

## Bottles & Barrels

### The War-Torn Past and Promising Present of America's First Bosnian Winemaker

Alma Rosa's Samra Morris Settles into the Cellars and Culture of Santa Barbara County

By [Matt Kettmann](#)

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Credit: Macduff Everton/ [VinesandVisionSB.com](https://www.vinesandvision.com)

The first harvest for the first Bosnian winemaker in America came quite close to catastrophe.

When she got word that Alma Rosa Winery's winemaker had quit right before the 2019 harvest, Samra Morris — then the winery's assistant winemaker — was staying with her husband near Napa, where he was enlisted at Travis Air Force Base. She hustled down and arrived at the Alma Rosa facility in the Lompoc Wine Ghetto, only to find two large steel tanks that were ordered months before just standing outside in the alley.

After dodging sniper bullets during her childhood in war-torn Sarajevo, Samra Morris isn't fazed by the challenges of leading the harvest crew for Alma Rosa Winery.

With the help of general manager Debra Eagle and some friendly winemaker neighbors, Morris forklifted the tanks into the winery, where they learned of the next problem: no electrical outlets. "The building had not been prepared for these tanks," recalled Eagle. Thanks to kind electricians willing to work on Labor Day, Morris was able to whip the facility into shape just before the grapes arrived.

Then came the harvest itself. "People with experience were unavailable; they were long gone," said Eagle of the labor crunch that comes right before harvest, when most wineries have already enlisted their crews. Morris rose to that challenge as well, assembling a solid team to process her first vintage as head winemaker, which are among the best wines that Alma

Rosa has produced since being founded in 2005 by pioneering vintner Richard Sanford.

"Samra did a masterful job of managing a really, really horrific situation," said Eagle, and that situation quickly slid right into a global pandemic, triggering all sorts of labor, supply chain, distribution, and other issues for the wine industry. "Samra has lived through civil war," explained Eagle, who gave the 36-year-old Sarajevo native her first American job up in Napa back in 2013. "This isn't fazing her. She's just marching along."

#### Grenades and Grade School

Samra Morris was 6 years old in 1992 when Serbians invaded her Sarajevo neighborhood, forcing her family to escape to another part of the city and putting her dad on the frontlines.

"My childhood was pretty crazy. We were under siege for four years," explained Morris of the Bosnian War, in which the Serbs were trying to purge Muslims like her from the newly created country of Bosnia-Herzegovina following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. "We didn't have water. We didn't have electricity. They cut off

everything. They were shooting at us every day and dropping grenades a lot.”

One of those grenade blasts injured her mother’s head as Morris watched, and she lost two uncles and a number of cousins, including many in the genocide of Srebrenica. “I was so young when the war started that I didn’t have the opportunity to remember them,” said Morris, whose maiden name is Muhamedagic. Each school day, she and her classmates had to strategically walk between buildings to avoid snipers. “Some days, they were shooting less,” she said. “Some days, they shoot a lot and school gets canceled.”

And yet, amid all the shock and crying and childhood confusion, life went on. “You get used to it,” said Morris. “We were trying to live our lives. This is the situation you’re in. It’s horrible, but you’re gonna live. We tried to make the best of it.”

As the fighting subsided, Morris and her family were able to return to their old apartment. She went to high school and then followed her father’s footsteps into the University of Sarajevo’s Department of Agriculture and Food Science, where he was studying when the war started. But while her dad opted for ag, she pursued a passion for chemistry into food science.

By then, Morris had been introduced to wine by her dad, who, like many Bosnians, doesn’t adhere to the Islamic prohibition of alcohol. “There’s a history of winemaking in our country,” she explained. “It’s part of our culture.”

But the vineyards and wineries were located hours away in southern Bosnia, so Morris decided that she might want to become a beer brewer instead. While interning at a popular Sarajevo brewery, Morris quickly realized that she couldn’t stand that sweet-sour aroma of fermenting beer every day. “I got tired of it. I don’t like this smell,” she said. “I love beer, but I started to be annoyed.”

### **Women Winemakers Celebration**

Samra Morris is joining nearly two dozen female winemakers from Santa Barbara County as part of an annual celebration on March 6, 1-4 p.m., at Roblar Farm. The tasting and snacking event will raise money for the Community Health Centers of the Central Coast. The \$90 tickets are going fast.

