



WHAT TO DRINK



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## 5 Producers We Love In The Sta. Rita Hills

The best of the idiosyncratic coastal region that's producing some of California's most thrilling and nervy wines.

BY PATRICK COMISKEY

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► **What's the best wine region in California?** I try to avoid such questions. They usually devolve into popularity contests, with all the authority of a *Family Feud* survey. But I can tell you that the most diverse, the most idiosyncratic, the edgiest, and probably the most thrilling is the Sta. Rita Hills, in [Santa Barbara County](#).

We can start with the name, which contains a legally-binding abbreviation (Sta.) because a Chilean winery, Santa Rita, objected to a region by the same name; never mind that these hills had been beatified decades—no, centuries—before, around the time that the Purisima Mission was erected in 1787.

It's coastal, which is a California thing, except that here the hills that define the valley are transverse, running east to west instead of north to south. This leaves the inland unprotected, exposing the vines to the ocean and its proclivities—bracingly cool temperatures, persistent fog, prismatic sunlight, and relentless wind—the particulars of which differ from hillside to hillside.

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Those hills are themselves borne of the sea, sand, shale, clay, and vast mounds of soft fine white dust that are the exoskeletal remains of trillions of microscopic creatures known as diatoms. The result is one of the edgiest places to grow grapes in California geographically, geologically, and climatically.

As a region, the Sta. Rita Hills are, for “sunny” California, fairly inhospitable; prone to fog, year-round sweater temperatures, and winds that can warp the shape of trees (but which thicken grape skins). Once thought too cold for growing anything but artichokes and cabbage, the valley is arguably the Central Coast’s most historic for grapevines—not the oldest per se, but it is home to this region’s first grand cru. That would be Sanford & Benedict, planted in 1971 on a north-facing slope of sandstone and clay 13 miles from the ocean with almost nothing between. Richard Sanford and Michael Benedict, sailing buddies looking for “maritime French” features, planted the site to Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Their debut bottlings were lauded almost from the start. The property has proven to be one of the most perfectly situated in the appellation: cool but warm enough, and a kind of North Star for all the plantings that came after it.

Head west from the Sanford driveway on Santa Rosa Road, and you will lose one degree of temperature for every mile you drive. And for the last three decades that has been vigneron’s prevailing direction, as they test the limits of that cool climate with Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Syrah grown ever closer to the Pacific.

Those westernmost vineyards taken together—Memorious, Bloom’s Field, La Côte, Sous le Chêne, Bentrack, Radian, Parker West, Our Lady of Guadalupe, and The Joy Fantastic—form a frontier for vine growing that’s fairly unprecedented in California at the moment, with a flavor profile of bracing acidity, mineral tensions, and wind-infllected fruit-skin textures that read like a vanguard, introducing savor, texture, and complexity to California’s fruit-forward propensities.

This assignment limited the number of profiles to five, but the wines I love far exceed that number. So if I don’t mention Domaine de la Côte, Tyler, Chanin, The Hilt, Dragonette—to say nothing of the region’s OGs, Sanford, Ojai, Babcock, Brewer-Clifton, Alma Rosa and Au Bon Climat—I mean no disrespect. Each of the producers that follow are flirting in their own way with the edge, and channeling the vibe of California’s most exciting region.

## STA. RITA HILLS PRODUCERS TO KNOW

### Melville



Chad Melville, the second generation to run the pioneering Sta. Rita Hills winery Melville.

**Melville Winery** is an OG, as it was established in 1996, but for the last half decade it’s been breaking new ground. Twenty years in, Chad Melville—the founder’s son, who with his brother planted the vineyard—took over winemaking duties from the estimable Greg Brewer. In that time three things occurred: the estate vines got older, and in their maturity began to self-regulate. Second, Melville, who’d experimented with different winemaking styles on a side project called Samsara, pivoted the winery’s approach. Finally, the public’s pendulum of taste shifted away from wines with high alcohol and, in the parlance of the day, “gobs of

fruit,” and toward balance.

Melville has steered the brand away from its original riper style, reined in his fruit, embraced whole-cluster fermentations, and is making the best wines of his life. The house style is now more savory, spicy, fragrant, while small tweaks in the vineyard (and earlier picking times) have led to fresher, more authentic wines, more in common with Cornas than with Paso Robles. Case in point: the 2021 Donna’s Block Syrah (\$62), and its blackberry fruit core lined with sage and Sichuan pepper.

### Samsara

Chad Melville's side hustle was **Samsara**, a regional project focusing on Syrah and Grenache. In 2017 Melville sold, and Matt Brady stepped in as winemaker. Brady threw in with Rhône varieties and still makes several, until the siren songs of Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir and Chardonnay began to woo him—repeatedly. In fact he seems incapable of saying no to Sta. Rita Hills fruit when it's offered to him: he now works with a dozen vineyards from the AVA, spanning an impressive range of microclimates and soil types from west to east. Many go into his lineup of single vineyard wines.

