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Report #90 Santa Barbara's Sta. Rita Hills: An Update



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Introduction

In our last report on the Sta. Rita Hills AVA *Sta. Rita Hills: A New Look* we provided readers an in-depth look at the region and its wines. We examined the recent history of the region, its unique wine growing characteristics, the improvements in viticulture and winemaking and recent projects and investments in the wine industry. We also included up-to-date profiles of the region's vineyards and tasting notes of their current vintages. We refer readers to that report for a comprehensive in-depth analysis of the Sta. Rita Hills region.

This briefer, special report complements our previous analysis by offering readers an update on new developments in the region based on our visit to the Sta. Rita Hills earlier this year. It consists of a series of updates focusing on many, but not all, of the top wineries we visited a couple of years ago. There are also profiles on some new wineries, especially those of younger and very talented winemakers who are crafting some of the finest wines in Santa Barbara County.

The Sta. Rita Hills is the jewel in the crown of the Santa Barbara County wine industry. While Santa Barbara County has several attractive AVAs producing outstanding wines, we continue to be impressed with the extraordinary high quality of the wines being produced in the Sta Rita Hills owing to the regions unique terroir, top quality winemaking and outstanding vineyard management.

In recent years several Sta Rita Hills wineries have made noteworthy improvements in their winemaking. The most significant has been at Sanford Winery and Vineyards where Trey Fletcher took over winemaking responsibilities in 2019, bringing a wealth of experience to his new assignment. His most recent position was at Bien Nacido in Santa Maria where he served as General Manager for 11 years and acquired in-depth knowledge

of farming Central Coast Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Our review of Trey's recent releases tells the story of his impact working with the iconic Sanford and Benedict and La Rinconada vineyards.

Since our last visit to the region, several young winemakers have also made great strides, crafting wines of elegance and refinement. These winemakers include, *inter alia*, Samra Morris at Alma Rosa, Zac Wasserman at Frequency, Wynne Solomon at Peake Ranch, and Matt Brady at Samsara. A relative newcomer to the Sta Rita Hills is Gambal Work; our reviews of their wines are provided in this report.

Santa Rita Hills is perhaps best known for its outstanding cool climate Pinot Noirs. However, in our view, the region's Chardonnays are perhaps even better than its Pinot Noirs. Having recently completed an in-depth analysis of California Chardonnays focusing on Sonoma County, we can conclude without reservation that Sta. Rita Hills Chardonnays are every bit as good as the top wines produced in Sonoma.

There have also been noteworthy improvements in the quality of the Syrahs crafted by Sta. Rita Hills winemakers, and the John Sebastiano Vineyard has been a major source for their fruit. Among the outstanding ones are those from Dragonette, Frequency, Peake, Pence and others. Melville's estate Donna Syrah is also exceptional.

The Sta Rita Hills has many outstanding vineyards; profiles of vineyards included in this report are provided in Annex 1. We take note below of the growing importance of the Rapidan and Bedrock Vineyards which are among the most prized for their grapes.



1 Radian Vineyard's Pinot Bowl

Radian and Bentrock Vineyards In 1844, the Mexican governor of California granted Rancho Cañada de Salsipuedes ("leave if you can") to Pedro Regalado Cordero. Fast forward 178 years, and Rancho Salsipuedes is home to two of California's top vineyards for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes, Radian and Bentrock. Located at the far western end of the Sta Rita Hills appellation (see map in Annex), the mostly north-facing, 100-acre Radian and 92-acre Bentrock vineyards are predominantly (90%) planted to Pinot Noir with the remainder planted to Chardonnay. The windy, cold climate of

Radian and Bentrock results in low yields (about 2 tons/acre) of small berries with thick skins. The grapes ripen slowly and evenly, reaching phenolic ripeness at relatively low alcohol levels. Radian and Bentrock are the estate vineyards of The Hilt winery, but grapes from these vineyards are sold to several of the top producers in Sta. Rita Hills.