As she started working toward her master’s in the same department, Morris became close with a professor of enology, and wound up focusing more on wine. After a year-long internship in the Department of Enology, she began considering a move to the wineries down south.

In the meantime, she’d fallen in love with Michael Morris, a tech sergeant in the American Air Force who was stationed in Sarajevo. They married in March 2012 and decided to move to the United States, where he was to be stationed at Travis Air Force Base in the Bay Area. She figured that her wine career was over, but then he told her that the base was only 30 minutes from the Napa Valley.



*Credit: Macduff Everton/ [VinesandVisionSB.com](http://VinesandVisionSB.com)*

“Oh my god!” Morris replied. “Are you joking?”

### California Dreaming

It took Samra Morris a year to get her American citizenship and other necessities, like a driver’s license. “I was bored,” she said of those days, but at least communicating with others was not a problem for her, as she’d studied English since dodging those bullets in 2nd grade. “I’ve been learning English as long as I’ve been learning my language,” she said.

At that time, Debra Eagle was a major player in the North Coast wine scene. After seven years of selling diamonds in Germany — she moved stones from Armenians that she’d met while attending Mills College and getting an MBA at UC Berkeley — Eagle relocated to Sonoma County in 1993 to raise her family.

With a background in luxury items and some experience in wine country from her grad school days, Eagle shot up the ladders at Kenwood, Robert Mondavi, and Sutter Home, then launched ultra-premium Bond Wine for Bill Harlan. After another GM job at Clos du Val, she was hired in 2009 to run Hestan Vineyards, where renowned winemaker Thomas Rivers Brown had begun consulting.

“I gave Samra her first job in the U.S.,” explained Eagle, who hired Morris in July 2013 as a tasting room associate in Hestan’s downtown Yountville location. Because of Morris’s accent and “exotic” looks, Eagle said that guests “were kind of dismissing her.” But Morris would impress them with her knowledge, and turn that into dollars.

“She would have \$10,000 transactions,” recalled Eagle. “She was incredibly effective.”

### World of Pinot Noir

Alma Rosa will be one of more than 150 wineries from around the globe pouring at the World of Pinot Noir this weekend, March 3-5, at the Ritz-Carlton Bacara resort in Goleta. Tickets are still available for the grand tastings and a few special events. See [worldofpinotnoir.com](http://worldofpinotnoir.com).

Morris also had a chance to check out vineyards and work in the cellar alongside Rivers Brown, who’s considered a cabernet expert but may be more passionate about pinot noir and chardonnay. After interning at St. Supéry, she worked three harvests for Rivers Brown’s Mending Wall Wines as well as in the cellar at Michael Mondavi and tasting room at Grgich Hills. Morris was two years into a quality control job at Free Flow Wines — one of the country’s largest wine keggering and canning companies — when Eagle called her about the assistant winemaker opportunity at Alma Rosa in 2018.

“We would always stay in touch after I left Hestan,” said Morris of Eagle. “She was always curious about how I



Along with grapes from other Sta. Rita Hills vineyards, Samra Morris sources an increasing amount of fruit from Rancho El Jabali, the estate vineyard for Alma Rosa Winery.

Credit: Macduff Everton / [VinesandVisionSB.com](http://VinesandVisionSB.com)

was doing, how I was growing, what I achieved.”

Eagle brought Morris and her husband down and gave them the grand Santa Ynez Valley tour, through the quaint scenes of Los Olivos and Solvang, along the romantic Santa Rosa Road, and into Alma Rosa’s vineyards at Rancho El Jabali. It worked.

“I just think this is the area,” Morris told her husband, who was intrigued by the proximity of Vandenberg Air Force Base. “It’s just gorgeous, and I think I have the opportunity to make really special wines, and I am really in love with pinot noir and chardonnays. As a winemaker, I’m not so much into cabernets. I was like, ‘Okay, I’m going to do it.’”

Morris was hired as Alma Rosa’s assistant winemaker in July 2019. She had no idea that the top job would be hers less than two months later.