Rather than flash, these wines are notable for their quietude, needing time in the bottle and air in the glass to rouse. And it is a marvel to watch them develop over an evening. The fruit from a La Encantada Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$74) starts off tightly coiled, wound around floral then tealike accents, the fruit tense and dark with a thick-skinned depth. His Syrahs, like the one from Zotovich Vineyard (\$59), are firm and cool, with a peppery undergirding of tannin. Taken together, Brady's lineup is testimony to how California wines can age, and how Sta. Rita Hills is one of the state's best sources for ageable reds.



Samsara winemaker Matt Brady.

## Deovlet



Ryan Deovlet.

After meaningful stints at Stephen Ross Wine Cellars in Arroyo Grande and the original Red Car team in the early and mid-2000s, Ryan Deovlet began quietly making his own wines under an eponymous label in 2008. **Deovlet** garnered contracts for some of Santa Barbara County's most esteemed sites, focusing on the Sta. Rita Hills for his cool climate offerings. (He also makes Bordeaux-variety bottlings from the Happy Canyon AVA.) Deovlet works with three vineyards in the Sta. Rita Hills—Zotovich, a low-lying site of almost pure sand off Highway 246, and two on Santa Rosa Road, La Encantada and Sanford & Benedict.

He harvests earlier than most other winemakers at all of his sites, seeking what he feels is inherent in the region's fruit character, an edge, marked by acidity, small-berry intensity, and nerve. His Sanford & Benedict Pinot Noir (\$60) is composed and graceful, full-flavored but with earth-toned old-vine accents. By contrast, the La Encantada Pinot (\$60), from the vineyard just west of Sanford & Benedict, is leaner, more windswept, and with a dramatic tension in the fruit. He makes a Pinot Blanc (\$35) from the same vineyard. To my mind, it's the finest in California, a nervy, chalky, lemony mouthful of pure crunch.

## Xander Soren Wines

Xander Soren worked at Apple for more than 20 years, much of that time as director of music applications. (If you use GarageBand, or listen to bands that do, then you probably have him to thank.) The job took him to Japan regularly, often shoulder to shoulder with Steve Jobs. He fell hard for the culture and the cuisine, so when Soren decided to retire in 2022, he gave himself two goals: to start a **winery devoted to Pinot Noir**, and to make Pinot Noirs that would pair well with Japanese cuisine.



Xander Soren.

Soren's early research drew him to the Sta. Rita Hills. When he finally had wines to share he poured them from multiple appellations for Japanese chefs and sommeliers; most gravitated toward the Sta. Rita Hills Pinots. "They were drawn to the sea spray and nori notes along with the ocean influence that the AVA is famous for," says Soren, "Very complementary to the umami flavors that Japanese cuisine is built around."



Soren's winemaker Shalini Sekhar works with seven vineyards. Four of them are Sta. Rita Hills sources—Sanford & Benedict, La Encantada, Fiddlestix, and Rancho la Viña—giving you an idea of their devotion to this place, and how well it jibes with their project. In a lineup of wines that try to thread umami notes into Pinot fruit, their Sanford & Benedict bottling (\$115) really delivers, with its aromatics of cinnamon, cap mushroom, and crushed nori, woven into classically delicate S&B red fruits.

## The Joy Fantastic

The husband and wife team of Peter Hunken and Amy Christine founded Holus Bolus wines in 2005. Since then, they have made balanced, low-alcohol, ethereally aromatic wines for their various labels, which fly under the radar for most of the country except in Los Angeles, where they used to live and work. Amy, a Master of Wine, was a sommelier and wine-slinger for Kermit Lynch for many years, while Peter worked with Sashi Moorman at Stolpman Vineyards in nearby Ballard Canyon.



Peter Hunken and Amy Christine of The Joy Fantastic.

Hunken and Christine have worked with a number of high-profile Santa Barbara County vineyards, including Presqu'île, John Sebastiano, and Bien Nacido. But they shifted focus in 2014 when they planted **The Joy Fantastic** Vineyard, named for the Prince album *Rave Un2 the Joy Fantastic*. (I defy you to find me a more ardent Prince fan than Amy Christine.) Joy Fantastic lies on the western edge of the appellation, less than a dozen miles from the Pacific shoreline on a hugely devigorating parcel of sandy loam and diatomaceous earth. It's a dense planting of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Syrah, and Gamay; windswept and desolate, the yields here are minuscule, clusters and berries tiny, the fruit wildly concentrated and powerful. Seven vintages in, the wines from the site are as taut and nervy as any in California right now, like their bracing, mineral Chardonnay from 2022 (\$55), smoky with lees and citrus, a lemon-lime edge, and such salinity it's as if you're tasting salt spray on the breeze.

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