



# WINGROWING REGION ROUNDUP

BY

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## **The Happy Canyon AVA: Where Sunshine Powers Wine to Rival Bordeaux's Best**

*By Matt Kettmann*

In the early days of Santa Barbara County winemaking, the pioneers planted plenty of Cabernet Sauvignon, then California's go-to grape. But to their dismay, much of the region proved too chilly for the Bordeaux varietal, and the resulting wines were embarrassingly vegetative, smelling of green pepper with a taste somewhat reminiscent of asparagus. The region eventually evolved into other grapes, locating the hot spots for Syrah and Sauvignon Blanc and cool zones for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Then, as if discovering a long-lost friend, growers realized that the Santa Ynez Valley's sunshine-soaked eastern end was hot enough to keep Cabernet and its Bordelaise sister grapes quite happy. Indeed, winemakers quickly discovered that not only do the Bordeauxs thrive, but they're distinctively elegant, and so in 2009, the area — officially known as Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara — was granted its own appellation.

"It's unique here," said Doug Margerum, who makes wines for Happy Canyon Vineyards and Cimarone Estate Wines. "There are days when you feel the heat of the high desert coming down the hill and swirl with the maritime breezes. It's a pretty special place, and very much deserving of its own AVA." Margerum, who's been involved in the Santa Barbara wine business for three decades, credits the climate, soil, and steepness of certain vineyards for the quality shown in the Cabernet Sauvignons, Cabernet Francs, Merlots, Malbecs, Petit Verdots, and Sauvignon Blancs emerging from the region. "What's amazing here, and what I haven't seen that much in California, is that the grapes become physiologically mature and ripe before they get a tremendous amount of sugar," said Margerum. "That's pretty neat. We're actually waiting on sugar and not our ripeness, which makes for more elegant wines." Because of that, Margerum — who recalls the days when no one thought Bordeaux varietals would ever succeed in Santa Barbara County — explains, "Everyone is back on the Bordeaux varietal bandwagon and we're all having a fair amount of success."

Of course, it all began as "one big science experiment," explains Mary Beth Vogelzang, whose Vogelzang Vineyard grows the red Bordeaux grapes as well as a famous Sauvignon Blanc, Syrah, Grenache Noir, Mourvedre, and Viognier. "We had to stop starting!" she laughs, recalling the days when they'd plant anything to see what worked in Happy Canyon. Like their neighbors, they realized that the Bordeauxs excelled. "The fog burns off earlier in Happy Canyon, so we have a longer day of heat," she explained. "The beauty is that the heat manages to burn off the vegetative quality that had once been found in Santa Ynez Valley Cabernet. It seems to have disappeared in our AVA." Vogelzang's juice gets made into wine by a Napa Valley vintner, who believes that the AVA's wine is "very much a Bordeaux that's more toward the French style." Because Happy Canyon does not have the caché of Napa, Vogelzang is happy to offer a "value wine," but warns that could change one day. "As we keep working," she explained, "we're going to stand up against those Napa wines just as well as anybody else."

A newer kid on the Happy Canyon block is Grassini Family Vineyards, which was established in 2004, but winemaker Matthias Pippig understands the region's charm as well as anyone. When it comes to temperatures, Pippig explained, "We're almost identical to Calistoga, but we get a little more fog and cooler nights." The soil is also significant because it holds onto water fairly well.

“That’s important,” he said, “because Cabernet has such little berries that when it gets hot, they can turn into raisins rather quickly.” With the proper soil, Pippig believes they have the opportunity to develop a healthy root system that’s able to tap the water resources when necessary. Altogether, that allows Pippig to craft wines in a European style that “shoot for a bit more balance and a little more finesse.” And like the Euros, he’s not about to give away any secrets. “Just like in Bordeaux, we don’t really lock ourselves into 100 percent of one grape or a specific percentage each year,” he said. “What the vintage gives us determines what the blends are.”

