

# Alma Rosa Winery & Vineyards: Wines Without Compromise

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Richard Sanford proudly displays the Sta. Rita Hills AVA map, he discovered this region over forty years ago, which now produces world-class Pinot Noir wines.

*Patricia Decker*

Alma Rosa Winery & Vineyards is the culmination of Richard Sanford's lifetime of experience and passion. Sanford, a visionary pioneer, discovered the [wine](#) grape growing potential of what is now known as the [Sta. Rita Hills AVA](#) of Santa Barbara County almost a half century ago. Highly acclaimed, world-class [Pinot Noir](#) and Chardonnays are produced here, and Sanford continues his romance with these cool climate grape varietals. [Alma Rosa](#) focuses on crafting Burgundian-style wines, from Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, and Pinot Noir, sparkling and still. For Sanford it's a "matter of balance", elegant wines with fruit, structure, and spice, with their hallmark length, and amazing aging potential, these are truly spectacular wines worthy of a place at your table and in your home cellar.

Alma Rosa wines have an intense connection to the vineyards they come from, [El Jabali](#) and La Encantada, both located along Santa Rosa Road in the western Santa Ynez Valley. In fact, that is the origin of the [name](#), Alma meaning "soul" in Spanish, and Rosa referring to the Rancho Santa

Rosa land grant which originally included both vineyard properties. Made with the greatest care, these high quality wines truly embody excellence, and fulfill the promise of this unique terroir. Richard Sanford is the first winegrower in Santa Barbara County to have **California Certified Organic Farming** (CCOF) certified vineyards, coaxing the natural energy of the symbiotic relationship between the soil and vines into the intensely flavorful wines that he makes.

Today, **Richard Sanford** is the face of the label and winemaker in charge, assisted by winemaker **Nick de Luca**, and financed by Bob Zorich, the owner. **Alma**

**Rosa's story** started in 2005, when Sanford started anew after losing his Sanford winery. In the years that followed, he went deeper into debt with the purchase of these two vineyards and his home ranch. With the double whammy of the 2008 recession, Sanford filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2012, reorganizing the brand rather than giving up. Meeting Zorich led to a working relationship, and in 2014, Zorich bought the Alma Rosa Winery & Vineyards, freeing Sanford from the burden of debt and placing him where his legacy will shine, in the vineyards. On a rainy afternoon, next to the flickering fireplace in the **Alma Rosa tasting room**, Sanford reflected on his current situation.

“This new Alma Rosa, with our partner and owner Bob Zorich, allows us to make wines without compromise, we have the financial ability, we have the vineyards, we have the equipment, and so it's very exciting for me.” Reflecting on his journey, since leaving Sanford over a decade ago, he says, “I'm so grateful to find someone who resonates with me. It's a curious business, you watch people come and go, with all of the effort that I've put in, and the time intensive things, it's been a spiritual journey for me.”

His **journey** has been one of legend. A shared love of sailing brought him and Michael Benedict together, and a deep fascination with the wines of Burgundy fueled the dream, to find uncharted territory that would yield amazing wines in that vein. Together, they came to the conclusion that the cool climate of the western Santa Ynez Valley, seemingly unsuitable for growing wine grapes, was a perfect cradle for the finicky Pinot Noir. With lots of twists and turns in the story, and a parting of ways for him and Benedict, Sanford's deep ties to the land wouldn't allow him to walk away. He says, “I spent a lot of time on the tractor, the beginning of this journey was spiritual, what happened with Sanford & Benedict sort of amplified my perspective, sort of the karma of that experience.”

