



Jonata, named for the Chumash tribe's word for oak, has 83 acres of vines planted on sandy soils, atypical for Santa Barbara County.

# PARALLEL UNIVERSE

At Jonata, in Santa Barbara's Santa Ynez Valley, uncommon *terroir* calls for an uncommon approach

BY EVAN DAWSON • PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELIOT CROWLEY



In 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



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



Stan Kroenke, estimated to be worth \$4.1 billion in 2012, owns several sports franchises. He also owns two wineries—Jonata and Screaming Eagle.

our vines, but it was perfect."

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.

**T**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.





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.



“One of the most important things we can do is get away from monoculture,” says Dees, 34, uttering the word “monoculture” in a tone one might use for “mononucleosis.” Dees views vineyard-only properties as unnatural, a kind of illness even, for an environment that would prefer a thriving multi-culture. 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 unwelcome critters and herd the goats. The sheep cut the grass. Almost every animal could be “on the payroll,” in Dees’ words, with the exception of a vagabond llama—no one seems to know where it came from.

And then there are the 20 hogs. In a large pen filled with all manner of pigs, one is conspicuously larger than the rest, its grunts more guttural, its eyes more threatening. The hogs are romping through the mud when this porcine brawler, a wild boar, emerges, barking aggressively, and Dees’ guests suddenly become acutely aware of—and thankful for—the wire fencing that’s providing separation.

“That is one scary boy,” Dees says, clearly satisfied. The virile boar has been introduced to increase the hog population.

“We care about the health of the ranch as a whole,” Dees says. “We think better wine comes when the entire property thrives.” Lately, the chickens have been the busiest. “We take the chickens up to small parcels of the property that have nitrogen deficiencies. Over the course of a week, the chickens scratch and incorporate their own waste into the soil. They have high-nitrogen waste, so it’s a way to add something the earth was lacking.”

From the project’s outset, Jonata’s neighbors viewed the winery with skepticism. They saw big, out-of-town money coming in, with very little connection to the local scene. That perception was only heightened when Banks became a partner in Napa’s iconic cult wine Screaming Eagle. When Banks sold his share in both wineries to Screaming Eagle partner Stanley Kroenke in 2009, the new owner kept his distance. Kroenke has likely spent millions on the property, although he declines to reveal the extent of his investment.



Vineyard manager Ruben Solorzano (above) has no problem using technology as a backup, but finds observation is the best way to keep vines healthy in Jonata’s sand (left).

But as Dees tosses homegrown squash into the pen for the pigs to eat, he laughs at those initial concerns, saying that locals’ vision of Jonata as an expensive, unapproachable curiosity has changed. “We were supposed to be Screaming Eagle south, or Screaming Eagle’s second wine. Never mind that we’re six hours south of Napa. 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 modern-but-understated Buellton winery by appointment, and they’ll often break out the prosciutto, sausage and carnitas—turns out those hogs serve a purpose too.

Barely 25 when he was hired at Jonata, Dees is a self-described dirt geek with a degree in soil science from the University of Vermont and winemaking experience gained at New Zealand’s Craggy Range and Napa Valley’s Staglin Family Vineyard. “I’ve had to make some serious adjustments to the way we work in the winery,” he says. “If you try to make wine here like you make it in Napa, you can get in trouble.”

He points to Jonata’s Cabernet Franc blend, El Alma, as an example. “In Napa, we would extract constantly,” he says. “The grapes ripen 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 wines that had too much structure, too much tannin. Now we don’t do very much extraction at all in the late stages of fermentation. We lay off.”



Solorzano and Dees 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.

If 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 he’s right.

The wines bear Spanish names. The Cabernet Sauvignon is El Desafio; the Sangiovese is called Tierra. Todos is a blend of all 10 varieties grown on the property. Jonata has kept just about everything from the initial plantings except Merlot.

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 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.”

Nowhere is that more important than in the vineyards, where Solorzano has honed his approach. He is especially sensitive when it comes to irrigation. “When it’s hot, I look at the vines three times a day,” Solorzano says. “I want to see the vines in the morning, when it’s cold. I want to see the vines in the middle of the day, when they’re hot and stressed. Then I want to see the vines at the end of the day. If they’re happy, then they’re not in danger. If they’re still stressed then, we give them water. But we only want to give the vines enough water to keep the leaves alive; we want the berries to have flavor, not water.”

The result tends to be small, intensely flavored berries. “We probably don’t irrigate as much as people think,” Dees explains.

“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 Stolpman Vineyards. But the neighbors have planted vines on very different, much stonier soils. That means Jonata wines have little in common with wines made a short tractor ride away.

Ten years ago, that might have created some confusion. Today, winemakers in the region tend to see Jonata as “the outlier,” as Stolpman winemaker Sashi Moorman puts it. “Most people choose not to work with the kind of soil that Jonata has—they don’t generally think of pure sand as vineyard land,” Moorman says. “Jonata was never going to be a regional trendsetter, 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 stand-alone outfit making wines that fit an uncommon site. “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.” Indeed, Jonata’s red wines are nearly black in color. The whites are higher in alcohol than most, with a Sauvignon Blanc checking in around 16 percent.

The man who spends the most time with the grapes remains humble: “The vines are always teaching us something new,” says Solorzano. Then he and Dees have to cut the conversation short. They have an appointment with Jonata’s Syrah vines, their third of the day.

Rochester, N.Y.-based writer Evan Dawson is author of *Summer in a Glass: The Coming of Age of Winemaking in the Finger Lakes*.