

PINOT NOIR ROMANCE

Who on earth would fall deliriously in love with the Pinot Noir wine grape? It is temperamental. Finicky. Unpredictable. And talk about demanding! The climate in which it grows has to be just so. And woe is the winemaker who wants it to be Everygrape, fruit for wines that fail to glorify its unique and kissably wonderful character. Why, Pinot Noir will have none of it!

There is someone for everyone. And the grape that is often considered...well, *special*, has a lover who romances it very, very well. In a tiny appellation within the larger terroir known as Santa Barbara County, California, there is a group of maverick, passionate winemakers absolutely besotted with Pinot Noir. They come from the Santa Rita Hills, an AVA known as Sta. Rita Hills to distinguish it from the 130-year-old Chilean label, Viña Santa Rita. And not only do they love the grape with their beautiful land – caressed as it is by cool ocean breezes and blessed by a long growing season – but these earnest and enterprising suitors of Pinot Noir's charms know all the right moves to coax out the grape's beauty, to glorify its soul. And how gorgeous it is because of it! Sip a Sta. Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noir and you can taste the passion...the

fun...and the very miracle it was to make – all the joy these vintners bring to the happy challenge of crafting Pinot Noirs that to them really matter.

Lucky us.

“Is there really anything else worth drinking aside from Champagne?” asks Brian Loring of the region's Loring Wine Company. Fly to the Santa Rita Hills for a fun-filled tour of this magical region and a phenomenal day or days of tasting the Pinots that a fast-growing number of local vineyards and wineries produce and likely you'll agree: is there really any other wine that can be so sublime?

Alight at Lompoc (LPC) or buzz into Santa Ynez (IZA). Make your way to the romantic **Wine Valley Inn & Cottages** (winevalleyinn.com 805-688-2111) in Solvang. The cottages are so charming! You'll be smack in the center of all the action. The Santa Rita Hills lay in the western end of the Santa Ynez Valley,

in the santa rita hills
of california,
a love story unfolds



LaFond Winery and Vineyards

between two other mountain ranges, the Purisimas to the north and the Santa Rosas to the south. At their closest point these east-west running hills are a mere 10 miles from the Pacific Ocean, source of the cool morning fogs and afternoon breezes that Pinot Noir grapes so adore. Though vineyards and wineries are scat-

tered everywhere off southerly Santa Rosa Road (a lovely, winding country lane) and northerly Purisima Road (and Hwy 246), relatively few have actual tasting rooms. But, oh, what a delight these half-dozen are! Off Hwy 246 there is **Foley Estates**, formerly a Thoroughbred horse ranch where the valley views from the winery –

housed in handsome stables – are as stunning as the Pinots uncorked for tasting. There is **Babcock Winery & Vineyards**, one of the oldest in the appellation. Here, winemaker Bryan Babcock, once lauded by the *Los Angeles Times* as “the most courageous winemaker of the year,” bottles wildly experimental (and delicious)

Pinot Noirs. Also there is **Melville Vineyard & Winery**, a Tuscan-style architectural marvel where moments spent tasting tantalizing Pinots feels like a vacation in wine paradise.

Cruise along Santa Rosa Road and stop in at **Alma Rosa Winery & Vineyards**, where Santa Rita Hills pio-

neers Richard and Theckla Sanford (they planted the region’s first Pinot Noir grapes back in the 1970s) offer palate-dazzling wines created using organic, sustainable agricultural methods. Or visit nifty **LaFond Winery & Vineyards**, where a family tradition of risk-taking continues. In 1962 Pierre LaFond opened the first

winery in Santa Barbara County since Prohibition; today the family’s winery bottles stellar Pinots popping with depth and complexity, as you’ll taste. Off Santa Rosa Road there is also impressive **Sanford Winery & Vineyards**. The stone and adobe winery, christened Rancho La Rinconada, is believed to be the largest handmade adobe construction built since the California missions, which style it honors. In the adjacent tasting room, you’ll sip – and delight in – Sanford’s pride: its Pinot Noir

Spend a day or two discovering these Santa Rita Hills charmers and the next, forget about designating a driver. The Danish-themed town of Solvang is dotted with maybe 15 to 20 tasting rooms, with three especially good for a Pinot Noir tasting adventure – all within two blocks of your romantic Wine Valley Inn garden cottage. There is lively **Bellissima Wine & Espresso Bar**, which uncorks bottles of Sta. Rita Hills’s best. Or drop into the **Tastes of the Valleys** “wine education center” inspired by the film, *Sideways*, and love the wine cellar ambiance and convivial company chatting and sipping by the fire. You might even join the action at the **Old Mission Company** tasting room, loaded with personality. In Solvang, a veritable wine adventure awaits you whichever direction you turn, and these tasting rooms pour Pinot Noirs from Sta. Rita Hills AVA wineries that do not have their own tasting rooms.

After all, the Pinot Noirs poured here reflect their makers’ character. Santa Rita Hills wineries were late to California’s wine game (the 100-square-mile Sta. Rita Hills AVA was established in 2001 and the earliest of 20,000 acres planted today appeared in the 1970s). But today they express the quirky, rule-breaking, risk-taking ways of vintners who, typically, run family enterprises utterly devoted to quality vintages. *Ultra*-quality vintages.

“I love Pinot Noir. It is a very sexy, seductive wine – like a woman,” says Kris Curran, founding and current winemaker of Sea Smoke Cellars who also bottles



New beginnings in Ovation Vineyards

personally “stylized” vintages under her own label, Curran Wines. Her partner of 16 years, Bruno D’Alfonso, who bottles his particular genius under the DiBruno and Badge labels, has his own take on the grape now bringing Santa Rita Hills acclaim. “A lot of people talk about how finicky it is, but I don’t see

it,” he says. “Great Pinot Noir is easy to make if it’s grown properly – there are no tricks.” It’s the soil and climate in this AVA, the region Curran and D’Alfonso blissfully call home to the quality of the Pinot Noir grape, as Bruno says, “beautiful.”

Beautiful. Just as you will find the

wines – and the adventure – when you set your heading to the Santa Rita Hills and thrill to the birthplace of indeed special Pinot Noir.

For information on wines and wineries of this thrilling appellation, visit staritahills.com. ✕

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