

VINE HILL WINERY™

The Land Shepherdess

Rachel Ormes has taken on the Santa Cruz aura in a big way. Except for the English accent, you'd think she was born and raised right here in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Born in Bedfordshire, England, northeast of London, Rachel describes her homeland as lush and incredibly green, and says with a laugh, "I was always playing in the mud! My grandmother gave me my first plant which was an edible. The gift helped inspire in me the land/food connection."

When she later came to America, Rachel didn't have a specific path of travel in mind, just a desire to expand her knowledge and opportunities until she reunited with dirt and gardening and went back to school to study plants and the environment. One auspicious day she crossed paths with Nick Guerrero, proprietor of Vine Hill Winery, who helped her rack her first wine. It was a Grenache, made from organically farmed grapes that Rachel had been growing for a client in Saratoga. This was a very exciting way to get back into chemistry: taking fruit and making something out of it. She says the fruit was under ripe, with grapefruit flavors in the wine but she was hooked.

During their brief winemaking experience Rachel shared her knowledge of plants and viticulture. Nick was in the process of hiring a vineyard manager and had his candidate selected but suggested she come take a look at the vineyard site just for the experience. She did so in the winter of 2006. She noted erosion problems and other things she was familiar with due to her previous experience with gardening in the mountains. Rachel calls them "land issues." Nick's initial candidate ended up not taking the job and Rachel was hired full-time. She went to work first on stabilizing the soil, creating erosion channels and digging catch basins, and laying lots of jute. As Rachel says, "This was landscaping on a different scale. Ten acres of gardens was a real challenge!" Initially, Vine Hill property engaged the services of local vineyard consultant Rick Anzelone. He began putting in the first Pinot vineyard on the site in the

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spring of 2006. During this time, Rachel paid close attention to everything Rick was doing, learning about irrigation systems, trellising systems, vine spacing and basic vineyard practice. During her first year at the vineyard, she educated herself about rootstocks and clones, and learned firsthand what a special niche this area is for Pinot Noir.

Choosing the proper rootstocks for the soil conditions was critical, coupled with the concern for disease tolerance. The soil at Vine Hill is, at best, sandy loam and at worst, sandstone. Thus a decision to use both rootstocks 110R and 3309C made “double” sense. “Double sense?” thought Rachel. First, Sal advised, the rootstocks would accommodate the varying soil conditions at the winery. The 3309C is used in the areas with greater soil biomass and potential for moisture retention. Rick first planted the 3309C rootstock in the richest soil on the property. Later, Rachel planted 110R rootstock in conditions that at times required a jackhammer. This made some sense since 110R rootstock performs well in dry, sandy conditions. Second, by selecting two rootstocks and four Dijon clones, 115, 777, 667, and 828, winemaker Sal Godinez hoped to achieve his pyramid of consistency and set the stage for the creation of excellent wine, year in and year out. With any luck, the resulting wines will represent the appellation’s terroir appropriately and consistently from year to year.

Early on, Rachel worked a bit with Prudy Foxx, a vineyard consultant in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Prudy provided Rachel with some good basic knowledge of vineyard problems and how to diagnose and treat them. The vineyards at Vine Hill experienced a chinch bug problem early in 2007 - not usually a common issue here in the mountains. These damaging critters are more typical of hotter climates, but tell that to the bugs. Thriving in cover crops and grasses, they can quickly devastate a young vineyard. Although they are a minor pest, chinch bugs in the nymph stage inject a toxin into the vine tissue that looks like a mold, and actually causes the plant to wilt. Rachel controlled the problem by alternating the application of organic solutions of rosemary-thyme oil and Pyrethrum oil. She applied the treatment from June to late August to control the problem.

Then there's gopher control — a major undertaking in the mountains, especially when establishing a new vineyard. Rachel uses traps with a great deal of success. From an initial effort of 20 hours per week chasing the little root-eating monsters, the staff now spends a few hours each month and has the population in check.

Adapting to the unique characteristics of the vineyards at Vine Hill has been critical for Rachel. During this process, she's also learned a lot from people like Prudy and Rick about trellising, pruning and training the vines. "It's an interesting transition to go from horticulture to viticulture. But after all, a plant is a plant! There are just so many more of them to care for."

Rachel has also settled on using a cover crop of barley and crimson clover with "whimsy" thrown in like the application of purple vetch in the Plum block. Next year, she will concentrate on a big weed control program always keeping in mind that Vine Hill is a highly erosive site and weed control through tilling is only undertaken with care and forethought.

Ever the sustainability maven, Rachel is considering getting some Baby Doll sheep to control the cover crops. Can't think of a more perfect site for the natural lawn mowers! The sheep definitely fit in with Vine Hill's commitment to organic and sustainable farming practices.

Rachel's long-term plan is the eventual incorporation of some biodynamic practices. She recently acquired a set of female cow horns from the Julia Pfeiffer Institute in Virginia, admitting it wasn't easy, even in eco-conscious Santa Cruz County, to source female cow horns for this purpose. With proper ritual, she buried the cow horns stuffed with female cow manure to make the 500 formula with which she sprayed in the vineyards this year.

She is also investigating the use of the 501 spray that is supposed to raise the Brix levels in the vineyard. "I'm of the mind where I'll implement things in a very eclectic Santa Cruz style. I'm not really into the dogmatic side of biodynamics, but I'm definitely into the beneficial side of it. My plan is to incorporate the elements of all the available farming methods to achieve the best results for this particular site."

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Facing her first large 10-acre “garden project” was indeed almost overwhelming, and getting information out of people was a bit difficult at first. Like anything else, it just took time. Says Rachel, “Coming into a tradition, and being able to meet the standards of this high-end winemaker from Napa (Sal Godinez) was a challenge. But it is the Santa Cruz way to do things a little differently. I had enough awareness about plants, but not viticulture as a tradition. It takes a lot of courage to step into territory like this. I really wanted to do it. And I’ve really got a good team supporting me. I’ve got high standards and I know what I want. Learning patience has been a big part of the job.”

When she arrived at Vine Hill, one of the first things Rachel planted was an apple tree. A few months later, she was hanging out on the deck with Sal, sharing a moment of quiet satisfaction together, while taking in the amazing views from this special place. Looking at the vineyards and the gardens you can’t help but thank Rachel’s grandmother. Her small gift of a chive plant inspired Rachel to pursue a career in sustainable wine grape growing in one of the lush and greenest parts of California. We’re all eager to taste the results.

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