Of the roughly 500 planted acres in Happy Canyon, Star Lane Vineyards occupies about 250, where vines span more than 1,000 feet of elevation and are planted on soils that restrict growth while ensuring intensity. So says Star Lane’s Kurt Ammann, who was formerly with Stag’s Leap in Napa. Describing how Happy Canyon’s late afternoon and evening warmth occurs during a significant grape growth period, Ammann explained, “If you don’t have enough of those peak point growing hours, you end up with wines that have a vegetal character. That’s not a good quality for a Cabernet or other Bordeaux, but unfortunately, it is the reputation that Santa Ynez has with those varietals.” Thanks to the new Happy Canyon AVA, Ammann said consumers can be confident again in Cabernets from Santa Barbara. And to the Napa veteran, Happy Canyon’s are even better, because of the “elegant acid structure” that occurs naturally. “We’re not having to add acid back to the wines like so many Napa Cabs have to do,” said Ammann. “That’s really going to be a distinguishing factor as the years go on.”

## **The Los Alamos Valley: A Middle Ground Between Western Fog and Eastern Heat**

*By Matt Kettmann*

For a region that lies between the cool Santa Maria Valley and even cooler Sta. Rita Hills, yet stretches east over the hills into the sometimes sweltering Santa Ynez Valley, it should come as no surprise that the Los Alamos Valley is able to produce wines that show off the climatic diversity of Santa Barbara County. From luscious Syrah and other remarkable Rhône grapes to promising Pinot Noir and celebrated Chardonnays to exciting plantings of Grenache Blanc and even Merlot, the Los Alamos Valley is a land o' plenty with a bounty found in bottling from throughout the Central Coast.

"It's versatile," said Louis Lucas, a Santa Barbara County pioneer who started growing grapes in Santa Maria in the early 1970s but discovered the Los Alamos Valley's potential in 1980. "It's right on the edge of being a cool district and yet it gets enough warmth to grow varieties like Nebbiolo, Barbera, and Sangiovese." So his Lucas & Lewellen Vineyard offers a wild blend of 16 varieties planted on about 300 acres, from Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc, and Chenin Blanc to Riesling, Gewurztraminer, Muscat Canelli, and Malvasia Bianca. "Pinot Grigio does exceptionally well there — it actually has some flavor and acidity" proclaims Lucas proudly, before adding, "But the Chardonnays and Pinots will surprise you in Los Alamos too. They're really good." He credits "heavy soils" for some of the characteristics, but explains that the valley "has a bit of tilt to it," so drainage remains optimal.

It can't be ignored that the bulk of the Los Alamos Valley's acreage is taken up by corporate wine houses, such as Beringer, Sutter Home, Meridian, and Kendall Jackson, who tend to focus on Chardonnay because of the favorable economics. Dale Hampton, who started growing grapes in Santa Barbara County with Louis Lucas in 1972, was responsible for planting most of that, and still maintains plenty of acres. "Los Alamos is a very good area to grow grapes," assessed Hampton, whose opinions are only hard-won. "You can have a mixture of stuff up and down that valley."

David Thompson boldly tapped into that mixture back in 1991, when he planted his family's Alisos Canyon property in Syrah, making it one of California's early acreages dedicated to the grape. In so doing, the Thompson Vineyard bucked the conventional wisdom that the Rhône variety must be planted in warmer climates, but his gut decision worked out. "There's a lot of little nuances and a whole mystery of terroir that makes a site," said Thompson. "For us, being on a hill with low vigor soils, the fog will burn off at the right time. Down the way, it stays foggier, and up the way the sun burns it off quicker. That just adds up over the summer." Today, Thompson grows 42 acres, most in Syrah, but also in Grenache, Petite Sirah, Mourvedre, Cabernet Franc, Pinot Gris, and Chardonnay, and sells his fruit to Jaffurs Wine Cellars, Tensley Wines, Dragonette Cellars, tercero wines, and Blair Fox Cellars, among others.

