

TOUR THROUGH THE ESSENTIAL WINERIES OF STA. RITA HILLS

THE
PRESS

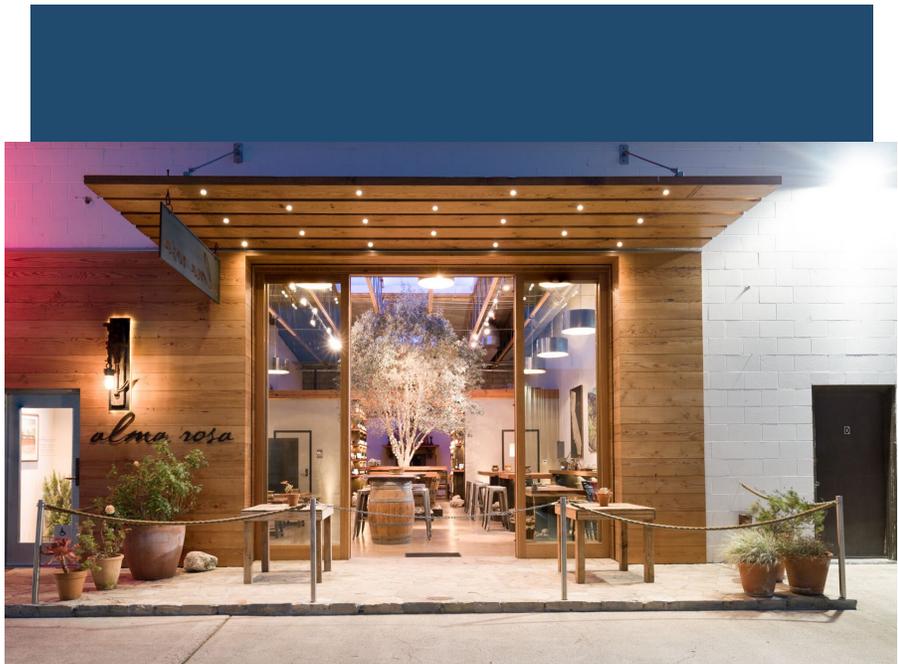
BY
THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

Extending east to west from Buellton to Lompoc, the Sta. Rita Hills are a global hotspot for Pinot Noir — indeed, winemakers here frequently remark that wine lovers from around the country are more familiar with this sub-region than with Santa Barbara County wine as a whole.

The reasons are well-documented. Thanks to foggy mornings and windy afternoons, the temperatures here stay quite cool all year long, allowing the grapes many months to ripen into deliciously fruity flavors while retaining their bright acidity. That goes not just for Pinot Noir but also for the Chardonnay, Syrah and small smattering of outlier grapes that grow alongside it. Throw in a streak of limestone that cuts through the middle of the appellation, and the Sta. Rita Hills' potential for great wine is unbridled.

There are really three sets of hills in the Sta. Rita Hills AVA, which was created in 2001, making it the first sub-appellation of the greater Santa Ynez Valley. (Thanks to a lawsuit from Santa Rita winery in Chile, the appellation has to abbreviate Santa Rita.) On the southern edge, along Santa Rosa Road, are the Santa Rosa Hills; this is where Richard Sanford and Michael Benedict planted their Sanford & Benedict Vineyard in 1971 and discovered that the area was perfect for Pinot Noir. There are a handful of tasting rooms on Santa Rosa Road, but even just driving through this area is a beautiful experience in any season.

On the east end, along Highway 101, is Buellton, which is quickly becoming an epicurean hub. The very casual Industrial Eats is one of the best restaurants in the county, while the Hitching Post II steakhouse is iconic for grilled meats. There are dozens of tasting rooms plus beer and booze options all within a few blocks.



The best way to start a tour of the Sta. Rita Hills, both geographically and historically, is to stop by Alma Rosa Winery, which was founded in 2005 by Richard Sanford, one of the region's pioneers. Sanford and Michael Benedict had planted their eponymous vineyard more than 30 years earlier. Alma Rosa produces a number of single-vineyard expressions. It's located in a quickly gentrifying warehouse zone of Buellton off of Industrial Way, which is the eastern opening to the appellation. It's the perfect start to any Sta. Rita Hills exploration.