

# The Stellar Wines of California's Sta. Rita Hills

May 26, 2016

1:16 AM MST

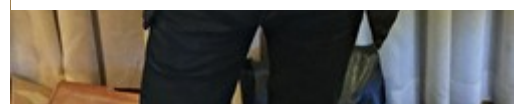
Premium [Chardonnay](#) and [Pinot Noir](#) thrive in this coastal valley of [Santa Barbara County](#), where grape clones and temperature differences define the many wines that are crafted here. This relatively new [wine](#) country was once thought too cool to ripen wine grapes, but it seems that the clusters love a long hang time, slowly developing more complex aromas and flavors. Known worldwide for their freshness, full body, and firm structure, these award-winning wines reflect the ocean breezes, fogs, and marine soils they grow in.

Forty-five years young, the [Sta. Rita Hills](#) is an infant in the wine world. The first vineyard, planted in 1971 by Richard Sanford and Michael Benedict, was a risky experiment at the time. Five years later, it was validated with their groundbreaking Pinot Noir. Other winegrowers followed, and liquid gold was struck, with accolades heaped upon the fledgling wine area, but somehow, it still seemed to remain a local secret. The first winemakers of this valley, pioneers of this terroir, were savvy to the fact they had something special. They pushed for official recognition, and in 2001, the AVA was granted. Today over 59 vineyards, planted on 2,700 acres, are home to not only [Chardonnay](#) and [Pinot Noir](#), but 18 other cool-climate loving wine grape varieties.

The [Sta. Rita Hills Winegrowers Alliance](#), with over 50 producers and growers, actively promotes the region and its potential. Not only is this area unique in its geography, climate, and soils, but the quality of the wines, especially Pinot Noir, are among the best in the world. Recently, a small group of winemakers came to LA for their annual “road trip”, highlighting the many expressions of the wines. Nineteen producers poured mostly Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, but also sparkling,



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rosé, and Syrah at The Wine House. With an emphasis on single vineyards and clones, the Pinot Noir wines were a revelation. Fruit forward, vibrant and mineral, these wines vary according to winemaking techniques and growing temperatures, yielding either riper or leaner wines. Many are boutique wines, made by “garagistes”, artisan producers who craft small lots of wine from bought fruit, some without a dedicated tasting room, and aren’t widely available, but worthy of seeking out. Wine festivals are the best opportunities to taste these wines, such as the [Garagiste Wine Festival](#) or the [Celebration of Harvest](#) in the fall.



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Of the producers in attendance, and apologies to those I didn’t get to taste, these bottles express the many nuances of the Sta. Rita Hills.

[Ave Winery](#) poured two “Founders Reserve” Pinots, Clone 4 and 777, from the 2013 vintage, and a Pinot that is a blend of four clones. All fruit is bought from the La Encantada Vineyard, one of the coolest sites in the valley. The bottle labels are beautiful and the wines really display the differences between a single clone and a blend of clones.

Greg Brewer represented two labels, [Brewer-Clifton](#) and [Hilliard Bruce](#), of which he is winemaker of both. Both Chardonnays are pure and elegant, with minimal oak, and a salinity that reflects the marine influence that shroud the vineyards, at the western edge of the valley, with the Brewer-Clifton more round and textured. The Pinots are vibrant, with the Hilliard Bruce richer and more structured. All of these wines are stunning, with the Hilliard Bruce bottles coming from the 2011 and 2012 vintage, where Brewer-Clifton came from 2013 and 2014.

Mark Horvath of [Crawford Family Wines](#) produces small lots of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Syrah that reflect the sense of place so prominent in the Sta. Rita Hills. The 2014 Tin Shack Chardonnay is bright, citrusy, and mineral, channeling the Rita’s Crown Vineyard. The 2013 Walk Slow Pinot Noir, a blend of two vineyards, and the 2013 Radian Vineyard Pinot Noir are a lens in which to focus on vineyard characteristics. The 2014 Syrah Zotovich Vineyard is remarkable, a great example of a cool climate Syrah.

