On a warm afternoon in the spring of 2004, Matt Dees was doing something that no professor, no instructor, had taught him. As the winemaker for Jonata, in California’s Santa Ynez Valley, stood in a vineyard, he squinted a bit, and listened. He was attempting to hear how dry the leaves were. “I had to change the way I approached vineyard work, all thanks to Ruben,” says Dees. He’s talking about vineyard manager Ruben Solorzano, who has earned a sterling reputation despite—or perhaps thanks to—his highly unusual methods. Solorzano eschews much of the technological gadgetry that helps crews monitor everything from grapes’ sugar levels to their chemical contents. “He trusts himself more than he trusts machines,” Dees explains. “And when I first tried to do what he did, I couldn’t help but laugh a little. He’ll listen to the crackle of the leaves, getting a feel for the water content.”

Solorzano was a teenager when he began working for Jeff Newton at Coastal Vineyard Care in the 1980s. That’s where he learned the technical aspects of his job; it’s also where he learned to trust his instincts.

His methods fit snugly with an operation that was unusual in almost all respects right from the outset. Charles Banks and partners founded Jonata in 2000 to compete with the great wines of the world, planting a wide range of varieties, including many that had not found much success in Santa Barbara County, which is best known for Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Banks wanted Syrah and Grenache, but he also insisted on Sangiovese, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc, which had struggled in the region. Jonata released its first red wines, from the 2004 vintage, at more
The past decade at Jonata has been about coming to understanding the land and how to get the most out of the vines planted there. Sometimes it’s been counterintuitive. Several Santa Barbara County winemakers have been focused recently on reducing alcohol and cutting back on what they perceive as overly heavy wines, but the team at Jonata has had to go in the opposite direction, embracing a unique terroir that yields small amounts of ripe, powerful fruit.

Dees and Solorzano have made adjustments, both in the field and in the winery. And the wines have continued to improve; the first vintage reviewed by Wine Spectator, 2005, saw zero outstanding scores (90 or more points on the 100-point scale), but after tasting those early wines, senior editor James Laube wrote in 2007, “the potential is there for greatness.” And of the five reds reviewed from the 2007 vintage, three crossed the 90-point threshold. More recently, Jonata’s 2009 La Sangre de Jonata Santa Ynez Valley, made from Syrah, earned 92 points ($125).

Apparently you can learn a lot by listening to the leaves.

The most noticeable change at Jonata (proounced ho-NOT-ah; the local Chumash tribe’s word for oak tree) is the one that Dees credits with having the largest impact: It’s now a working farm, not just a series of rolling vineyards.

“Matt Dees is a self-confessed soil geek from Vermont, who, after stints in Napa Valley and New Zealand, embraced the challenge of making wine in a tricky environment. He has turned the 600-acre Jonata property into a working farm.

than $100 a bottle, despite being based in an area where the most expensive wines retailed for around $50. Jonata’s inaugural Sauvignon Blanc, from 2005, was released for $75, triple the price of most other Sauvignon Blancs from Santa Ynez Valley.

And then there was the issue of the soil.

Jonata’s property is composed almost entirely of Careaga sand, the fine grains of which provide excellent drainage. It’s ideal for growing root vegetables. Most vineyards in the Santa Ynez Valley are planted on varying mixes of clay, limestone and loam. Indeed, when Banks asked Frédéric Engerer of Bordeaux’s Château Latour to visit the property, the first-growth’s CEO concluded that the most profitable venture for the land would be to grow asparagus.

“I didn’t know what was going to work, but I knew we had a chance,” says Solorzano, 43. “That’s because we kept everything small. Growing vines in sand scares people, but if you do a lot of work, the fruit can get what it needs. We had very little fruit coming from our vines, but it was perfect.”

He most noticeable change at Jonata (pronounced ho-NOT-ah; the local Chumash tribe’s word for oak tree) is the one that Dees credits with having the largest impact: It’s now a working farm, not just a series of rolling vineyards. “You’ve got to start the tour with the hogs,” he says with a smile.

Of the nearly 600 acres at Jonata, the 83 acres under vine are the prize. But after several vintages, Dees and Solorzano began to suspect that the vines could be healthier if the entire property operated as a greater ecosystem.
Jonata vineyard team pens them in the tent of his investment. Both wineries to Screaming Eagle partner Stanley Kroenke in late 2006. Winemakers are working in a way that would prefer a thriving environment. That's why Dees, Solorzano and the 10-man crew have brought in 120 chickens, 100 sheep and goats and 16 turkeys. A barnful of cats and dogs hunt for uninvited critters and herd the goats. The sheep eat the grass. Almost every animal could be “on the payroll” in Dees’ work, with the exception of a vagabond llama — no one seems to know where it came from.

Above: These chickens are employees — the Jonata vineyard team pens them in the vineyards parcels for a few days, where they eat insects and add nitrogen to the soil.

“We care about the health of the ranch as a whole,” Dees says. “If you try to make wine here like you make it in Napa, you’re going to have problems. I always thought that was disrespectful, but fortunately, we don’t hear that anymore.” Jonata has never had an open-to-the-public tasting room, but Dees and Solorzano will welcome visitors to the property. “We want people to think about the larger picture,” says Dees. “We care about the health of the ranch as a whole.”

As the man who spends the most time with the grapes remains humble: “The vines are always teaching us something new,” says Dees. “We can dry farm some of it. I have learned so much from working here, and the first thing I’ve learned is to throw out your expectations and keep your eyes open.”

Jonata’s land is bordered by some of the top producers in the Santa Ynez Valley, including Stehling Vineyards. But the neighbors have planted vines on very different, much stonier soils. That means Jonata wines have little in common with wines made from similar sites. “We don’t generally think of pure sand as vineyard land,” Moorman says. “Jonata was never going to be a regional trend-setter, because other wineries are operating with much different material.”

Moorman’s point is a vital one in understanding Jonata’s place in the region. Instead of being a game changer, Jonata is a standalone outfit making wines that fit an uncommon niche. “Those are absolutely wines of place,” Moorman says. “Matt Dees is very, very smart. He knows that you couldn’t make elegant, low-alcohol wines there.”

In Napa, we would extract constantly,” Dees says. “The grapes open enough to allow that. Here, I was doing it that same way in 2004 and 2005. But I found that the seeds don’t get nearly as ripe here as they do up north, particularly with Cab Franc. So we ended up with grapes that had too much structure, too much tannin. Nowhere is that more important than in the vineyards, where Jonata’s reds share a hallmark, it’s substantial tannins, and as dark as the wines are, they are not jammy. In their youth the wines can be heavy, but Dees notes that time has proven to soften the edges. A taste of the earth-stained, olive-centric 2006 Syrah La Sangre suggests his point.

Dees says the same about Kroenke’s presence at Jonata. “We’re given a tremendous amount of freedom. I’m aware of what a privilege that is, and I have all kinds of space to make decisions. Jonata’s team describes Kroenke as an ideal owner — willing to spend money but not interested in micromanaging. Aside from Screaming Eagle, Kroenke also owns notable sports franchises such as the St. Louis Rams, Denver Nuggets and Colorado Avalanche. Sports Illustrated recently listed Kroenke as the sixth most powerful person in sports, noting that he’s a quiet owner who tends to stay in the background. Dees and Solorzano compare notes on the day after visiting their vineyard parcels multiple times. The duo has learned how to harness this unique terroir to produce intriguing wine.