Over his 18 years of winemaking, Andrew Murray has grown fond of the Los Alamos Valley, particularly the Watch Hill Vineyard, where he sources one of his many annual Syrahs (and where distinctive Grenache is grown as well). “They might be sort of big wines as far as their tannic and alcoholic structure, but they have a semblance of cooler climate in the sort of aromas and flavors we get, the white peppers and the slightly floral note,” said Murray, describing the Los Alamos dichotomy. “It just makes a pretty Syrah, yet it’s a darn big Syrah.”

Another area that fits this dichotomy as well is the Cat Canyon area, just north of the city of Los Alamos. This area is home to both large and small vineyards, including Melville’s Verna’s Vineyard and White Hawk Vineyard, both home to many award-winning wines. Varieties successfully grown here include Syrah, Viognier – both Rhônes – as well as Burgundian grapes such as Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

## **Santa Maria Valley: Where Chardonnay Is Star for Old Guard and Next Generation Alike**

*By Matt Kettmann*

Due to the ocean-cooled climate and arguably the state's longest growing season, there just might be no better place on the planet to grow Chardonnay than the Santa Maria Valley, where winemakers held a first-ever symposium to celebrate that reality this summer. Whether a proud veteran of the old guard — which has been mastering the grape since the late 1960s and achieved recognition for the region as its own appellation in 1981 — or an excited member of the region's emerging next generation, Chardonnay plays a starring role in the valley that's given birth to such now distinguished vintners as Jim Clendenen, Bob Lindquist, Bill Wathen, Rick Longoria, and Chris Whitcraft.

Since the Santa Maria Valley runs east to west rather than north to south, like the Sonoma and Napa valleys, and opens directly onto the Pacific Ocean, there's a strong sea breeze that kicks up every day by about noon, dropping daytime temperatures, keeping the evenings chilly, and assuring that the grapes take a long time to ripen, which leads to full flavor development. "With this type of moderate climate and long growing season," explains winemaker Denise Shurtleff of Cambria, whose Tepusquet Vineyard was planted in 1970, "once the grapes ripen, the maturation process is slow and consistent, so we don't have much acid respiring out of the grapes like you do in a warmer region. That leaves a lot of acidity, which really makes for good balanced crisp wines. They can be drunk on their own, but they're very food friendly."

Nicholas Miller, whose family planted Bien Nacido Vineyard in the early 1980s, agrees. "There's a lot of character in the fruit itself," adds Miller, whose highly praised vineyard is widely sourced by the biggest names on the Central Coast. "The fruit seems to really stand up against the oak, and really shines through without being overshadowed by the barrels."

Jim Clendenen, who founded Au Bon Climat Winery in 1982 and began working with Bien Nacido grapes in 1989, is the most vocal proponent of letting these already perfect grapes do the work for themselves. "In the Santa Maria Valley," explained the long-haired Clendenen, "when you pick the grapes, the wine comes out balanced and elegant and age-worthy in the same way as the great white Burgundies. There's good minerality and good acidity." He's the loudest critic of other California winemakers who have oaked the varietal to death, which he says prompted the ongoing ABC ("Anything But Chardonnay") movement.

As such, Au Bon Climat wines are actually more popular in Europe, where finesse is appreciated. "California celebrates a whole different thing, in which heaviness is power," said Clendenen. "To me, that's *inelegance*." In his unabashed opinion, that trend is dangerous. "It's destroyed American Chardonnay's image," he argued. "People stopped drinking it because they stopped liking heavily oaked Chardonnays that put them to sleep after lunch." He hopes that the annual Chardonnay Symposium will shine a light on how to do the grape right.

