

WINE News



SoCal's Coolest Wine Region Is White Hot

JANUARY 24, 2023 FEATURES

- 2-4 The Sta. Rita Hills Hit Parade
- 4 Producer Spotlight: Paetra Wines
- 5 Recession Busters

New Outlooks, Great Wine

By Ryan Woodhouse, Domestic Buyer



What a wild start to 2023 we've had in California! After prolonged drought and some seriously scorching temperatures last summer (I toured Dominus Estate at 118F on September 6th), the heavens opened in late December and a barrage of atmospheric river storms dumped historic and damaging rains on the Golden State. Week after week of rain caused widespread flooding, power outages, mudslides, hundreds of road closures, and, tragically, some lives lost.

As I write, sunny skies have finally returned. Deep puddles have been replaced by sparkling morning frosts. Just today I rode the Napa Valley Vine Trail bike path and was treated to scenes of bright yellow mustard flowers beneath rows of bare vines. The hillsides and forests are lush and green; reservoirs are filling up for the summer ahead.

The new year is often a time of reflection and assessment. To be honest

I have very little to offer as far as answers or predictions. However, I do know for sure, there are a lot of incredible wines out there. There are more people than ever crafting wines of real character, wines that represent an unwavering dedication to quality and sense of place. And, despite rampant inflation, you can still find plenty of fantastic bottles of wine on our shelves for under \$20. Even with a global pandemic, droughts, fires, floods, and any number of other challenges, the wine business remains strong and vibrant.

Within these pages you'll find a deep dive into the Sta. Rita Hills. I've well and truly fallen for the wines of this incredible region, and I hope you'll find a keeper, too! I'll also introduce you to the wonderful Weinbau Paetra in Oregon, a tiny winery with a deep commitment to producing authentic Germanic-styled wines, the likes of which I have rarely experienced. I am floored by the quality.

Finally, I'll list off some top picks for best values from the U.S. While everyone loves to splurge on a special bottle every now and again, I really get a kick out of finding and recommending wines that overdeliver on their modest price points. We have lots of everyday drinkers that won't break the bank. Cheers!



2021 Donnachadh Sta. Rita Hills Chardonnay \$34.95 94WA 93WE This brisk and vibrant Chardonnay is full of verve and energy. Crunchy orchard fruit, quince, green apple, lemon zest, and hazelnuts crushed in a stone pestle and mortar. With its racy

acidity and mouthwatering intensity on the finish, this fantastic Chardonnay will give Meursault a run for its money.



2021 Paetra Willamette Valley Riesling \$19.95 A perfect intro to Paetra's wines, this eye-catching bottle (arachnophobes beware) houses the Riesling from three vineyards across Eola-Amity Hills, Yamhill-Carlton, and Van Duzer Corridor. Picked fresh and early,

with native yeast fermentation. Zesty, prickly, mouthwatering, and infused with wet stone minerals—you're gonna need a few bottles.



2021 Banshee Sonoma County Pinot Noir \$19.95 93WE Banshee has long been a staff pick here at K&L. More than a decade later the wine is still one of the best in its category and remarkably still under \$20! The 2021 is particularly strong, showing the quality of the

vintage. Alpine strawberry, ripe raspberry, Morello cherry, Asian spice, tanbark, and truffle. Supple, silky, very easy drinking.



Fall in Love with the Sta. Rita Hills

Nestled in Santa Barbara County, the Sta. Rita Hills continues to prove itself as a leading winegrowing zone in the New World. The region's deceptively cold climate, complex soils, and ever-growing host of quality focused producers has put it at the top of my list heading into 2023.

I frequently recall my first visit—a trip to Sandhi and Domaine de La Côte wineries in mid-August of 2018. It was a bluebird day with gleaming sunshine. We stepped out of the car at the top of the white bluffs upon which their vineyards are perched, and immediately the chill of the abrasive onshore wind cut right through our clothes—several of us reaching for down jackets!

Despite its southerly location in the state, the transverse (west-to-east) orientation of the mountains north and south of the AVA creates a funnel-like effect that draws cold air from the Pacific Ocean and then passes it over the vines. Indeed, the heavy influence of the ocean in the Sta. Rita Hills doesn't stop with the wind—the soils here are also almost entirely ocean derived. The predominant soil component is Diatomaceous in various forms. You'll find shale, chert (flint), sandy loams, and fine clays, each interacting in a slightly different way with the vines yet weaving a common thread of racy, saline minerality that is woven throughout the region's wines.

For a relatively small region I believe the Sta. Rita Hills is now producing a disproportionately large amount of the finest Pinot Noir and Chardonnay in the state. In these pages, you'll find few of those wines that we have in stock for you perusing.

