

Sanford Winery & Vineyards: Delicious Wines That Tell a Tale

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Michael Benedict, one of the original founders of Sanford Winery, enjoys their new Brut Cuvée.
Patricia Decker

Almost a half century ago, Sanford Winery & Vineyards' founders planted the first vineyards in this windswept corner of Santa Barbara County. It was revolutionary, groundbreaking, and visionary, it set the stage for the Pinot passion that transformed this valley, from bean fields and livestock, into rows of world-class grapevines. These vines, blanketed with early morning and late afternoon fog, their roots in crumbly Monterey shale, and grape clusters kissed by midday sun, are now known to produce profound [wine](#). But it wasn't always so. Once thought to be too cool to ripen wine grapes, it's now understood that this cool maritime climate supports a long hang time for the clusters, crucial to develop phenomenal aromas and flavors, while poor soils encourage the vine to struggle, and produce intensely concentrated fruit, all hallmarks of wines whose structure allows them to age well and transcend time.

The renowned [Sanford Winery & Vineyards](#) has a storied if not turbulent past. Almost 50 years ago, two men partnered their passion and individual strengths together in a journey of discovery. [Michael Benedict](#) and [Richard Sanford](#) took their dreams of winemaking into uncharted territory.

Inspired by the great wines of Burgundy, Sanford and Benedict were convinced that great wine could be made in Santa Barbara County's Santa Rita Valley. After taking air temperatures and studying climate charts, they persuaded investors with deep pockets to come along for the ride. Lady Luck dealt them a particularly fortuitous hand, over 400 acres of the original Rancho Santa Rosa Mexican land grant became available, a lease was struck, and vines planted in 1971. A five year experiment became a calculated risk, and in 1976, the inaugural Sanford & Benedict [Pinot Noir](#) was bottled. Upon release two years later, this wine took the wine world by storm, becoming an overnight sensation, a cult wine that defied the existing wisdom of where wine grapes could be grown.



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While the Sanford story itself takes as many twists and turns as Santa Rosa Road does in its winding journey towards the Pacific Ocean, Richard Sanford and Michael Benedict are the visionary pioneers that drew others to this valley. A quarter century later, this region was crowned with their own AVA, the [Sta. Rita Hills](#). Recognized as one of the premier spots for Pinot Noir in the world, [Chardonnay](#) also flourishes here. The original Sanford & Benedict vineyards planted the flag, and is recognized as one of the five most important vineyards in California by Wine Enthusiast. While Sanford and Benedict went on to other projects in recent years, many of these first vines still exist, producing world-class Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, with many producers clamoring for its fruit. Yet the current team behind Sanford is keeping back enough grapes to experiment, to continually improve the brand and strive for perfection in the wines. Since 2006, the [Terlato Wine Group](#) and winemaker Steve Fennell have sought to interpret these [estate vineyards](#), Rancho La Rinconada and Sanford & Benedict. Their current lineup of luscious Pinot Noir and Chardonnay wines reflect the ongoing care and vision of the founders, that these vineyards can make great wine, elegant, fruit forward, and food friendly.

On a rainy Spring day, the commitment to quality and the future was shared by [John Terlato](#), winemaker [Steve Fennell](#), and one of the original founders, [Michael Benedict](#). Terlato's goal for Sanford? "We want to make magical wines...to put wines on the table to appeal to the wine drinker, where the first visceral response needs to be, Oh my gosh, that's delicious!" With a glass of the [2015 Sanford Rosé of Pinot Noir](#) in hand, Terlato notes, "I taste this wine, some people could argue this is a simple wine, it is not, not by any means...it's seamless, it's integrated, it's balanced, and it's delicious". Bright acidity, vivid fruit, and a mineral tang make this salmon colored wine exciting and refreshing.

