

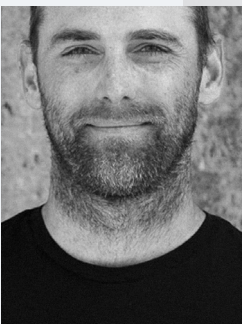
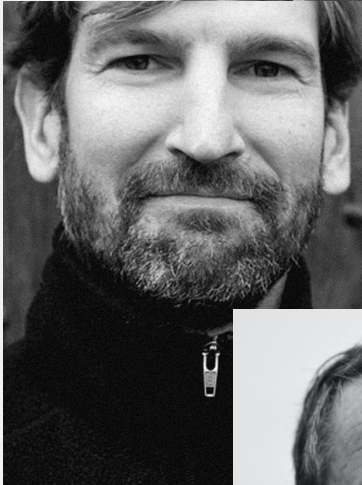


CLUB MAGNUM

VINS ET EXPÉRIENCES

# RACINES

SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA



**RACINES IS A BRILLIANT NEW COLLABORATION WHICH FEATURES THE TALENTS OF FOUR PIONEERS WHO HAVE COME TOGETHER TO PUT DOWN ROOTS IN ARGUABLY THE MOST EXCITING ‘NEW CLASSIC’ REGION FOR FINE WINES ON THE PLANET: SANTA BARBARA.**

The story really begins in the 1980s. Father and son, Hubert and Etienne de Montille, sensibly decided that it would be to everyone's benefit if Etienne travelled and experienced the world outside of Burgundy before his eventual return to the Côte d'Or. In 1982, Etienne packed his bags and headed to the United States, so beginning a love affair with California which has never left him and has seen him returning regularly throughout his life, visiting old friends, making new ones and revelling in the freedoms of the West Coast.

From top: Etienne de Montille; Brian Sieve; Rodolphe Péters, Justin Willett.

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Etienne of course returned to France, first working in Paris in finance alongside his commitments in Burgundy before gradually taking over at Domaine de Montille and of course managing and eventually purchasing the Château de Puligny. As with his father, a thirst for deal-making and adventure runs deep and so in 2015 and then again in 2016, in partnership with his long-standing right-hand man Brian Sieve, he made an extensive trip to California in search of opportunity for a new project. With their connections, doors were readily opened to them the length and breadth of the state. By the end of their trip, Santa Barbara and the Santa Rita Hills had emerged as the leading candidate to answer the question of 'where' and in local winemaker Justin Willett, they were also able to answer the 'who'. 'When', 'How' and of course 'How much' remained to be thrashed out on their return to France.

With further detailed work back in Burgundy and regular communication between the newly-formed trio, the pieces of the jigsaw came together. In 2017, I was able to join Etienne on a further trip to California and his excitement for the new project couldn't have been more evident. Brian, Etienne and Justin were already zoomed in on specific vineyards and were able to move quickly to secure fruit from the 2017 vintage in order to make their first wines, vinified by Justin in his cellars in Lompoc.

There was to be a further development, however: Etienne saw the clear parallels between the soils of the Santa Rita hills and those of Champagne and felt sure that there was excellent potential for sparkling wines as well as for still ones. His great friend Rodolphe Péters, one of the key figures in the 'Grower Champagne' movement, was intrigued by Etienne's observation and after much discussion and investigation agreed to become the fourth partner in the project, which the quartet later named 'Racines'. The first sparkling wines are anticipated in late 2021.

The model of producing wine from fruit grown on someone else's land is very much common practice in California and particularly in the Santa Barbara area. Indeed, it is this structure that has led to the explosion of innovation in new winemaking centres such as Lompoc where young talented winemakers are able to access small quantities of top quality fruit in a way that would be very difficult in more established regions.

**THANKS TO THEIR  
CONNECTIONS, RACINES IS  
ALREADY WORKING WITH SOME  
OF THE LEGENDARY SITES IN  
THE REGION FOR PINOT NOIR  
AND CHARDONNAY: SANFORD  
AND BENEDICT, WENZLAU, LA  
RINCONADA, LA ENCANTADA  
AND BENTROCK.**

*Racines*



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It is worth spending a moment to understand just how recent this region is in global wine terms. Richard Sanford first started looking for vineyard land in the valley on his return from Vietnam in the early 1970s. A geographer by training, he had realised the unique properties of this transverse valley that allows cold sea breezes and fog to funnel up the valley, bringing temperatures down from levels that would otherwise make grape-growing impossible this far south for cool climate varieties such as Pinot Noir, the grape Sanford had fallen for via the seductive charms of Volnay.

Analysis of the soils had provided further encouragement: the crumbly diatomaceous earth, essentially composed of fossilised algae, was an obvious parallel to Burgundy's limestone, while the presence of clays and loams was also suggestive of an affinity with Burgundy's grapes. The weathered quartz found in the hills, known locally as 'chert' only added further complexity. However, as promising as this canvas was, the area was known for the production of flower seeds, arable crops and for ranching and convincing landowners to either sell up or convert their land to vineyards was an enormous challenge. Even today, standing on one of the valley's hilltops, there would appear to be hundreds of acres of potential vineyard land available in a way that could only be dreamed of in Burgundy.

Fortunately Sanford together with his business partner, Michael Benedict, succeeded in planting six hundred acres (272 ha) and achieved rapid recognition, inspiring many others to come to the valley and make their way.

Racines is starting small but with ambitions to grow in the mid-term. Having engaged geologist guru Yves Hérody, the partners have purchased land in 2019. Six hectares were planted in 2020 and four hectares will be planted in 2021. The soil is consistent with the rest of the valley but a large proportion sits on limestone. The plot is located between Clos Pepe and Melville Estate on highway 246 at an elevation affording views over the valley. It comprises six distinct soils with the first productions anticipated in 2023 and 2024. They have a 15-year contract in the highly-regarded Wenzlau vineyard, in which they farm their parcels themselves organically and are well positioned with contracts in Sanford and Benedict, La Encantada, Bentrock and La Rinconada.

Winemaking, as one would expect, combines the approaches taken at both Domaine de Montille and at Justin's Tyler Winery. Whole-cluster fermentation is favoured for the reds, a mixture of tank and barrel fermentation for the whites and in both colours the aim is for purity, terroir expression and elegance.



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At present there are six wines although this will change, particularly when the sparkling wines come on stream. There are multi-site blends in both colours under the Santa Rita Hills appellation as well as two single vineyard Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs. In Sanford and Benedict, Racines' parcels include some of the original 1971 vines in both colours. The other single vineyard Chardonnay, Bentrack, is a particularly special site at the western edge of the hill range, closest to the ocean. The rule of thumb as you move inland up the valley from west to east is that you add a degree of temperature every mile. At Bentrack, this cold, exposed, windy site is inhospitable and requires dedication to farm.

The best wines are strongly suggestive of the marine influence, tingling with minerals and salts and with revitalising, nervy acidity. Racines have two parcels, both north-facing, one on very rocky soils, the other with a higher component of marine sedimentary material. If your idea of California Chardonnay is deep, rich, golden, oaky, alcoholic and exotic then you are in for quite a shock!

For Pinot Noir, La Rinconada is a few miles further east, on the south side of the valley next to Sanford and Benedict. The vines being farmed by Racines are from original cuttings taken from Mount Eden by Richard Sanford and planted on deep, rocky soils. Key notes of wild flowers and herbs accompany the gorgeous swirls of red and blue fruit, offering both early pleasure and longer-term possibilities for development in bottle.

