

Samra Morris, Alma Rosa Winemaker, On Her Bosnian Roots And California Future



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Food & Drink

I cover wine at work, with attention to makers and growers.



Alma Rosa Winemaker Samra Morris PHOTO CREDIT: KATHRYN ZDAN

When winemaker Samra Morris bottled her first full grape-to glass vintage at Alma Rosa Winery in California's Sta. Rita Hills, she says it was the "most exciting moment of [her] life."

As the first women from Bosnia to craft wine in California, Morris makes her mark in one of the premiere growing regions in North America, on an estate planted by wine industry pioneers

Richard and Thekla Sanford. This combination of heritage from different perspectives is the future of Alma Rosa.

Morris holds Bachelors and Masters degrees in Food Sciences from The University of Sarajevo, College of Agricultural and Food Sciences. She was originally interested in brewing, but an internship in the enology department at the university turned her on to winemaking. She jokes that she also “got tired of the taste of beer.”

In 2013, her husband got stationed at Travis Air Force Base and the couple relocated to California where Morris took a job as a tasting room associate in Napa Valley and eventually an vineyard internship at St. Supery. There she tended three harvests under the direction of Thomas Rivers Brown and was part of the cellar team for Michael Mondavi Family Estate. For several years she worked in quality management at Free Flow Wines before she connected with Debra Eagle, general manager of Alma Rosa and “fell in love with Santa Barbara.”



The Alma Rosa estate vineyard El Jabali, which is now owned by Bob and Barb Zorich, comprises 55% Pinot Noir, 30% Chardonnay and 15% Syrah and Grenache. When Sanford planted it in 1983, it became the first certified organic vineyard in Santa Barbara County. The Sanfords still live on the property and are ambassadors for Alma Rosa. A new winery is planned for the estate in several years.

Eagle describes the vineyard as a “diverse estate” with various sun exposures and altitudes. The unique spiral shape feature, as designed by Sanford, reflects an artistic soul and thoughtful planning. Though known for Chardonnay and Pinot Noir—Sanford was the first to plant Pinot Noir in Santa Barbara County—Eagle touts the estate’s “other” grapes as well. “The Rhone varieties are amazing from Sta. Rita Hills,” she says.

Morris nods to her Bosnian roots as an influence, and says that she and her family enjoyed excellent wines growing up. Her father, a professor, instilled a “tradition of drinking wine and eating good food,” she says. “We are like Italians, but a little more crazy,” she jokes. The young winemaker’s debut release introduces a selection of 2019 and 2020 rosé and white wines. Her 2019 single vineyard Pinot Noirs, Chardonnays and Rhône-style wines are in the works for a fall 2021 release. The Alma Rosa portfolio is available for purchase online or at the winery, which is open for business that’s “safe and adventurous” according to Eagle.

Morris plans to continue making boutique style wines that explore Sta. Rita Hills terroir from the estate and other partner vineyards such as La Encantada, which was also planted by Sanford. She’s ready for people to say, “oh, she can make wine!”