Leaving the warmth of the fire in the main tasting room, and touring the impressive [winery](#), you think, this is a winemaker's dream. Indeed it was Richard Sanford's, who built this future thinking, eco-friendly winery in the late 1990's, with its almost three-foot-thick adobe walls, 100-year-old redwood timbers, and gravity-racking system on hydraulic lifts to gently handle the young wines. The cellar interior maintains a perfect temperature for wine production, with zero energy use due to the thick adobe walls. The wines slumber in rows of stacked oak barrels, tended by the watchful

eye of Fennell and his crew, with cryptic chalk symbols on the barrel tops denoting which vintage, vineyard, varietal, and even block they came from. Comparing the three most recent vintages of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, Fennell notes, “The kind of thing that keeps me fascinated, as a winemaker, is that as much as we learn, there’s still so much we don’t really know, and why the wines from similar seeming vintages are very, very different wines...2014 made generous wines, 2012 and 2013 on paper were almost identical...but I think the wines are very different.”

Tasting through four **Chardonnays** from those years testified to that fact. All four wines were crafted in the same fashion, low yields from both estate vineyards, whole cluster pressed, with a varying percentage of new French oak barrel fermentation, there was a common thread to the wines. Aromatic, full-bodied, textured wines with vibrant acidity and racy minerality, finishing long and deep, defined them, with the warmer 2014 vintage having more tropical fruit notes. The **Sanford & Benedict Vineyard Chardonnay** distinguished itself with a flinty minerality, more savory than fruity, while the **La Rinconada** was richer, with a stone fruit profile. Fennell remarked, “What really surprised me here was how great the Chardonnay potential was”. While everyone is focused on Pinot Noir, Sanford has been adding to their Chardonnay plantings, producing wines that are delicious young, and some that beg for extra time in the cellar.

Turning to the star of the Sta. Rita Hills, the profound Pinot Noir requires lots of care and nurturing, which Sanford’s estate vineyards have had from the start. Planted with different clones, La Rinconada produces richer wines, while Sanford & Benedict makes more Burgundian-style wines, with structure and acidity. Three Pinots from 2012 offered rich berry and spice profiles, which Fennell says is the hallmark of Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir. All three were well balanced wines with ripe tannins and bright acidity, yet the different vineyards’ voice rang through, the **La Rinconada** had a meaty note and mocha accents while the **Sanford & Benedict** had dried herbal aromas, with more acidity. The **2011 Sanford & Benedict Vineyard Founders’ Vines Pinot Noir** was the most elegant, savory and complex, making the case for what older vines can bring to the table. This wine, made from the original 1971 plantings of Pinot Noir, has the promise of greatness, with even more time to evolve in the bottle.

And while the historic Sanford & Benedict vineyard is widely acknowledged as ground-breaking in the world of California viticulture, founder Michael Benedict believes that many more are waiting to be discovered. “I think that in Santa Barbara County, that most of the greatest vineyards have not yet been planted, they have not yet been discovered...There aren’t many people out there exploring, I think that’s what we did uniquely, at least in Southern California, actually systematically and intellectually trying to solve a problem, which was where is the best place to grow wine grapes”, observed Benedict.

Too cool to ripen wine grapes? The boundaries are being tested, and it’s a win-win for wine drinkers. Benedict thinks that outstanding sparkling wine is the destiny of the region from the Sta. Rita Hills west to Lompoc. Terlato has taken his cue, and Sanford has produced their first **Brut Cuvée**, the 2013 a blend of both estate vineyards, 78% Pinot Noir and 22% Chardonnay, vibrant and delicious!

While Sanford is an iconic winery, John Terlato continues to build on their reputation. He says, “We

experiment as much as we can, but it's expensive to experiment, and it's time consuming, but it's worth it. If there's a goal, it's to be the best in California". Looking to the future, he says, "We want wines that tell the tale of a place, that's what makes them powerful, that's what makes them memorable, that's what causes them to become multi-generational...you can theoretically have these wines be consumed by my grandchildren and your grandchildren, and still saying 30, 40, 50 years from now, they're delicious and they're relevant. That is the hallmark of a great wine, a wine that can transcend generations".

Taste for yourself, and visit [Sanford Winery & Vineyards](#), open daily at two locations:

The Winery (in the Sta. Rita Hills)
5010 Santa Rosa Rd
Lompoc, CA 93436

or

The Downtown Santa Barbara Tasting Room (in the La Arcada Plaza)
1114 State Street, Suit #26
Santa Barbara, CA 93101



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