noir regions in the County. He is rightfully referred to by many as the Godfather of Pinot Noir in Santa Barbara County.

His legacy includes Sanford and Benedict Winery and later Sanford Winery, which although still bears his name no longer holds any relationship to Richard. In 2005, he started a new venture, Alma Rosa. His focus remains on sustainably produced Pinot Noir and a few aromatic whites. For forty years he has studied the craft of winemaking and has done so with constant attention to his environmental impact on the land. He was the first grape farmer in the County to be certified organic and his vineyards are farmed to keep a balance between economic and environmental sustainability.

Richard will find part of his legacy in Pinot Noir; there is no doubt about that. But that is just one brush to paint a man with. The story, like any good one, is filled with love and loss, joy and sadness, success and disappointment. But as humans go, it is our experiences that shape who we are, like many waters over the face of a rock.

So, how do I tell a story that begins with a young man disillusioned from the horrors of Vietnam and forty years later is still unfolding? I have concluded that I don't. I let Richard tell it.

The story starts with Richard still serving in the Navy. "I had been introduced to a really wonderful Volnay by a shipmate of mine named Scott Wine of all things. I did not come from a wine drinking family, but when I came out of [Vietnam] I thought I wanted to be involved with something more earthly connected after the war. It was not a good experience. The rejection the soldiers faced coming back was not great during the Vietnam War, it was awful in fact. So I sort of rejected the culture that sent me to the war and did something sort of counter culture and decided I have to be involved with agriculture. I wanted to be involved with something that got better with age and after tasting the Volnay, if I could make something that had the texture of velvet that got better with age, why not?"

"It sounded interesting and challenging, but what grape would I grow? Well I had had the Volnay and I had never had a California Pinot Noir that was anything in comparison to that. I developed my own personal prejudice [against] Pinot Noir being grown in climates that were too warm."

The desire to create a Pinot Noir of the quality found in Burgundy lead Richard to search out cooler climates to plant his own vineyard. In addition to making a choice on where he would grow grapes, he also had to decide how he would learn to do it. Although his studies in geology and geography at Berkley had instilled in him an interest in the land, he still needed an education in grape growing and winemaking.



“I decided I could go to [UC] Davis and in four years have a degree or I could do my own research and in four years have grapes. So I decided I would try and learn everything I could about wine growing and winemaking...I read every book I could find... I went back in the climate records for a hundred years in Burgundy and compared the climates of Burgundy with different places in California and something rather dramatic in my research came out. That here (the Sta. Rita Hills) these coastal valleys of the transverse mountain range opening to the west, to the ocean, allowed the maritime winds to come ashore and moderate the growing climate. I started driving up the valley here with a thermometer in my car and everybody said, “this persons gone crazy.” I determined there was a [favorable] band of climate of about two to four miles wide.”

“I then began to look around for land in this band of climate and came upon the Sanford and Benedict vineyard. It was sort of a derelict bean farm at the time and was just being farmed with horses...I located the place and stepped into this guy’s office and offered him a bunch of money and he said, “yes.” So I had to go and *find* the money. He was very supportive of what we were trying to do...I found some investors and planted 60 acres of grape vines.”

“The property had never been electrified so we had to install gaslights. I lived there for six years with gaslights and driving around on a tractor getting the vineyard established. For me, it was a very important healing experience after the war and it’s become a very important spiritual connection [as well].”

“Along with the rejection faced by the soldiers and sort of a rejection of the culture, religion and the spiritual part come into play. So I rejected the religion I grew-up with. Very few people have the chance to have a clean slate and start over again when they are more adult. But I started right over and developed a great affinity for nature and a connection with nature. It wasn’t until long after, after reading Huston Smith and Joseph Campbell that I began to learn more about spirituality and I began to study Tai Chi and Taoism. I consider myself a spiritual Taoist. So, just the whole experience has been spiritual for me. And what a place to be when you look outside and see the softness of the hills, I just think we are so lucky to be here.”

“In 1976 we (Sanford and Benedict) finally had a Pinot Noir that was just stunning and I was so excited about it! That’s the way it was supposed to happen, it was supposed to be good because it had been planned that way. Victor ([Gallegos of Sea Smoke](#)) in fact asked me if I was surprised of what happened in this area? No, I am not surprised, because that was the point.”

In time, Richard found his partnership with Michael Benedict strained, noting it was “hard to make wine by committee.” His wife Thekla came along in 1976, in time for their first harvest, and by 1980 they decided to leave the Sanford and Benedict partnership. In 1981, they started the Sanford Winery, utilizing the cellars of the Edna Valley Winery in San Luis Obispo for their first two vintages.

“Then we moved all the tanks and equipment down to Buellton and Bruno d’Alfonso, who was the assistant winemaker for Edna Valley, came to be our winemaker and was our winemaker for 25 years. I finally built the winery of my dreams at the Rinconada Ranch and if there was any time to not be deep in debt with a new building, it was 9/11. We had to take on a marketing partner and it turned out that my wife and I had a different set of values and we chose to leave and start a new winery to focus on sustainable issues.”

Many are probably unaware that Richard no longer has any ties with the winery that bares his name. The Sanford Winery leaves the split ambiguous, removing any reference to the name Richard, making statements like “In 1971 Sanford Winery and Vineyards discovered an overlooked, grape-growing treasure in the Santa Rita Hills,” and “Sanford planted the area’s first Pinot Noir in its Sanford & Benedict vineyard.” But is important to Richard and Thekla that people know they have no connection with the winery they designed and built.

It is a part of Richard’s history that many would see as tragic, but he sees positives in the experience. “It’s a beautiful place,” he says, referring to the Sanford winery. “I feel very grateful to have had the experience of

designing and building it. It is state of the art from an environmental standpoint and that will be there for a long long time, and you know, ownership will change.”