Norm Yost of [Flying Goat Cellars](#) poured his whimsical 2013 Goat Bubbles Brut Cuvée, a fun and fresh wine. Three Pinots, two different clonal selections from the same vineyard, and a third vineyard that is actually a patchwork of smaller blocks, were sampled. All elegant, rich and structured, the 2011 Rio Vista Pinot Noir Clone 2A, 2010 Rio Vista Pinot Noir Dijon Clone, and 2011 Rancho Santa Rosa truly embody the spirit of the Sta. Rita Hills.

Three [Ken Brown](#) wines were poured, the St. Rita Hills Pinot, which is a blend of four top vineyards, and two single vineyard Pinots from 2013 La Encantada and Rita’s Crown Pinot Noir. These outstanding wines have great acidity and vivid fruit, with that mineral streak from the marine soils. Ken Brown is one of the winemaker pioneers of the AVA, and in addition to his own wines,

he works with other growers, experimenting with clones, rootstocks, soils, and winemaking methods, looking to fulfill the promise of Pinot Noir in Santa Barbara County.

Dan Kessler of **Kessler-Haak Vineyard and Wines** brought his A game. Starting with a 2014 Chardonnay, which is rich and creamy, with baked apple, poached pear, and citrus, and accented with toasty oak, he followed that with a vivacious 2014 Rosé of Pinot Noir, and the 2012 “Ohana” Pinot, all made from estate organically grown fruit. The 2013 Syrah, from the Lafond Vineyard, is all red berry fruit, pepper, and smoked meat, elegant in its structure, acidity, and tannins, an excellent wine.

Rick Longoria of **Longoria Wines** is another Santa Barbara County winemaker pioneer, making wine for the past 40 years. His wine style is more European than Californian, making balanced and silky wines that blossom with food. He poured a 2013 Chardonnay, a blend of three vineyards, and three Pinots, including one from his own estate vineyard, Fe Ciega. It’s floral, with dark fruit and an herbal accent, concentrated and silky with integrated oak.

Steve Arrowood of **Montemar Winery** is a true “garagiste”, sourcing fruit from 18 different vineyards that he either farms or leases. His small family winery produces 1400 cases of wine annually, and sells wine from their Lompoc Wine Ghetto facility. He and his wife Caryn poured three Pinots from the Sta. Rita Hills, of which the La Encantada Vineyard is a standout.

**Pali Wine Co.** is a relative newcomer, rapidly expanding their business over the past decade, buying fruit and making wine in a state of the art facility in Lompoc. The 2013 Huber Vineyard Chardonnay is classic, lemon and pear on the palate with mineral and saline touches. The 2013 Rancho La Vina Vineyard Pinot Noir is sweeter fruit and spice, with balance and acidity.

**The Hilt Wines**, a sister winery to the renowned Jonata, focuses on producing wines that are transparent of site. Two types of wine are made, the Old Guard, which strive for structured wines with good acidity and savory notes, and The Vanguard, more of a New World spin, with generous, fruit driven, powerful wines. One Chardonnay and two Pinots were poured, distinctive wines with a nod to the Sta. Rita Hills sites from which they come.

**Transcendence Winery**, a passion project of Kenneth “Joey” Gummere and his wife, Sara, sources fruit and makes limited quantities of cool-climate Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Syrah. Striving for elegant, complex, and structured wines, the wines are sold directly to the consumer through the winery, with a portion of the proceeds donated to several non-profit organizations. The 2015 Zotovich Chardonnay is fresh and vibrant, while the 2014 “F Street” and Kessler-Haak Pinots are aromatic and textured, a study in the unique micro-climates of the Sta. Rita Hills.

Many of these wines can be tried in various tasting rooms along the **wine trails** of Santa Barbara, Los Olivos, Buellton, and the **Lompoc Wine Ghetto**. Just 2 hours northwest of Los Angeles, it’s an easy day trip, or a fun weekend getaway, go and experience these amazing wines, and the vineyards of the **Sta. Rita Hills**.

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Burbank Wine Shopping Examiner