



Samra Morris, who became the head winemaker at Alma Rosa Winery in 2019, hails from Bosnia.

Bosnia's Loss is California's Gain: Samra Morris Takes the Lead at Alma Rosa

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I love to talk about wine with people who share my passion for it. We open bottles, we trade stories about travel and soil types, terroir and residual sugar, and we talk of taste and food and restaurants. We recommend wines to one another, we drink, and we learn a lot.

In Wine Talk, I introduce you to friends, acquaintances, and people I meet as I make my way around the world, individuals who love wine as much as I do, who live to taste, who farm and make wine. You'll appreciate their insight, and I hope you'll learn something from them as well.

The world of wine never fails to provide me with pleasure. Opening a bottle, walking through a vineyard, tasting a barrel sample, meeting a fellow traveler in *l'univers du vin* ... the discovery and exploration are never-ending.

The journey continued last month on a beautiful expanse of land in Santa Barbara County, a property that played a major role in the formation of the [Sta. Rita Hills AVA](#). (If you don't know the name Richard Sanford, go ahead and learn about [him](#), because he is truly the "Godfather of Central Coast Pinot Noir.")



Samra Morris: “I think that would be my guidance: Drink what you love.” (Courtesy Alma Rosa Winery)

We had driven up from Los Angeles, and Buellton was my destination, specifically the [Alma Rosa Winery tasting room](#). I was there to meet Samra Morris, Alma Rosa’s winemaker since 2019, for a tasting and a tour of the estate. (Note: For those who may not know this, the small complex in which the tasting room is housed is a must-visit when/if you do visit the town. One of my favorite restaurants in California — [Industrial Eats](#) — is also located there, and its food alone is worth the trip, especially the beef tongue pastrami reuben and the white shrimp wrapped in pancetta.)



A beef tongue pastrami sandwich extraordinaire ...



White shrimp, pancetta, garlic, butter ...

We sampled a bit of Alma Rosa sparkling at the tasting room; it was a warm afternoon, and the wine was good. What followed was a 10-minute drive to the estate along a quiet, nearly traffic-free road, and then, beauty.

Alma Rosa's 628 acres (38 acres planted to vines) spread from the valley floor to the top of the Santa Rosa Hills. The estate vineyard, El Jabali, originally planted by Richard Sanford in 1983, has been joined by four non-contiguous plots of Pinot Noir (55 percent), Chardonnay (30 percent), and Syrah and Grenache (15 percent), all farmed using sustainable practices.

Sanford and his wife, Thekla, sold the estate to Bob and Barb Zorich in 2014. Zorich is a businessman in the oil industry who now resides in Houston, Texas, but he and his wife both attended school at the University of California Santa Barbara and have a home in the coastal city. They were introduced to the Sanfords in 2013, and, upon discovering that the property was for sale, took a leap into the world of winery ownership.

A ride through Alma Rosa Winery is a feast for the senses.

When we arrived at Alma Rosa, Morris took us on a quick ATV ride to a vineyard planted with Syrah — no bud break yet. Along the way we spied a few turkeys. Bobcats, deer, and mountain lions are also denizens of the property, the latter rarely seen.



Vines and hills ...

Back at the ranch house on the valley floor we tasted with Morris and Debra Eagle, Alma Rosa's general manager. Both women are engaging, passionate about wine and the estate, and great ambassadors for the brand.

Morris was born and raised in Bosnia, and attend the University of Sarajevo, where she studied agriculture and food sciences, receiving bachelor's and master's degrees. She met an American in the U.S. Air Force who was stationed overseas, and they moved to California when his duty took him back to the states.

She interned at St. Supéry in 2014, and worked three harvests with Thomas Rivers Brown as a cellar intern at Mending Wall. In 2017, Morris began working as a lab assistant at Free Flow Wines, and by 2019 was a quality control manager there. She became Alma Rosa's winemaker later that year.

Here is Morris in her own words.

James Brock: How has COVID-19 changed your work and life?

Samra Morris: I think Covid-19 has affected me more personally than professionally. As a winemaker, I have been fortunate to be able to go to work every day and enjoy my cellar duties. It was a good escape from reality and what is happening in the world. It gave me a sense of peace that I needed.

