

Melville: Getting it right from the beginning

January 15, 2009 1:03 PM, by Dennis Schaefer

For more than a decade, Melville Winery has quietly gone about its business of producing world-class wines without a lot of fanfare. In the grand scheme of things in Santa Rita Hills, it's not a legacy producer like Babcock or Alma Rosa, nor is it the newest kid on the block, popping out 50-case lots made from purchased grapes that earn high scores from critics.

From the very beginning in 1996, Melville wanted to be an estate producer that established vineyards and controlled its own fate, not content to be at the mercy of other growers. By farming its own grapes, it could also control the yields of the vines and the quality. That was long before the whole Santa Rita Hills wine thing caught on; in fact, the appellation only became an officially approved AVA (American Viticultural Area) in 2001. Vintner Ron Melville and his sons, Chad and Brent, had the foresight to see that this area, west of Highway 101 out to Lompoc, had dazzling potential for grape growing.

Now they have about 140 acres of grapevines, including Verna's Vineyard, a newer planting in Cat Canyon, north of Los Alamos. Devoted to pinot noir, chardonnay and Rhone varietals, they have succeeded by planting the right grapes in the right places, harvesting at peak ripeness, then minimally intervening in the winemaking process (Greg Brewer is the winemaker, or "non-winemaker," as he sometimes refers to himself) to let the vineyard sites speak for themselves.

And by the way, in the recent issue of Wine Advocate, every Melville wine scored 90 points or better. I had the opportunity to taste a number of Melville wines from the 2006 and 2007 vintages, side by side.

- Viognier, Verna's Vineyard 2007 (\$22): Exotic beauty of a nose on this wine embedded with stone fruits; it takes off right out of the glass. Those dried peach, nectarine and apricot fruits come through on the palate as opulent and weighty but backed by a finely tempered acidity. A honeyed sweetness, from the ripe fruit, lingers long, while orange blossom, coconut and hazelnut dance around the edges. I've tasted viogniers at twice the price that don't have this type of vivacity and pure varietal expression.

- Chardonnay, Verna's Vineyard 2006 (\$26): Again, good purity of fruit

esters on the nose, effusive but still focused. I found a good cornucopia of apple, banana, pear, white peach, citrus and pineapple flavors, though their demonstrativeness is more subtle than I make it sound. It's all wrapped up in a lean, sleek, mineraly package, crisp and graceful on the finish. The 2007 version is more boisterous, moving more toward the tropical fruit side of things but with exotic seasoning hints of ginger, hazelnut, tamarind and rock salt.

- Chardonnay, Clone 76 Inox 2007 (\$36): Now for something totally different. These grapes come from only south-facing slopes in sandy, loamy soils. The vines produce small berries in small clusters, all the better to concentrate on the essence of the vineyard and the varietal. Inox is French for "stainless steel," meaning the resulting wine spends its entire life in stainless steel tanks without the encumbrance of oak. Inox is very Chablis-like with mineraly, steely, nervy acidic flavors, the kind that pair well with oysters and seafood.
- Chardonnay, Santa Rita Hills, 2006 (\$32): Tropical fruit aromatics are evident but more of the lemony/citrus aspects come through. On the palate, it seems both savory and saline, in fact (and I mean this is the best possible way), it has top shelf Margarita-like flavor components. The lemon-lime and salinity are augmented by honeysuckle, orange blossom, lemon drop and gingerbread; it has a lot of verve and style. The 2007 version is just as intriguing, but even more dense and packed with flavors components.
- Pinot Noir, Verna's Vineyard, 2006 (\$26): Dark fruits rule in this pinot noir with black plum, raspberry and spice box intertwined. Oak is less a factor here, as only 20 percent new French barrels were employed. It's a big-boned wine with plenty of red fruit flavors that include earthy background elements of forest floor and mushrooms as well as savory herbs. The 2007 version amps it up quite a bit, with more red fruits, more spice and the savory and sweet in perfect harmony.
- Pinot Noir, Santa Rita Hills, 2006 (\$32): Structurally, this estate Santa Rita Hills wine seems more defined and set up than the Verna's. The flavors, black cherry, red currants and black raspberry, feel more concentrated. Though tightly wound, the entire savory/fruit package is beginning to show well, with some swirling in the glass. The 2007 version shows the same structural components, but due to near-perfect vintage conditions, it is bigger, riper and rounder, with black fruits and full-blown exotic spices.

Mark your calendar for March 20 for Melville's annual release of its small-lot collection, a series of 2007 pinot noirs that show the winery can

go toe-to-toe with any small producer in the appellation in producing distinct and unique wines. The High Density, Terraces, Indigene and Carrie's pinots are very site-specific, age longer and cost a little more. But then again, quality never goes out of style.

Wine expert Dennis Schaefer's column appears every other week in the Food section. E-mail: life@newspress.com.