Ultimately Sanford left the Sanford & Benedict label and vineyard in 1980, yet he continued winemaking with bought fruit while he planted the Rancho El Jabali vineyard on his property, going organic before it was fashionable to do so. Returning to the Sanford Winery in 1990, he planted two more vineyards, La Rinconada and La Encantada. Pursuing his ideal of sustainable winemaking, Sanford built his dream winery, an eco-friendly adobe building with a gravity-racking



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system and a cellar that used zero energy to keep the wines at a constant temperature. Unfortunately, the winery construction cost over double the initial budget, and mired in debt, Sanford entered a deal with Paterno Wines International (since renamed Terlato Wines International). Over the next few years, that arrangement fell apart, and Sanford was forced to leave behind the winery, vineyards, and even his label name. When he lost any connection to the land he had farmed for 15 years, his wife, Thekla, told him, “you’ve got to give it up, it’s becoming an obsession.” With wine in his blood, Sanford started anew, creating the Alma Rosa label.

Zorich’s deep pockets has allowed Sanford to live the dream, virtually unheard of in winemaking, which weaves the romance of the grape with the stark reality of business. Whatever needs to be done can be done, and Alma Rosa can afford to do what’s necessary to make the very best wine possible. Sanford remarks, “I am so proud of all of our wines and I guarantee them, and I think each I enjoy for different reasons. The beauty of this selection of Pinot Noir wines we have, it goes the whole range, and depending upon what your food is, it’s important”. Sanford notes a personal favorite pairing is the El Jabali Pinot with salmon. And for him the hallmark of his wines are their length, “I’m not quite sure where that all comes from, it’s really respecting the integrity of the natural growing and winemaking, because we don’t do a lot to our wines, they just make themselves”.

Tasting through the current releases at Alma Rosa’s Buellton tasting room is itself a spiritual experience. A zen space, with an olive tree named “Olivia” at it’s center that is bathed in natural light from the overhead skylight, beautiful posters of both vineyards on the walls, and the energy of over century-old timbers resonating from the bar, tables, and benches, all elements link the pleasure of wine tasting to the natural world. Starting with what may be the newest sensation of the Sta. Rita Hills AVA, a sparkling wine is poured. The **2013 Brut Rosé**, 100% Pinot Noir from El Jabali Vineyard, is stunning. With a nose of strawberries and rose petals, this round wine lingers on the palate, the finish accented by a note of orange zest, this is a spectacular sparkler that continues to thrill with its long finish. Next up, the still white wines, starting with the **2014 Pinot Gris La Encantada Vineyard**, with a slight blush color, that is delicate and floral on the nose, yet viscous and mineral, with grapefruit notes, a beautiful wine for the price. The **2014 Chardonnay El Jabali Vineyard** is mouth-filling, with a lemongrass nose and juicy body. The Pinot Noirs, from different clones and vineyards, are intense and expressive. The **2013 Pinot Noir Sta. Rita Hills** is delicious, with plum and berry aromas and flavors, bright with acidity and sturdy with structure, a very good wine at an entry price point. The **2013 Pinot Noir Mt. Eden Clone El Jabali** smells of raspberry jam, a pleasant wine that has a bit of tannin that brings a depth to the wine. There are many more wines available, including a **Vin Gris** or still Rosé of Pinot Noir and a **Blanc de Blancs** sparkler from Chardonnay and Pinot Blanc.

The wines keep getting better and better. At the recent World of Pinot Noir event, Sanford poured a limited tasting of Alma Rosa library wines, to the delight of those lucky enough to get a taste. Bottled with screw caps instead of traditional corks, these wines had evolved in the bottle, yet retained their bright acidity and length. A smoky minerality had permeated the 2005 Pinot Gris and Pinot Blanc, and the vertical tasting of the La Encantada Pinot Noir, 2006-2008, was fascinating, with the 2007 my personal favorite.

The trials and tribulations of Sanford's winemaking career plays like a soap opera. Yet after each fall, he rises again, with determination and dedication to the wines he makes. Alma Rosa wines are the beneficiary, as Sanford says, " they are delicious, seamless wines, there is a lusciousness about them, a balance that just flows together". Richard Sanford is making the wines that speak to him, whose quality endures, and are truly wines without compromise.

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