Donnachadh

Don't be scared off by this estate's somewhat impossible-to-pronounce Gaelic name (it's DON-nuh-kuh)—the wines are fantastic! This is one of my favorite new producers to come out of California in the past few



years. The relatively new estate, established in 2013, is already gaining a stellar reputation as one of the top plantings in the region. The combo of its exposed hillside location in the western part of the AVA; meticulous organic farming; and the superlative winemaking of Ernst Storm means these are some of the most dynamic, delicious wines I've tasted in some time.

2021 Donnachadh Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir \$34.95 95WA 94WE This entirely estate-grown beauty rises from the glass with an effusive perfume of rose petals, baking spice, dark raspberry, clove, Earl Grey tea, and savory elements of moss, wet clay, and black truffle. Medium-bodied, pure, linear, and vibrant with a nice grip on the palate and a very subtle framing of oak spice. It's a magnificent bottle.



Tyler

With the possible exception of Greg Brewer (we'll get to him later), in recent years Justin Willet has done more to elevate the quality and reputation of the Sta. Rita Hills than anyone. His wines have been consistent benchmarks of quality and style and have helped define what it is that makes this region truly special.

Though there is now a plethora of world-class producers nipping at his heels, Justin's Tyler wines continue to be some of the finest and most critically acclaimed in the region. We typically have a full lineup of Tyler wines on our shelves and online, so here are some of my current favorites:



2021 Tyler Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir \$29.95 93WA There is perhaps no better intro to Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir than this bottling. It is sourced from some of the very best plantings in the region and artfully crafted by one of the area's top winemakers. It's a highly transparent wine that shows off the bright, crunchy intensity of SRH Pinot. Savory notes of leaf litter and woody spices mingle with red fruits and floral elements.

2021 Tyler Santa Barbara County Chardonnay

\$29.95 95WA Though not truly a Sta. Rita Hills wine (it has fruit from Dierberg in neighboring Santa Maria Valley, too) Tyler's "entry-level" Chardonnay is hard to leave out of this discussion... it's just too good! A flinty nose with ripe citrus, yellow stone fruit, wet stone, a subtle yeasty/leesy component that adds depth well beyond its modest price point, and a chalky, mineral-driven finish that goes on and on. Impossible to beat at this price!



Melville



After returning home to his family's estate, Chad Melville turned an already top program into a regional powerhouse. With prime vineyards in the super sandy soils of the north Sta. Rita Hills, Melville's wines are consistently some of the most explosively aromatic and expressive in the region. The wines tend to have a little more upfront, succulent fruit than those of Tyler and Donnachadh that we just covered, but they also show their cool-climate origin with wonderful lift and vibrant acidity.

**2021 Melville "Estate" Sta. Rita Hills Chardonnay**

\$34.95 96WA 94JD Assuming this hasn't sold out between me writing this article and the newsletter being published, this is a must-buy designation from Melville. The purity of fruit, luxurious texture and crystalline nature of the ripe acidity is just so compelling. As soon as you take a sip you can just imagine these golden clusters of Chardonnay hanging in the cool sunlight of Sta. Rita., the rich flavors

developing while the cold breeze preserves that all-important acidity. This is a masterclass in what this region can do.

2021 Melville "Estate" Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir

\$39.95 94WA I've long admired Chad's ability to incorporate whole-cluster fermentation into wines



without it becoming the dominant character. He has the perfect touch when it comes to capturing the positives of stem inclusion, yet without fumbling on the common pitfalls. The 2021 Pinot is assertively structured with deep red fruits, Maraschino cherry, Amaro-like tones, spiced citrus peel, sandalwood and dusty earth. A Pinot that can work with richer game and roast pork and will no doubt age beautifully.

2019 Melville "Estate" Sta. Rita Hills Syrah \$38.99

95W&S 94VN Though this SRH article is dominated by Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, the region is also home to some fantastic plantings of ultra cool-climate Syrah that produce perhaps the most Northern Rhône-esque wines anywhere in California. Melville has consistently produced some of the finest Syrah in the region. The 2019 is stellar—tons of meaty, peppery aromas mingle with lavender, bracken, and garrigue tones. Smoky dark fruit, plum, and blackberry.

Brooding and powerful but not heavy in any way. A baby but already drinking beautifully.



Sandhi

Sandhi founders Rajat Parr and Sashi Moorman both came to the wine business via food. Both were professionally trained chefs before succumbing to the potent venom of the wine bug. No surprise then that the wines at Sandhi are very much inspired by traditional techniques and styles you'd find in Burgundy. An ethos of making wine in the vineyard and minimal intervention in the cellar drives all that they do. Despite the fact that the wines could essentially be deemed "natural wines" these are far from the "natty" wines that can be very divisive. Sandhi's wines for me are defined by ultimate purity and elegance. They tend to be on the lighter side with lots of whole clusters, subtle oak usage, and firm acid lines. They typically champion balance over brawn.

