

# Crawford Family Wines: Unlocking Varietal Flavor Part 1

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Mark Horvath of Crawford Family Wines proudly pours his 2014 Santa Barbara County Rosé, a blend of Pinot Noir and Grenache, for LA Wine Writers.

*Patricia Decker*

Would you like to have a master key that unlocks [wine's](#) mystical and magical properties? Crawford Family Wines believes in such a thing, that by producing focused wines from some of the best vineyards in the [Sta. Rita Hills AVA](#) of Santa Barbara County, you will taste what the region is all about.

**Crawford Family Wines** is Mark Crawford Horvath's pet project, who along with his wife Wendy, produce wines in the "garagiste" style, artisan bottles that express the world class character of the region. Very small production wines, made from purchased fruit, with minimal intervention, spotlight the fruit from these exceptional vineyards. Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are their specialty, but recently they have embraced



neighboring Ballard Canyon for their Rhône varietal blend of Syrah, Grenache and Mourvedre.

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It's a family affair for Mark and Wendy, winemaking at a very personal level. **Crawford Family Wines** allow them to explore a life-long fascination with wine, under the microscope of specific vineyard sites and wine grape clones. The skeleton key logo on the labels holds particular significance, as it is the core of their mission. Just like a master key, Mark explains that his wines are the "skeleton key that opens up different doors for everyone, something inside the glass that will speak to you", and will open your palate to the magical wines of the region.

It's been a long journey for Mark Crawford Horvath. After working 12 years in the hotel industry, he found his "creative side was stifled by the corporate culture". A friendship with Master Sommelier Emmanuel Kimiji opened Mark's door to wine, and he began to obsess about making wine himself. Immersing himself in wine education, while working at Carmenet Winery in Sonoma Valley, his passion grew. A chance meeting with young Santa Barbara County winemakers at a UC Davis Viticulture course planted new ideas. While visiting Clos Pepe's Wes Hagen in the Sta. Rita Hills, he saw the potential of this untapped area, and eventually made the leap, working as assistant winemaker for **Bryan Babcock**, who found his "insanity good and necessary for winemaking". But still craving his own creative expression, Mark started a side project, Kenneth-Crawford Wines, with his good friend Ken Gummere. They ultimately produced some of the area's most sought after wines for over ten years, notably Pinot Noir, Syrah, and Grenache.

Recently, Mark took the helm at **Tres Hermanas Winery** in Santa Maria, and it's been quite a learning experience. Producing over 22 different wines every year has honed his winemaking expertise. It's a busy life for him, in addition to being full time **winemaker** for Tres Hermanas, he consults and makes wine for five smaller production clients. Hands on for all this winemaking, Mark says "these wines have my signature but reflect the terroir and fruit", retaining their individuality. And then there's Crawford Family Wines, his intensely personal project with Wendy, a legacy for his family, and a chance to make incarnate all the wine lessons of his life.

Mark poured his wines and shared his story over lunch with the LA Wine Writers at **West Restaurant** in the **Hotel Angeleno**. Chef Laura Scollan created four small plates to pair with his six wines, offering a tapestry of flavors for the wines to play against.

First, the **2014 Crawford Family Wines Santa Barbara County Rosé** was poured, a beautiful salmon pink nectar, made by the saignée method, where the pink juice is bled off from a production of red wine as it ferments, concentrating the red, and essentially making two wines from one batch. This blend of 70% Pinot Noir (Bentrock vineyard) and 30% Grenache (Ballard Canyon) is aromatic, with strawberry fruit, good acidity and body, and a touch of bitterness on the finish. "Aromatics are so much of what a wine is", Mark says, and notes that the small amount of residual sugar in the wine helps mitigate the bitterness from the skins, which balances out the wine. "It's tricky to source fruit for Rosé", Mark says, because "price point is crucial". To effectively market the wine, it needs to retail for \$20 or under, but the regions' fruit is costly. Priced at \$18, Mark has achieved his objective but he's not sure it will be a regular offering. He doesn't plan to make this Rosé every year from the current fruit, but may earmark a new Grenache vineyard just

for this purpose, due to its popularity. The first course, Jumbo Garlic Shrimp over Lemon-Pepper Fettucini with Artichoke Alfredo sauce paired well with the Rosé, accenting the aromatics of this delicious wine.

The **2013 Crawford Family Wines “Tin Shack” Chardonnay, Rita’s Crown, Sta. Rita Hills** is very good, complex and extremely yummy! In Mark’s quest to produce the best Chardonnay of the region, Bryan Babcock offered him access to a parcel of fruit located at the highest point of Rita’s Crown vineyard. “I wanted to make a Chablis style Chardonnay with the richness of a Burgundy” Mark notes. Lean and mineral, yet round and textured, this Chardonnay is extremely well balanced. Lees aging lends a yeastiness and baking spice character to the wine; partial malolactic fermentation in neutral oak barrels brings out the richer flavors of lemon curd and creme brulée without the buttery, oaky quality of many California Chardonnays. Mark’s objective, “I wanted a spectacular range of crisp acidity within a round body, to coax the wet stone and lean snap from the fruit”, which makes for a complex wine. Beaming, Mark says, “I couldn’t be happier with this wine!” Mission accomplished! The second course, Prosciutto Wrapped Halibut, with Grilled Eggplant in Tomato Caper Sauce was excellent, balancing the yin and yang of this spectacular Chardonnay.

continued in **Part 2**

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**Patricia Decker**

Burbank Wine Shopping Examiner

