

In new venture, veteran winemaker Richard Sanford stays true to himself

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Paul Gregutt
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<http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/ABPub/zoom/html/2008140346.html> Sanford Winery was an icon in the central coast of California long before its 15 minutes of fame in the movie "Sideways." You may recall tasting-room manager Chris Burroughs, the long-haired cowboy in the scenes filmed there. He's since moved on — along with the Sanfords themselves — and therein lies a story, and some very good wines.



Richard Sanford was a Navy brat, who spent some teen years in Seattle in the mid-1950s. He later graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, with a geography degree, did his own war service in Vietnam, and came home determined to pursue, he writes, "a more earth-connected occupation."

COURTESY OF ALMA ROSA WINERY
Richard Sanford checks on grapes at the La Encantada vineyard. Sanford and his wife, Thekla, founded Alma Rosa Winery & Vineyards three years ago.

By then he'd developed a taste for Burgundy, and set out to find a similar climate zone in California. Most people would head north, but what Sanford found — well before anyone else had made the connection to wine-grape growing — was a transverse mountain range, with valleys that ran east to west — in Santa Barbara County! There the Purisima Hills and Santa Rosa Hills, with the Santa Ynez River flowing between, created these unusual valleys, whose orientation conveniently allows cool sea breezes to moderate the otherwise too-hot growing conditions.

Sanford saw the potential to grow chardonnay and pinot noir, and with a partner he planted the Sanford & Benedict vineyard in 1970. A decade later, he and his wife, Thekla, founded their Sanford winery, making wines that ultimately paved the way for establishing the Santa Rita Hills AVA (appellation).

In 2002 the Sanfords entered into a business partnership with Chicago's Terlato Wine Group, a partnership that de-parted in 2005. Anthony Terlato's company now owns the Sanford winery, the Sanford & Benedict vineyard and a second estate vineyard called Rancho La Rinconada.

In retrospect, says Richard Sanford, the partnership "was probably a mistake." We spoke by phone as he was driving to his new winery, Alma Rosa. "It was a hugely emotional challenge to go through this separation," he acknowledged, adding "it was something we had imposed on us. We got involved with people who had a whole different perception about marketing and business. Thekla and I have our own personal philosophy, based on sustainability. It was very challenging for us; we were being asked to compromise our own values. But now, looking back, it has allowed me personally to focus on the quality of grapes coming from this region."

Fortunately for the Sanfords, at the time that the partnership dissolved, they had just begun bringing in grapes from a new vineyard, La Encantada, planted in 2000. Situated at the far western edge of the AVA, it's an exceptionally cool, 100-acre site planted to mostly pinot noir, with just a couple of acres each of pinot

blanc and pinot gris. In addition, the Sanfords retained ownership of El Jabalí (pronounced Ha-bo-lee), planted in 1983 at their home ranch property.

Both vineyards are farmed organically, the first certified organic vineyards in Santa Barbara County. They are part of an original 15,525-acre Mexican land grant called Rancho Santa Rosa. In Spanish, Sanford explains, *alma* means "soul"; the name Alma Rosa signifies that these wines are a reflection of the soul of the original rancho.

Already in their 60s when the Sanford winery and vineyards were sold, Richard and Thekla Sanford immediately embarked on a new venture. They made wines in a custom crush facility. (Under the terms of the breakup, their original tasting room was leased to the Terlato family.) It was a trying time.

"We erected a canvas tent inside a warehouse," Sanford recalls. "We called it Camp Alma Rosa." Finally, just a year ago, a new Sanford Winery tasting room opened, adjacent to the production facility, and the Sanfords were able to reclaim their original space. "So everything is the same except the name," says Richard. "It's been a huge and amazing transition; and thankfully we don't have to have partners."

Alma Rosa farms sustainably, with such labor-intensive practices as mechanical weed control (by plowing and hand hoeing), planting cover crops and using beneficial insects and sticky tape for insect control. No chemical herbicides or pesticides are used.

Production has quickly reached 20,000 cases, from both estate-grown and purchased grapes. The cool climate and bright acids of the AVA are reflected in these wines. The winemaking is elegant and sophisticated, emphasizing lightly ripened fruit (hence lower alcohol levels); natural acids, restrained use of new oak and modern packaging (screwcaps to prevent corked bottles and recyclable materials wherever possible).

"You learn a lot along the way," Sanford concludes. "I've learned this: Be true to yourself and without compromise, while being respectful of other points of view. It's pretty exciting once again."

Alma Rosa wines are distributed in Washington by Youngs-Columbia. Some back vintages are in stock locally; current vintages are available from the winery. If you stop by the tasting room, look for the guy in the cowboy hat — that will be Chris Burroughs.

Select wines from Alma Rosa Winery & Vineyards

Alma Rosa 2007 Pinot Gris; \$18. Spice, mint, light floral, crisp grapefruit, lime skin, cleansing minerality, persistent, melony fruit, lively mouthfeel

Alma Rosa 2006 Pinot Blanc; \$20. Bright, spicy, tart, melon and cucumber, Asian pear, lively and clean

Alma Rosa 2007 chardonnay; \$18. Good focus, mixed aromas of tropical fruits — pineapple and sweet citrus; hint of cracker

Alma Rosa 2006 El Jabali Vineyard chardonnay; \$30. Estate vineyard, refined and elegant, 25-year-old vines, pear/apricot fruit, tight, steely focus

Alma Rosa 2006 Pinot Noir; \$30. Smoke, light herb, tomato leaf, hints of jalapeño pepper, rhubarb and cherry

Alma Rosa 2006 La Encantada Pinot Noir; \$43. Young, tight, elegant, ageworthy, subtle complexity with rose petals, tart berry, saffras, earth and iron

More information: 805-688-9090 or www.almarosawinery.com

Paul Gregutt is the author of "Washington Wines and Wineries

The Essential Guide." His column appears weekly in the Wine section. He can be reached by e-mail at wine@seattletimes.com.