Personally, it affected me in that I didn't have the opportunity to go home to see my family in Bosnia and enjoy my time with them. I had already been missing them a lot, so I was very disappointed when my flight was canceled. I've been very homesick recently, so I hope that by the end of this year we all get vaccinated and I have an opportunity to see my family next summer.

JB: Tell us about three wines you think are drinking well at the moment. What makes them worthwhile? How about a food pairing for each one?

SM: I will start with Alma Rosa's 2018 El Jabali Pinot Noir (\$68). It is a gorgeous Pinot Noir that represents our beautiful Sta. Rita Hills in the glass. You can purchase this wine through our [website](#) or at our tasting room in Buellton. I would pair this wine with red meats.



An estate Pinot Noir

The second wine is Alma Rosa's 2020 Grenache Rosé (\$30) from our Sta. Rita Hills estate vineyard. This rosé is beautiful, and salty strawberry notes and bright acidity make this gorgeous wine perfect to drink in the summertime. Growing up in Bosnia, we often took summer vacations on the Croatian coast. The salinity and acidity in this wine reminds me of the Old World Adriatic wines I loved from home. I would pair this wine with a light shrimp salad.

The third bottle would be the 2017 Foxy Bubbles (\$55) by [Blair Fox Cellars](#), located in Los Olivos. This is a delicious sparkling wine, and I don't need an excuse — an occasion or food — to enjoy a bottle of it.

JB: If cost was no consideration, tell us the one bottle you would add to your personal collection, and why.

SM: If cost were not an issue, I would choose a bottle — or a few cases — of the [2014 Maybach "Materium" Cabernet Sauvignon](#).

I call it a perfect glass of wine. Also, this was the first bottle I had the opportunity to share with my family when I went home for the first time after moving to California, and while sharing this bottle with them we also shared laughs and good conversation that we needed to catch up after so many years apart.



JB: What is your favorite grape, and why?

SM: As a winemaker and as a wine drinker, my favorite grape to work with is definitely Pinot Noir. Due to its thin skin, tight clusters and late ripening, Pinot Noir can be a fragile variety that always challenges me as a winemaker. As a wine drinker I just love the aromas and perfume notes.

JB: How about one bottle that our readers should buy now to cellar for 10 years, to celebrate a birth, anniversary, or other red-letter day?

SM: The one bottle I'd buy to cellar for the next 10 years is Saxum's 2018 Paderewski

Vineyard. This wine is spectacular, and it's worth opening for your next major celebration.

JB: Where is your go-to place when you want to have a glass or bottle (outside of your home and workplace)?

SM: It would be somewhere I get to look at the ocean. We have so many beautiful places in Santa Barbara County where I can experience that. The ocean is so powerful, and looking at it while sipping wine is so relaxing for me.

alma rosa
winery & vineyards

JB: If there was one thing you wish everyone would keep in mind when buying and drinking wine, what is it?

There are so many times when people ask me what my favorite wine is that they should buy, and I always reply by asking them about their favorite wine and what they like to taste when drinking wine.

I think that would be my guidance: Drink what you love to taste.

JB: What is your “wine eureka moment,” the incident/taste/encounter that put you and wine on an intimate plane forever?

SM: I think when I made wines for the first time as a winemaker. It created a different relationship between me and wines, it became much more personal. I became more passionate and think of my wines in cellar as my babies. Having the wine that I made in a bottle and sharing it with friends, family, and our customers makes me so happy. I know

that all of my hard work has paid off when I see smiles on their faces.

JB: What has been the strangest moment or incident involving wine that you have experienced in your career?

SM: The strangest moment involving wine that I have experienced in my career is my relationship with forklifts. When I first became a winemaker, I thought I would never be able to drive a forklift like a professional. One of the skills of being a winemaker, besides producing wines, is needing to be extremely handy in the cellar. At first it was a very daunting task, but every time I was on the forklift I became more familiar.

Now, I am so proud of my forklift skills and my forever connection to them! At Alma Rosa we use forklifts throughout the year, moving barrels and pallets of wine around the cellar and dumping bins of grapes into the press during harvest. When visiting the winery, you can often find me on the forklift.

JB: Your favorite wine reference in a work of literature?

SM: *In Vino Veritas*. It's a phrase I learned while studying about wine at college.