

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



Jorian Hill: The Accidental Vintners

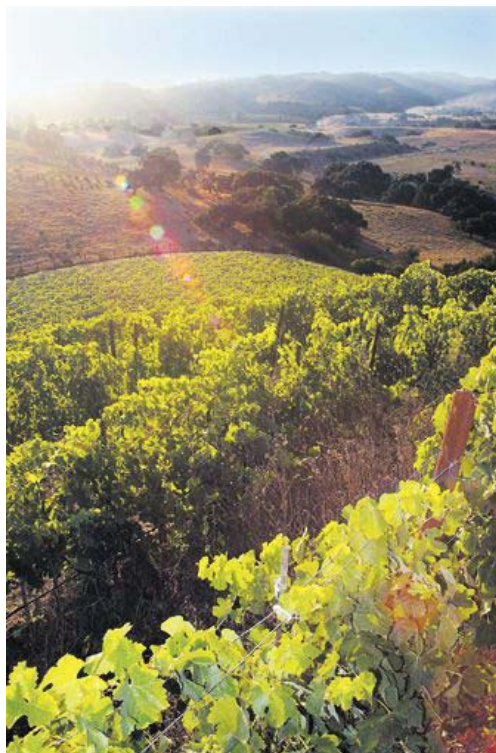
by Dennis Schaefer

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Gary and Jeanne Newman loved exploring the coastline, foothills and winery back roads of Santa Barbara County. It always provided a getaway from their high-powered jobs in the entertainment industry (he as chairman of 20th Century Fox Television; she as a partner in an entertainment law firm).

It was such a good respite that they began looking for residential properties in North County so they could establish a permanent destination for their travels, close enough to be easily accessible but far enough from the hubbub of L.A. to be restorative and calming.

Hidden back in the hills of Ballard Canyon in Santa Ynez Valley, they found a bucolic country estate that just happened to include seven-and-a-half acres of vines, planted to Rhone varietals. Suddenly, the city slickers were now unexpectedly not only grape growers but vintners.



Jorian Hill vineyard in Ballard Canyon.

PHOTO COURTESY JORIAN HILL

"The prior owners told us that it was a 'turnkey operation,' " recalls Jeanne Newman. "We bought the property two weeks before harvest and quickly realized there was no key to turn! But we were in the middle of a process and couldn't turn back."

Their first vintage as Jorian Hill (the moniker is a combination of their children's names, Jordan, Reed and Hillary) was in 2004 and they haven't looked back. In subsequent vintages, they could have easily sold their grapes to other wineries but they persevered as vintners.

"Despite the anxieties of the first harvest, we had become obsessed with the challenge of making first-class Rhone varietals from our grapes," says Ms. Newman.

The learning curve was not without a few zigzags. They realized there was no recipe for making fine wine, as they first mistakenly thought. Ms. Newman took viticultural classes at UC Davis to better understand the winemaking process. The couple delegated the heavy lifting to local experts: Jeff Frey (Frey Farming) for vineyard management and Mark Horvath and Joey Gummere (Kenneth-Crawford Winery) for winemaking.

"We were committed to bringing out the very best in our vineyard," Ms. Newman explains. "With seven and a half acres, we could afford to pay individual attention to every vine and make it produce the best grapes possible for the varietal. That commitment carried over into the winemaking."

The Jorian Hill production is small, under 1,000 cases per year. All the grapes utilized in the winemaking come only from their own estate vineyard; no other outside grapes are used, so when you taste their wines, you can really get a sense of place here: exactly what very specific kind of wine this small, secluded vineyard can produce. The vineyard, planted to viognier, syrah and grenache, is farmed organically and sustainably. The grape yields are purposely kept low to concentrate the flavors and the wine is made in small vineyard block lots.

Some thoughts on Jorian Hill's delicious current releases:

- Jorian Hill Viognier, Santa Ynez Valley 2007 (\$30): Lemon zest, honeysuckle and a flinty minerality are part of the lively aromatics of this 100 percent viognier, from the highly prized Alban Field Select clone of the grape. It gives an immediate impression on the palate as a lean, clean and bright white wine that's more about structure, form and process than just a ball of fruit-forward flavors. Yes, the flavors are there and they are bright and sunny, with lemon leading the way as well as ripe yellow pear and just a whisper of grapefruit tanginess. With swirling in the glass, an essence of white florals, like gardenia, add to the aromatics while clover honey and yellow peach add to the flavor spectrum. But the great thing is that none of the flavors stick out like a sore thumb; they coalesce to form a unified flavor front. The crisp acidity on the upbeat finish is also really key to making great viognier; in this case, the tension between the fruit concentration and acidity is perfect. This is a wine that makes you call out for food.
- Jorian Hill Syrah, Santa Ynez Valley 2007 (\$24): Deep black cherry and plum on the nose with hints of smoke and cinnamon plus a pleasant but unusual (for syrah) floral quality that counterpoints the deep-dish aromatics. Extracted black cherry and plum also on the palate with wood smoke and a dash of pepper, the latter a trademark of French red rhones, not often found in the California versions. Moderate in body and in alcohol, this syrah is not jammy with gobs of fruit; rather, it's focused like a laser beam on great fruit concentration that runs deep and is still tightly wound around its core. The balancing act holding this wine together, as with any good wine worthy of aging, is its firm acidity.
- Jorian Hill Beespoke, Santa Ynez Valley 2007 (\$38): Now for something lighter and brighter, at least in a certain sense. The Beespoke, named for the ever-present bees in the vineyard during harvest, is composed of equal amounts of syrah and grenache. The latter

grape brings strawberry, red cherry and, most exotically, pomegranate, to the aroma and flavor table and it plays well with syrah's normally darker side. Make no mistake, though -- just because you get lightness and darkness in the same package doesn't mean this wine is a compromise. Rather, you get a more layered complexity than what might be found in either varietal when bottled on its own. The wine also has a pleasant savory, herbal and flinty component that immediately triggers the salivary reflex and conjures up appropriate food pairings. Decant this one about an hour before dinner to bring out all its elements to best effect. Or you could cellar it for up to five years.

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