**2021 Sandhi Sta. Rita Hills Pinot Noir \$36.95 96WA**

A stunningly pure and ethereal expression. The fruit here is 95+% from Domaine de La Côte plus some from La Rinconada, from some of the finest parcels in the appellation. Translucent ruby in the glass, haunting aromas of fresh roses, baking spice, bramble, smashed pomegranate, cured meat, and chalk dust. Very fine tannins, scintillating acidity. Just beautiful.

2020 Sandhi "La Rinconada**Vineyard" Sta. Rita Hills Chardonnay \$64.95 96WA**

95WE 94VN One of the finest bottles of California Chard you're likely to find—stunning. From vines planted in 1997 in Diatomaceous shale, farmed organically for decades, this is a benchmark for SRH. Subtle struck flint, summer meadow, perfectly ripe peach, baked golden apple, pie crust, and almond paste. Could easily be Puligny...in a great year!



Brewer-Clifton

What SRH article would be complete without a Greg Brewer wine!? The biggest problem I have with Greg's wines over the past few years is that we can't keep them in stock! Few have enough talent to hold



a candle to this guy's winemaking prowess; yet when you meet him he's the most humble, self-effacing, gracious person you could imagine. The way Greg typically makes his Chardonnay is somewhat different than many of his neighbors. Modern trends have leaned toward earlier and earlier picking and then using oxidative processes, long lees aging, and élevage in new oak to build texture into the wines. Greg prefers to hang the fruit a little

longer to achieve greater ripeness and volume from the get-go. Then just about everything in the winemaking process is about sculpting the raw material into a linear form. Only partial malo, no new oak, often lots of stainless steel maturation—all to whittle the wine into its purest form.



2020 Brewer-Clifton Sta. Rita Hills Chardonnay \$34.95 95JD Voluminous and exuberant from the get-go. Citrus blossoms, beautiful yellow stone fruits, lemon curd, wet sand, and some kind of baklava element (but not sweet). Complex, but eminently crushable and versatile. A joy to drink. Granting it 95 points, Jeb Dunnuck says, "A gorgeous perfume of orange blossom, honeyed almonds, brioche, and lemon oil... this thrilling, deep, layered, singular Chardonnay will keep for over a decade."

Producer Spotlight: Paetra Wines



I was recently introduced to the wines of Weinbau Paetra, a small Oregon-based producer focused on German-style wines. I was quite literally amazed by the entire lineup—so much so that I bought four of the wines presented to me and stocked our shelves with them.

The passion, dedication, and expertise of proprietor and winemaker Bill Hooper is clearly evident in each

and every wine. Bill is one of just two American graduates from the prestigious, 120-year-old winemaking program in Neustadt, Germany. After apprenticing with some of the most famed producers in the Pfalz, he moved to Oregon to fulfill his dream of applying these centuries-old principles and techniques to the quality of raw materials he knew existed in the Willamette Valley. A stint with legendary Oregon producer Brooks (known for exceptional Rieslings of their own) set Bill up in his new home. Not only are the Paetra wines faithful to their roots, but they also represent some of the finest values I've seen in this category for years.

enjoys an extended growing season, perfect for the gradual ripening of Riesling. A step up in depth and complexity from the Willamette bottling, this shows more ripeness and density. Again, it was fermented very close to bone-dry, but with a more exotic take on the flavors. Reminds me of the great wines of Müller-Catoir from Pfalz.



2021 Paetra "Wahlstrom Vineyard" Eola-Amity Hills Pinot Noir \$29.95 Showing he can also turn his hand to stunning red wines, Hooper has crafted a magical wine with his Wahlstrom Vineyard Pinot Noir. From a ridgeline site in the Eola-Amity Hills that lies directly adjacent to a basalt quarry, this low-cropping, organically tended vineyard has produced a Pinot Noir of uncommon elegance and precision. Rose petals, fresh forest berries, black raspberry, pine needle, clove, and incense. Silky, refined, and pure—a stunning value for money.



With roots in Germany's Pfalz and a home in Oregon's Willamette Valley, Bill Hooper is uniquely positioned to make some of the best Riesling coming out of the U.S.



2021 Paetra Coastal Range Pinot Blanc \$19.95

With a tiny production of fewer than 200 cases, Paetra's Pinot Blanc comes from old vines planted at an 800-foot elevation in Oregon's coastal mountain range. Hooper describes Pinot Blanc as a bridge between Chardonnay and Riesling. This wine has a beautiful texture on the palate, with white floral notes, dewy orchard fruit, and more stony minerals. Made with native yeast fermentation and aged entirely in neutral oak barrels to impart texture without a strong oak imprint.

