



The 586-acre Jonata estate includes 84 acres of vineyards, as well as pastures lined with goats, sheep, and chickens.



The Jonata name refers to an 1845 Mexican land grant, Rancho San Carlos de Jonata, which covers expansive territory across the Santa Ynez Valley. The winery's estate can be found at the heart of this area.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JONATA WINERY

# The Plant Kid

DISCOVERING THE  
MAGIC OF **JONATA'S**  
SANDY SOILS IN  
BALLARD CANYON

by Meridith May

**THE 30-MILE CORRIDOR** of the Santa Ynez Valley offers up a diverse array of personalities for grapes and terroir. The warmer area in the eastern section—known as Happy Canyon—is producing revelation-worthy Bordeaux varieties.

Meanwhile, on the east-to-west foothills of Buellton, the Sta. Rita Hills serves as a mecca for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. But for Rhône varieties, there may be no better AVA than Ballard Canyon not only in the Valley, but perhaps anywhere in the United States.

Ballard Canyon, running north and south, gets the best of both regions, with a cooling marine influence from the west blended with the moderation of the warmer Happy Canyon. The result of this mixed climate puts this region on the map as Syrah country.

There are less than 20 Ballard Canyon wine estates: Some sit on limestone, some on clay, and some on sand (or a combination of the three). At Jonata's 586-acre estate, the farm pastures are lined with goats, sheep, and chickens. Off of the ranch, 84 vines are planted to grapes on rectangular-shaped Careaga sandstone. Winemaker Matt Dees, a former plant science major at the University of Vermont, began making wine 20 years ago and traversed from Australia to Napa to New Zealand before he began working for



*Jonata and The Hilt Winemaker Matt Dees.*

Jonata Owner Stan Kroenke in 2004. "I was always a plant kid," he tells *The SOMM Journal*. "I was also fascinated by bugs."

Dees also studies soils and admires the attributes that the all-sand profile displays on the estate, including good drainage and low vigor for discernable fruit ripeness. "Without water, the vines go into survival mode, which works like a dream," he says. The blocks and sub-blocks of vine sites are each matched with differing rootstocks, clones, and planting densities.

While Syrah, Grenache, Viognier, and other Rhône varieties thrive on the Ballard Canyon estate, Dees says Jonata farms "the

Noah's Ark of grapes at the estate—I I varieties in all, with no Chardonnay or Pinot Noir." His other label, **The Hilt**, shows off the best of Sta. Rita Hills-based fruit. "What I love about Ballard Canyon is that the coolness keeps the wines aromatic with structure, making them formidable," he explains.

We sat down with Dees at the Buellton facility (a new winery is planned to open in 2019 on The Hilt's 3,600-acre property Rancho Salsipuedes, home to some of the Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes grown for The Hilt label). Together, with The Rolling Stones' "Start Me Up" fittingly playing

in the background, we tasted Jonata's newly bottled 2015 vintages. "This is the first time I'm tasting these," Dees pointed out. "We just bottled them in August."

Comprised of 74% Cabernet Franc, 24% Cabernet Sauvignon, and a small amount of Petit Verdot and Merlot, **El Alma de Jonata** is kept 18–24 days on the skins followed by a seven-day cold soak. "I love Bourgueil," admitted Dees. And while he didn't compare this wine to the Loire, Dees explains that the grape grown on the Jonata estate—unlike the French expression—can be a tannic monster with ferocious concentration and intensity. Dees chose to tame the black, inky beast with very forgiving tannins, fresh violets, and a hint of Mediterranean herbs. "We pump over only two minutes a day," he explained. "It's the only grape we work with where we try to keep tannins in the skin." All four grapes undergo co-fermentations at cooler temperatures.

**La Sangre de Jonata** is 97% Syrah with 3% Viognier. Low, paltry yields produce what might be the blackest and densest color I've seen in a Syrah. It's incredibly fragrant, with notes of heather, anise, and graphite. "See? It's this sand dune we're on, plus the '14, '15 and even '16 vintages transported Syrah to a higher level," Dees said, adding that he used 25% new and 75% neutral French oak. Chewy with white pepper and plum sweetness, this is an outstanding wine. **SJ**

## Now, Let's Take It to The Hilt

The first vintages of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir were bottled under the Jonata label, but of course, not being estate fruit, both the Sta. Rita Hills grapes and the bordering Rancho Salsipuedes fruit needed a label of their own. Thus, **The Hilt**. "Stan [Kroenke] and I are Pinot and Chardonnay fanatics," Dees said. "Though we love and admire the wines of Burgundy, we don't want to make them here. While we would kill for that minerality and cut, we would be foolish to ignore or forsake the beautiful sunshine California has to offer."

Well, Matt, you've come pretty close. **The Hilt Vanguard** from Santa Barbara County is crisp and clean, yet also mouth-filling. I declared there couldn't possibly be any oak in this, and I was mistaken. "That's what we want to hear," Dees said with a laugh. "We stretch and pull to make it lean." In fact, he uses 100% new French oak and 20% malolactic fermentation. The buttercream and melon have lime interspersed.

Yet another level up of Burgundian style from the Vanguard is **The Hilt Old Guard Chardonnay**, also made with fruit from Santa Barbara County. The acidity is ultra-bright with ripe, tropical notes and a grassy nose. Lush white peach and jasmine finish with salinity—it's an edgy wine. "Chardonnay without acid is like a Beatles album without Lennon," explained Dees. "No irony, edge, or darkness."