### **Embraced by Alma Rosa**

Though it came mostly by surprise, Morris embraced the upside of her fast rise to winemaker. “This is the opportunity for me to show my talent and all that I can do,” she realized.

She also had help in the form of consulting winemaker Tony Biagi, who was enlisted by Alma Rosa in 2019 and named winemaker of the year by Vinous Media in 2020. A veteran of 30 harvests who’s worked with Duckhorn, PlumpJack, Clos du Val, and numerous other prestige clients in Napa and Paso Robles, Biagi has been gently holding Morris’s hand these past three years.

“I was there to help her with hard questions, philosophical questions that you might not know until your fifth or sixth harvest,” said Biagi, who prides himself on staying out of the way with his clients and just advising when needed. “Samra was a little green, but I’ve never met a person who works harder. She’s like a dog with a bone. She will not let it go.”

Like everyone else contacted for this story, he is quick to connect her tenacity to growing up in a war zone, but Biagi also sees something more. “You can teach anybody how to make wine,” he said. “You can’t teach people to care, and I think Samra cares more than most people I’ve ever met. Caring is not a learned trait. You either do or you don’t.” That shows particularly in her wines from 2020, a very challenging vintage. Said Biagi, “She made wines that are stupendous.”

Morris is appreciative of Biagi’s guidance. “Being a young winemaker and making big decisions that I never made before, he’s there for me to support and guide me to never fail,” she said.

The biggest name associated with Alma Rosa is its founder, Richard Sanford. Along with Michael Benedict, he proved that pinot noir could succeed in the hills between Buellton and Lompoc by planting



PIONEER PRAISE: Richard Sanford, who founded Alma Rosa Winery in 2005, believes Samra Morris can carry his legacy forward.

Credit: Macduff Everton / [VinesandVisionSB.com](http://VinesandVisionSB.com)

their Sanford & Benedict Vineyard along Santa Rosa Road in the early 1970s. As half-century later, the Santa Rita Hills appellation, which was created in 2001, is world-famous as a source for both pinot noir and chardonnay — even the French are buying land there now.

Though Sanford sold Alma Rosa to Bob and Barb Zorich in 2014, he still lives on Rancho El Jabali and remains the spiritual figurehead for the brand. I wanted to hear what he thought of Morris, so we met last November inside of Alma Rosa's then-brand-new Solvang tasting room over some afternoon wine and cheese. I wasn't surprised to learn that he's a big fan.

"With her background, she has no fear — she's resilient, she's grateful, and she's respectful of agriculture and all that comes with it," said Sanford. In true winemaker fashion, he appreciates her "great understanding for hygiene," and just digs her style. "She's inquisitive and open to new objectives and opportunities, and she's passionate about it," he said. As our second taste of Morris's first pinots turned to the third, Sanford leaned in closer to me, whispering, "She's kick-ass."

With three vintages under her belt as Alma Rosa's lead winemaker, Morris is slowly carving her own styles of pinot noir, chardonnay, grenache, syrah, pinot gris, and pinot blanc, and steadily learning the differences between the Jabali estate vineyard and the other properties she works with, including La Encantada, Bentrack, Radian, and Rancho La Viña. There's hope for building a winery on the estate property one day, but Morris will probably take that challenge in stride as well — dealing with designs and planners and moving tanks should be a breeze compared to her war-torn childhood.

Morris is planning to visit Bosnia and Herzegovina this summer for the first time since 2017. Her homeland has improved since the war, but corruption remains endemic, so many young people flee toward Germany and other European Union countries for better lives. Only one of her college classmates actually works in the food



industry today — none work in wine — but maybe Morris's story will help change that.

"I hope more of them will start coming and doing harvests in different parts of the world," said Morris. "I just hope what I've achieved in my life is going to inspire more people from my country to believe that they can become a winemaker or whatever they want to do."

Credit: Macduff Everton/ [VinesandVisionSB.com](http://VinesandVisionSB.com)

## How to Enjoy Alma Rosa

Try the wines of Samra Morris at Alma Rosa Winery's tasting room at 1623 Mission Drive in Solvang. They also offer hiking tours of the estate winery off of Santa Rosa Road with a reservation. Call (805)691-9395 or see [almarosawinery.com](http://almarosawinery.com).