The split from Sanford came with “interesting twists and turns,” but it has also given Richard another chance to start over, to make the wines he wants to make and farm the land the way he wants to farm it. For Alma Rosa, it means looking after their vineyards with sustainability in mind. “I have learned with organic farming, the most important thing is that the farmer thinks it’s possible,” he says referring to the importance of not getting set in your ways.

“It’s entirely possible, but some people have a mindset it’s not going to work. Thekla encouraged me to pursue organic because we were eating from our organic garden and I had been driving around a tractor thinking about how grapes were grown before the second World War, before all of these chemicals were invented. So I began to look back and see that people were taking care of weeds by mechanical methods, not by spraying. So I began to research that and decided we would attempt to convert to organic growing and sure enough we have been organic ever since. That was maybe 25 years ago.”

As we drove through his La Encantada Vineyard, half unpruned and wild, we passed along a high ridge that looks down on the Sanford winery below. It could be seen as a sad view for Richard, a reminder of what once



was, but he used the observation point to show me the area behind the winery where he and Thekla dedicated

130 acres as a permanent nature preserve. For Richard, being stewards of the land goes beyond organic farming, to include blue bird boxes, and breeding programs for native birds of pray. It is what keeps Richard from building fences to keep deer out, because being a true steward of the land means allowing a place for nature.

Throughout the vineyard runs passageways of wild grasses and shrubs, “corridors” as Richard referred to them where nature can have refuge from the business of man. “I think we have to be in harmony with nature,” Richard tells me as we pass through one of the corridors with scrappy dry vegetation on either side of us. “I like to leave some native [space]. You see some vineyards where everything is cleaned off. I prefer to leave little bits of native grass or chaparral so the native beneficial insects have a home.”

The La Encantada Vineyard occupies my favorite part of the Sta. Rita Hills. Directly across the Santa Ynez River from Sea Smoke, I enjoyed the opposite view from the one I had been privileged to see from high over the Sea Smoke vineyard. From a hill on Richards property you can look west to the Pacific beyond, its thick gray smoke lurking at the gate of the valley waiting for it's time to creep in and smother the sunshine we were currently enjoying. It is a spectacular place and a special vineyard.



We drove the few miles on Santa Rosa Rd. back to the Alma Rosa tasting room. There, in the golden sunlight, as I we walked back towards the humble, but wise building with its ancient cacti that rise from the earth like ancient hands in supplication to God, I could think of only one thing to say to Richard, "this fits you." He smiled and said, "it's not trying to be something it's not, and that's the important thing."

Adjacent to the tasting room stands a small grove of Redwood trees Richard planted decades ago. They now form a small wooded cathedral where visitors can take refuge in the majestic tree's shade while enjoying lunch at a picnic table. Although they are quickly outgrowing their neighbor oak trees, they are hardly the giants they are destined to become. When we look at a grove of giant redwoods, we assume they have stood as giants for all time. It is the same for great wine regions. We assume Bordeaux has always been Bordeaux, Burgundy has always been Burgundy.

One day, the shadows of what will then be the mighty redwoods will cast themselves deep into the small valley where Richard planted them. Long gone, will be any memory of their infancy, they will stand as if there forever. Will it be that people will then think, "there has always been Bordeaux, there has always been Burgundy, and there has always been the Sta. Rita Hills?" Only time can say. But the region, which Richard also helped to plant, is sure to grow, beyond its current infancy.

If I have come off as overly praise worthy of Richard, it is only because we all too often forget to praise human kindness. We praise financial brilliance, we praise physical or creative achievement, but we as a whole fail to praise human kindness nearly enough. Richard is an incredibly warm and generous man.

How will Richard be judged by time, as a winemaker, as a man? When winemakers would tell me they were inspired by Richard, it wasn't solely because of his pioneering work with Pinot Noir, it was because of who he is as a person. It isn't a put on kindness, but a genuine interest in others that has endured both Richard and his beloved wife Thekla to many. During my time with him, he greeted everyone in his tasting room, introducing himself with a kind smile and a handshake. Then he would turn towards me as if I was a long lost companion and tell his guests, "this is my friend Wayne."

There is a poem by Sam Walter Foss that I recalled after my time with Richard, it's called "House by the Side of the Road":

*There are hermit souls that live withdrawn
In the place of their self-content;
There are souls like stars, that dwell apart,
In a fellowless firmament;*

*There are pioneer souls that blaze the paths
Where highways never ran-
But let me live by the side of the road
And be a friend to man.*

*Let me live in a house by the side of the road
Where the race of men go by-
The men who are good and the men who are bad,
As good and as bad as I.
I would not sit in the scorner's seat
Nor hurl the cynic's ban-
Let me live in a house by the side of the road
And be a friend to man.*

*I know there are brook-gladdened meadows ahead,
And mountains of wearisome height;
That the road passes on through the long afternoon
And stretches away to the night.
And still I rejoice when the travelers rejoice
And weep with the strangers that moan,
Nor live in my house by the side of the road
Like a man who dwells alone.*

*Let me live in my house by the side of the road,
Where the race of men go by-
They are good, they are bad, they are weak, they are strong,
Wise, foolish – so am I.
Then why should I sit in the scorner's seat,
Or hurl the cynic's ban?
Let me live in my house by the side of the road
And be a friend to man.*

There is a final quote that I had not worked in, but it was too good to leave out so I present it in closing. On reflecting on all he has done over these years and all of his hard work, Richard said this:

“It’s really a long term commitment, you don’t just do this in a year or two years, or three years, you know? Well here I have just blinked my eyes and it’s 40 years, that’s a long time. But, it’s just as challenging and interesting to me now as it was then.”

[Alma Rosa Winery & Vineyards](#)

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