Luckily for Santa Maria Valleyites who rely on such perfect fruit, there's a whole new breed of winemakers who learned from Clendenen and his longtime associate Bob Lindquist, whose first wine ever as owner of Qupé was a Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay from Sierra Madre Vineyard back in 1982. The Burgundian style of Chardonnay-making that Qupé and Au Bon Climat have been touting for nearly 30 years is now being replicated by the next generation, including Lindquist's own sons, Ethan of Ethan Wines, and Luke of Tres Hermanas Winery. "The style of Santa Maria Valley Chardonnay that both Jim and I have made has been influential on a number of younger winemakers," explained Lindquist. "If they didn't work directly with us, they saw and appreciated the style. They saw the potential here for the Burgundian model, which is to pick grapes with balanced alcohol, good acidity, and lower sugar."

One such protégé is Gary Burk, of Costa de Oro Winery and Gold Coast Vineyard. "Those guys introduced me and so many people to not only wine in Santa Barbara County but the entire world of wine," said Burk, who's spent many a lunch with Clendenen and Lindquist opening bottles from throughout the globe. "It really taught me to take a more worldly view of what kind of wine I wanted to make. They really helped me define a style for myself." For younger winemakers like Burk, finding that personal spin on winemaking makes all the difference. "When you're making a boutique level of wine," said Burk, whose production of Santa Maria Chardonnay and Pinot Noir is about 6,000 cases a year, "you try to find an audience for yourself. If an audience can identify you with a style, then you can find a niche and be successful."

And the Santa Maria Valley is one of the best places to learn about Chardonnay for any up-and-coming vintner because of such teachers as Ken Volk who founded Wild Horse Winery and now runs an eponymous label, Daniel Gehrs, Lucas & Lewellen's first winemaker, Chuck "Mr. Chardonnay" Ortman of Riverbench Winery, and Ken Brown, who founded Byron Vineyards and now runs his own label. "There's great camaraderie amongst the winemakers," said up-and-coming winemaker Ryan Deovlet, another student of Au Bon Climat. "It's a community, and we're coming together to represent all of Santa Barbara. There's definitely competition, but it's more about everybody pushing each other to raise the bar."

Someone who helped first pick up that bar is Bill Wathen, owner and winemaker for Foxen Wines, a centerpiece of the Foxen Canyon Wine Trail, which is an offshoot of the Santa Maria Valley. Evidence that the varietal can be done in more than one way, Wathen makes three Chardonnays each year, one block designate from Bien Nacido, one fermented only in steel for a crisp Chablis style outcome, and one from his own Tinaquaic Vineyard, which is dry-farmed. Since he started working the vineyards with growers Louis Lucas and Dale Hampton in 1978, and then went on to found Foxen with Dick Doré in 1985, Wathen has seen a lot change in the valley, with more types of clones being planted, original rootstock being replaced, and more people making wine. "It was a shotgun approach back then in the '70s," said Wathen, explaining that people were experimenting with every varietal, from Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot to Gewurztraminer, Riesling, and even Gamay. "Chardonnay is the varietal that took hold, even before Pinot Noir. A lot of us had the feeling that it was going to fade with the whole ABC, anything-but-Chardonnay, movement, but people are still planting it."

Indeed, the more rootstock, clonal types, and winemaker names change in the Santa Maria Valley, the more the cool climate, harvest-perfect grapes, and communal nature stay the same. Together, those factors ensure that the region will remain a shining star of Chardonnay into the decades to come.

## **The Santa Ynez Valley AVA: Experienced Region Now Siring Serious Sauvignon Blanc**

*By Matt Kettmann*

Though often considered a new guy on the California wine block, the Santa Ynez Valley boasts nearly four decades of winemaking experience, and the early years of experimenting with different grape varietals are finally paying off in big ways. That's especially true when it comes to the skyrocketing ascent of the region's Sauvignon Blanc, a grape that thrives in the valley's hot weather and proves delightfully intriguing by relaying distinctive flavors from vineyard to vineyard.

