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Uncorked: Winemaker moves Alma Rosa into the future

By James Nokes



SOLVANG, California – Samra Morris has a vintage to call her own.

The Alma Rosa winemaker had worked with consulting winemaker Tony Biagi, but with the 2019 vintage, it was just her vision in the vineyard and the cellar. We sat down on a crystal clear spring day in Alma Rosa’s swank new tasting room in Solvang, California, to taste the entire lineup.

Alma Rosa winemaker Samra Morris works her magic in the Sta. Rita Hills AVA. (Photo by Kathryn Zdan provided by Alma Rosa)

Surrounded by a plethora of Danish bakeries, where the aromas from fresh ebelskivers and tasty pastries hang in the air, California’s first Bosnian-born winemaker rattled off every detail of the wines that were poured. She quickly recalled the cooperage, the time spent on lees, and the new oak percentage in which the wine was aged.

“I know what I did with them and what I wanted to achieve,” Morris said. “I know exactly what happened and have an ownership with them and with the vines.”

It’s a stunning examination of the vineyards of Santa Rosa Road, the heart of the Sta. Rita Hills AVA. While a common thread ran through each wine, each of the five sites bottled by Alma Rosa is a unique creation worth finding.

The **Alma Rosa Rancho La Vina Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir 2019 (\$68)** had raspberry, strawberry and bacon fat on the nose. There was a brilliant collection of red fruit flavors that included wild strawberry and cherry, while hints of sea salt, sage, rosemary and thyme came through on the finish.

From the wildest site in the Sta. Rita Hills, Morris captured the feral side of Radian Vineyard.

Everything is in hiding when the bottle is uncorked; it's closed off from fruit flavors. Instead, what's present is a funky, herbal nose that blows off with time. The mystery with Radian runs so deep because only a few wineries are allocated fruit from the windswept property, and no winemaker interprets what they have the same way.

"All the vineyards on Santa Rosa Road are like that," Morris said. "El Jabali is our estate vineyard, and is the first one on Santa Rosa Road. Then there's La Encantada, just 2 miles away. Rancho La Vina after that, and then right after it Bentrack and Radian. They are all unique vineyards – you can see how the weather changes, micro climates and soil types all make such a huge difference."

With the **Alma Rosa Radian Vineyard Pinot Noir 2019 (\$68)**, Morris has a wine with tilled earth and truffle flavors. Dried violets, cracked pepper and licorice gradually emerge, which furthers the intrigue in the wine. It's unlike any of its counterparts from the Sta. Rita Hills, and its unique style should be praised.

Alma Rosa only produced 160 cases of pinot from Radian; it's worth the hunt to track a bottle down.

The sister site to Radian, seemingly located no more than a golf-course fairway away, is Bentrack Vineyard. While Radian is cloaked in mystery, wind, weather and a myriad of elevation changes, Bentrack unfurls itself atop a plateau awash in what seems like glowing sunshine.

"Even though it is right next to Radian, Bentrack is a little warmer," Morris said. "There are such extremes in these vineyards, even though they aren't far apart. I really like to show off the special terroir of each vineyard."

There's a tension between the earth notes and flashy red fruit flavors.

"It's really an interesting site, completely opposite of Radian," said Morris about the **Alma Rosa Bentrack Vineyard Pinot Noir 2019 (\$70)**. "There are alluvial soils,

and I get two blocks, one gives me nice red fruit and the other a chalkiness that when they are blended together make a beautiful wine.”

Driven by a collection of baking spice flavors, the **Alma Rosa Rancho La Vina 2019 (\$70)** is a dark purple color in the glass, and had a deeper, more concentrated collection of plum and black cherry flavors.

“It’s such a beautiful vineyard,” said Morris about Rancho La Vina. “It’s high in the hills, gets a lot of wind, and really gives small clusters grown in sandy soil. There’s more dark fruit notes compared to the Sta. Rita Hills wine. There’s a little spice note, and I can smell a floral note on there as well, now that it’s opened up, and that’s really beautiful.”

A great bargain is the **Alma Rosa Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir 2020 (\$48)**. It’s an easy-to-drink blend, and has a wider distribution than the single-vineyard wines.

“Every year in the cellar, I taste by the block and by the barrel,” Morris said. “There’s 2% Bentrack Vineyard in there, but mostly it’s El Jabali. The idea for me is to make a nice vibrant pinot noir with lots of red berries and rose petals; you can taste the chalky tannins [and] the diatomaceous earth that represent the Sta. Rita Hills.”

As an homage to Alma Rosa founder and Sta. Rita Hills pioneer Richard Sanford, Morris made a **Barrel Select bottling in 2019 (\$72)**. When he founded his eponymous winery, Sanford would bottle the most impressive barrels from the vineyards with which he worked.

Morris captured the essence of that practice here, as she sought out the barrels that stood out because they had “more complexity, bigger flavors ... some even had a meatier note or soft, supple and lasting tannins.”

While 2019 was her first solo act, Morris has captured what makes the Sta. Rita Hills special; Alma Rosa is in good hands as it moves into the future.