2021 Paetra "Lobenstein Vineyard" Yamhill-Carlton Riesling \$24.95 Lobenstein is a small family vineyard in Yamhill-Carlton, farmed using organic and biodynamic practices. It's a cool site that

Recession Busters!

With the standards of viticulture and winemaking continuing to improve all across the industry, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of great wines at K&L under \$20. Here are a few to check out.

2018 Talley “Estate” Arroyo Grande Chardonnay \$14.95 (Elsewhere \$25) 92VN 92WE Probably the best deal in Chardonnay we’ve seen in many, many years. Talley has long been one of the leading Pinot Noir and Chardonnay producers in California; even at regular retail pricing of \$25 their Estate Chardonnay is a stunning value. At our current \$14.95 it’s just outrageous. Customers and staff have been stocking up on this by the case. This deal won’t be around forever, so don’t snooze on it.

2021 Tatomer “Hinter der Mauer” Central Coast White Blend \$15.99 92VN Graham Tatomer’s Hinter der Mauer was originally created to be an excellent value wine during the initial stages of the COVID-19 outbreak. The wine is so good that the 2021 release is now a go-to for me when folks are looking for an everyday, versatile white. A unique blend of Grüner Veltliner and Riesling, this is perfect for pounding on your porch, couch, dining table... anywhere that drinking wine isn’t prohibited! Hugely overdelivers and is as versatile as they come.



2021 Union Sacre “Kick On Ranch - Old Vine” Santa Barbara County Dry Riesling \$14.95 Another crushable white at a ridiculously low price, this Riesling shares a fruit source with the Hinter der Mauer above. These mature vines in the sandy soils west of the Sta. Rita Hills produce some of the raciest, most delicious Riesling grapes in the state. Vibrant citrus peel, crunchy apple, lemon drop, and a sea spray salinity.

2020 Maidenstoen “Wirz Vineyard” Cienega Valley Riesling \$19.95 94WE Another wonderful Riesling that is priced to sell is the Wirz Vineyard bottling from Riesling specialist, Maidenstoen. Coming from old, organic, dry-farmed vines planted in the 1960s, this wine really speaks of its decomposed granite and limestone soils. Zesty with tons of mouthwatering acidity and citrusy flavors but with a more ample texture and almost Sémillon-like waxy note. Love this wine.

2020 Marietta “Old Vine” California Rosé \$9.95 92WA 92JS Rosé season never ends for me...even after back-to-back-to-back atmospheric rivers. Marietta’s Old Vine Rosé is always one of my favorites, and I loaded up on this one at a fantastic price. Perfectly tart red fruits, fresh herbs, a touch of spice cake, dry and refreshing. You can’t go wrong here.

2019 Avennia “Lydian” Columbia Valley GSM Blend \$19.95 94WE 91VN Avennia’s 2019 Lydian snuck in here during the holiday rush and has been a bit under the radar. However, make no mistake: this is one of the strongest values from Washington State right now. Just look at the broad critical acclaim for a sub-\$20 wine. Jubilant blackberry, smoked plum, peppered steak, dried herbs de Provence, and hot stone.

2019 Chamisal San Luis Obispo County Pinot Noir \$19.95 94WE We managed to get another drop of this big-time over-performer—a 94-point Pinot for under \$20!? This vibrant, youthful Pinot Noir was matured 50% in French oak and 50% in tank—it’s pure, fresh, quaffable. Winemaker Fin Dufresne gained much of his experience in the hallowed cellars of Calera. He has a magic touch with Pinot.

2018 Lerner “Transverse” Santa Barbara County Syrah \$19.95 (Previously \$30) 93VN 92JD This is a stunner of a wine for a crazy low price. Combining fruit from the legendary Lerner Estate in Ballard Canyon and combining it with cooler climate fruit from Shokorian and Donnachadh in the Sta. Rita Hills, this is a superbly well-rounded Syrah that hits the bullseye for varietal typicity and expression. Dark red to black fruit, lilac, smoked meat, bacon fat, crushed rock, and charcoal.

2019 Koehler Estate “Rebel” Santa Ynez Valley Cabernet Sauvignon - Syrah \$19.95 (Previously \$55) A monster discount earns this wine a spot on the list of sub-\$20s, but it’s not really fair as its SRP is \$55! Based on a best-barrel selection of the richest, most exuberant, fruit-forward Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah from Koehler Estate. A real mouthful for sure—dark fruit, blackcurrant, mulberry, black raspberry, scorched earth, leather, toasted spices, camphor, subtle wood smoke, and dried flowers. Big, dense, and powerful, but not without detail and definition. The fruit is pure and expressive but retains plenty of class and balance.

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