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Rusack pinot noir ranks among best of Santa Barbara

Pinot noir fans know the names of Santa Barbara County producers such as Au Bon Climat, Sanford, Byron and Longoria. Here's a new one to add to the list: Rusack Vineyards.

Rusack was established in 1985 by Geoff and Alison Rusack in the Ballard Canyon area of Santa Ynez Valley. But it's only recently that the winery has started producing excellent pinot noir. That began when John Falcone became the winemaker about 18 months ago.

Falcone spent about seven years as winemaker at Napa's Atlas Peak, where the best known wine is sangiovese. So how does a guy who specialized in sangiovese have such success with pinot, a notoriously difficult grape?

"There's a lot of similarities with the problems that come with both varieties," Falcone says. In the vineyard, he says, it's crucial to choose the right site and manage the vines properly. In the winery, both grapes require gentle handling to minimize overly harsh tannins. And both are very sensitive to too much oak.

Falcone says he's aiming for an elegant style of pinot, and he's achieved that with all three bottlings he's made, though the wines have very different characters. The 2001 Santa Barbara County pinot (\$18) has dark cherry, a hint of cola and some racy acidity. The



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2001 Santa Maria Valley pinot (\$25) is very pretty, with crushed strawberries, juicy acidity, good structure and a long finish. The 2001 Reserve from Santa Rita Hills (\$32) has the most depth, concentration and tannin of the bunch.

Where the Santa Maria is pretty and feminine, the Santa Rita is much more muscular. But it still has a smooth texture, and with some time in the glass, opens up into something quite delicious. The reserve should also age well.

Considering the number of Santa Barbara pinots in the \$40-\$50 range, the Rusack wines are very attractively priced, too. All are made in fairly small quantities of just a few hundred cases.

The winery's Ballard Canyon location is really too warm for pinot noir, so the grapes are purchased. The same is true of the chardonnay, another focus for the winery. (I find the chardonnays to be a little over-ripe, although they're made in a style that's very popular.)

Ballard Canyon is perfect for syrah, however, and Falcone says that will be winery's third

specialty. The 2001, which isn't available yet, will be the first vintage Falcone has supervised from start to finish. The area should also be good for sangiovese, and Falcone plans to make a little of that. (Stolpman Vineyard, just up the road, has had success with both syrah and some Italian varieties, including sangiovese. Another neighbor, Beckmen Vineyards, is known for its syrah.)

The Rusack wines have not been distributed in Northern California, but that should change soon, Falcone says. If you can't find the wines, they're available from the winery at (805) 688-1278 or www.rusackvineyards.com.

NEGRETTE, ANYONE? : Negrette is one of those wines you don't see every day. I've tasted only two from California. Wild Horse Winery in Templeton produces a good one, but the winery that's developed something of a following for negrette is DeRose Vineyards in

the Cienega Valley near Hollister.

DeRose has about 100 acres of vineyard. Roughly 40 acres were planted before 1900, including the negrette, formerly known as pinot St. George. The property was owned for many years by Almaden Vineyards. In 1988, the DeRose and Cedolini families purchased the property, which was weed-covered and in disrepair. Yields in the old vineyards are

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very low, generally less than a ton per acre.

I've tasted a few DeRose wines over the years, and these are the best ones yet. The 2001 negrette (\$20), to be released in March, is a rich, ripe wine with black cherry, plum, hints of anise and rose petals, and firm tannins underlying the plush fruit.

The Hollywood Red (\$16) is a blend that's two-thirds zinfandel and a little syrah, with the rest made up of all manner of strange grapes — negrette, cabernet pfeffer, alicante bouschet and something called rose of Peru. The wine isn't vintage dated, but the new version is "bottling release four." The wine is quite ripe (and 15 percent alcohol), with rich cherry and blackberry flavors and overtones of white pepper and chocolate. Despite the ripeness, it still has good acidity.

I also tried the 2000 cabernet franc (\$18), a wine with a leafy quality that can turn downright weedy and vegetal when the grapes are grown in the wrong place. But the DeRose wine is ripe and plush, with cherry, black currant and spice and a lovely aroma. These vines are much younger, about 15 years old.

Like the Rusack wines, DeRose may be a little difficult to find. To order from the winery, call (831) 636-9143 or go to www.derosewine.com.

SHAW REACTION : I received dozens of e-mails in response to my evaluation of the Charles Shaw wines. Most of you agreed with me — that, even at just \$1.99, most of the wines aren't worth drinking. But the wines also had some staunch defenders. A few readers said they really liked the wines — lucky for them. People should drink what they like, and if it's inexpensive, so much the better. But several defended it mostly on the basis of its low price.

If you're buying the wines simply because they're cheap and, hey, they're not *bad*, I'd still encourage you to spend a few extra dollars to get something more to your liking. A \$6 wine may be three times more expensive (as several readers pointed out), but in absolute terms, we're talking four bucks more. It's not quite like the difference between a \$20 bottle and a \$60 bottle.

Remember: Just because a wine is cheap doesn't mean it's a good value.

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