Few people know the appellation as well as Jeff Newton, who's been planting and maintaining the valley's grapes since 1984 as the owner of Coastal Vineyard Care. Overseeing more than 2,000 acres of vineyards, Newton has watched Sauvignon Blanc — which has been cultivated here since the late 1970s — slowly emerge as one of the region's world-class wines. "It's always been kind of an underdog and, in a lot of ways, it didn't get the respect that Chardonnay does," said Newton, but he confirms that there is an "extraordinary" *Sauv Blanc* "universe" extending from Happy Canyon in the east to Ballard Canyon in the west. "Within that universe, there are some very different wines, but that's where you find the greatest propensity for Sauvignon Blanc," he explained. "We've planted it further west, but the strength is really in that zone."

One of Newton's earliest clients was The Brander Vineyard, which also happens to be one of the first vineyards in the entire appellation. Fred Brander's family planted the property in the heart of the Santa Ynez Valley just east of Highway 154 in 1975. Three years later, the original vintage of Sauvignon Blanc won a gold medal at the 1978 Los Angeles County Fair, making Brander to be the first vineyard in Santa Barbara County to win top honors at a major wine competition with the 1977 *Santa Ynez Valley Winery* Sauvignon Blanc, made from Brander Vineyard fruit (by Fred Brander – SYVW's winemaker at the time). With the upcoming 2010 vintage marking the 33<sup>rd</sup> Sauvignon Blanc from Brander and 9,000 of its 15,000 annual cases still dedicated to the varietal, the winery and its 42-acre vineyard show no signs of slowing down on the grape, which it employs in seven distinct bottling each year, from single vineyard designates to intriguing blends.

"There are so many different styles of making Sauvignon Blanc," said assistant winemaker Fabian Bravo, who left a career in engineering to become a winemaker a few years ago and lucked out when Brander agreed to take him on as an apprentice. Bravo quickly learned about why Sauvignon Blanc does well in the valley's climate, explaining, "There is long heat during the daytime, but it still cools off every night, so it doesn't over-ripen the fruit." While Brander's estate wine offers a bigger bodied, rounder representation of the varietal, Bravo said the wines from the Mesa Verde Vineyard tend to be grassy, like those from New Zealand, and that the higher elevation Purisima Mountain Sauvignon Blancs feature a noticeable minerality. He also uses Sauvignon Blanc as a base for such blends as Cuvee Natalie, which uses Riesling and Pinot Grigio in a nod to Alsace; Cuvee Nicholas, which throws in 20 percent Semillon and some oak barreling for a spicier take; and Uno Mas, which sets a leaner, citrusy Sauvignon Blanc against the fuller bodied, orange peel nature of Grenache Blanc.

Another Santa Ynez Valley old-timer that offers a number of Sauvignon Blanc interpretations is Buttonwood Farm Winery, which has been a working farm since Betty Williams founded it in the late 1960s but became a vineyard when her son-in-law Bret Davenport started planting grapes in 1983. “Sauvignon Blanc grows so beautifully here,” said marketing director Sherrill O’Neill. “It has such a distinct and strong character. It can be very aggressive and very acidic, but Sauvignon Blanc from the Santa Ynez Valley has a wonderful tropical quality to it.” Of the 8,500 cases made from Buttonwood’s 39 acres each year, the meticulously farmed Sauvignon Blanc plays a starring role in three: the winery’s signature estate bottling, in which the highly acidic, tangy juice is balanced with a touch of Semillon; the “Zingy,” a 100 percent Sauvignon Blanc that is whole cluster pressed and presents hints of grapefruit and guava; and the “Devin,” which picks up a creamy toastiness thanks to the 42 percent Semillon and oak barrel aging.

Just up the road at Carhartt Vineyard, the same strong sense of family ties and hands-on farming power another strong Sauvignon Blanc program. There, on the small remaining slice of what was once the sprawling Rancho Santa Ynez, Mike Carhartt — a descendant of the Carhartt clothing company who left the insurance business to save his family property — runs the vineyard while his wife Brooke makes the wine and son Chase prepares to enter the business by finishing up his viticulture studies at Cal Poly. “We farm pretty intensively. I think that’s why our fruit is what it is,” explained Mike. “It makes a nice wine, but why? I guess I’d have to throw it up to the heavens and say that the climate is right. That’s how quality fruit is grown.” Like many vineyards in the Santa Ynez Valley, the Carhartt property also features plenty of other varietals, including Merlot, Syrah, Grenache, Sangiovese, and Petite Sirah, and all of their wines can be sampled at their intimate tasting room on the northern end of Los Olivos. Even with all those grapes, the Carhartts make a mere 2,500 cases a year, ensuring that utmost care is given to the vines. And he doesn’t sell any of his grapes. “We make it all,” laughed Carhartt.

Also on Alamo Pintado is Lincourt Winery, where their Sauvignon Blanc — which is fermented solely in stainless steel, boasts a nectarine nose, and tantalizes the tongue with cantaloupe and kiwi — is touted as the “locals’ favorite.” The quaint country home tasting room is surrounded by about four acres of vineyards, which were once planted in Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. But the vineyard managers recently decided to graft all of those vines over to Sauvignon Blanc, revealing that the white grape is excelling enough to bump other popular varietals.

To the west in Ballard Canyon, John Falcone makes wine for Rusack Winery, which produces a Sauvignon Blanc that blends grapes from the Rusack estate, the Valley View property near the Santa Ynez River, and the McGinley Vineyard in Happy Canyon. “The Santa Ynez Valley covers a pretty nice climate for a spectrum of Sauvignon Blanc,” said Falcone. “It was somewhat one of the forgotten varietals that is just now starting to get noticed.” Falcone explained that the Santa Ynez Valley’s first winemaking attempts nearly 40 years ago cast a shadow over the region because the area’s pioneers were experimenting with which grape worked where. “It all comes down to the right variety in the right place,” explained Falcone. “Santa Barbara kind of got a bad rap in the older days because a lot of the wrong varieties were planted in the wrong place, like Cabernet in too cool of a location.”

The rise of Sauvignon Blanc, then, is a definitive maturing point for the Santa Ynez Valley, whose winemakers and growers are now experts on what grows best where. Once the optimal growing spots were figured out, the vintners followed suit, allowing the grape's best qualities to shine. "More and more, people are just producing Sauvignon Blancs very clean, very crisp," said Falcone. "They're just pretty wines here. It's a good spot."

## **The Sta. Rita Hills AVA: Perfecting the Place of Pinot Noir**

*By Matt Kettmann*

By now, thanks to an Oscar-winning Hollywood movie and nearly 40 years of critic-pleasing experience, anyone who knows anything about Pinot Noir realizes that the Sta. Rita Hills is home to some of the most promising cool climate vineyards on the planet. Comprised of rolling hills and two east-to-west running valleys — one cut by Highway 246, the other by the Santa Ynez River, but both opening onto the blue Pacific, which delivers brisk breezes even on the hottest of summer days — the appellation is home to a divergent pattern of soils, patchwork of shade and sunlight, and dramatic elevation shifts that result in tremendous expressions of *terroir* in the most classic sense. A vineyard that grows berry-prominent fruit, for instance, might be right across the road from one whose grapes throw off more of a gamey flavor. While the exact formula for these variations happily remain a mystery, it's becoming increasingly evident that, as more and more winemakers turn to the Sta. Rita Hills for Pinot Noir, the region is perfecting Pinot Noir's sense of place.

The original mystery, of course, was where to grow Pinot Noir in Santa Barbara County. That was solved by the region's pioneer Richard Sanford, whose interest in the geography of wine compelled him to research 100 years of weather reports from Burgundy, France — from which Pinot originally hails — and then drive through the Santa Ynez Valley with a thermometer outside of his car window. "I was interested in finding a place that was cool enough for Pinot Noir," explains Sanford, who realized that Santa Barbara County's Transverse Ranges allowed such temperatures. "It's one of the few places in the world where you have such a dramatic climate change in such a short distance." Sanford, who now owns Alma Rosa Winery, planted Pinot Noir in 1970, and harvested the first vintage in 1976. "The Pinot Noir was immediately successful," said Sanford, who helped champion the move to get the Sta. Rita Hills named its own appellation in 2001. "That's one of the best vintages I ever made."

Those early years were formative ones for Richard Longoria, who entered Santa Barbara's wine business in 1975 as a winemaker for Firestone Winery's first vintage. "The stars immediately were the Chardonnay and Pinot Noir," recalled Longoria. "The Sanford & Benedict wines became an overnight sensation." Though he began buying Sta. Rita Hills fruit — working with Sweeney Canyon, Huber Vineyard, Mt. Carmel, Clos Pepe, Rancho Santa Rosa, and others — it would be more than 20 years from that first vintage before Longoria was able to plant his own vineyard in the region. In 1996, Longoria serendipitously met the owners of a little mesa that he thought was "picture perfect for a vineyard" at a barbecue, and by 1998, he'd planted the Fe Ciega — or "blind faith" — Vineyard. "I knew it was the right spot for Pinot Noir," said Longoria. "I was willing to stake my reputation on it. I felt pretty certain we would have great wine."

He was immediately vindicated in 2001, when he took the small amount of available grapes and made 12 cases. "It was immediately apparent, just from that vintage, of how unique the vineyard was," said Longoria. "It had this character that was unlike any vineyard around it. I was excited from day one." That character, said Longoria, resembles the coastal sage that grows on the coastal hillsides, but also features some animal-like earth tones. "That's the best I can come up with describing it," laughed Longoria, who was the first winemaker to stake a claim in Lompoc's so-called "wine ghetto," a spread of industrial warehouses where now dozens of winemakers blend their juice.

Though Stephen Russell graduated from UC-Davis with a degree in enology in 1960, he did not begin making his own wine until he planted a vineyard on Santa Rosa Road in 2001. Calling his operation Prodigal Wines — a nod to his return to the trade after decades as a veterinarian and academic — Russell planted mostly clone 667, and was happily surprised. “The vineyard just does wonders with that clone,” said Russell, explaining that it’s known for earthy, black fruit, and berry flavors. “Ours accentuates all of that.” Just down the road, however, Russell said that another vineyard’s 667 clone does not offer the same experience. “That’s one of the intriguing things about the Sta. Rita Hills,” he explains, positing that it might be the “strikingly different” geology of the appellation, which ranges from heavy clay to sandy loam to nearly pure diatomaceous earth. Whatever the reason, the terroir allows Russell to focus on making the more Burgundian style, “less in-your-face fruit-bomb” style of Pinot Noir. “Philosophically, we are committed to producing Pinot Noirs that are the more sophisticated, nuanced, lighter style than the heavy, overly extracted Pinots that are often seen from Northern California,” said Russell.

One of the most distinct aspects of the western Sta. Rita Hills is that diatomaceous earth, which literally crumbles out of the mountainside in some place. On what was once his family’s lima bean field, Peter Cargasacchi planted grapes atop those soils in 1998, and now his 45-acre vineyard provides distinctive juice to both veteran winemakers such as Ken Brown and the Hitching Post and relative newcomers like Dragonette Cellars. “The vineyard is literally growing in decomposing rocks,” said Cargasacchi, which allows for lots of drainage and a “devigorating” chemical composition. “The end result is very small berries, so there’s such a higher ratio of skin to fruit that you end up getting wines that have a lot more flavor and a lot more color and a lot more tannins, which means that they have a better aging potential.”

For Richard Sanford, this evolving understanding of the Sta. Rita Hills is only more proof of his foresight. But while he’s on the verge of celebrating his 40<sup>th</sup> year as a winemaker, Sanford refuses to dwell on the past. “Young winemakers have recognized that there is an allure to Pinot Noir, that there is a challenge, and they recognize that this cooler climate has the potential for really stunning wines,” he said of the emerging class of younger vintners. “There is a whole group of young enthusiastic winemakers who are really going to make a mark on the region. From a consumer standpoint, it’s only going to get much better.”