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## james laube's wine flights

### Rajat Parr's Star Rises in Santa Barbara

Sandhi, the renowned sommelier's new Sta. Rita Hills Pinot and Chardonnay project, is off to a bright start

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Sommelier-turned-winemaker Rajat Parr has found a home. He's settled in Santa Barbara's Sta. Rita Hills for the next chapter in his young winemaking career.

Teaming up with financier Charles Banks, a one-time partner at Screaming Eagle, and Sashi Moorman, a veteran winemaker who makes Evening Land's wines, Parr is the front man and mind behind their new label, Sandhi ("alliance" in Sanskrit), founded in 2009. From 2004 to 2008 Parr made wines with other winemakers under the Parr Selection label. The Sandhi wines show considerable progress in style, density and substance.

Parr, 39, is well-known in wine circles. He is the sommelier who puts together wine lists for Michael Mina's restaurants; he's an author, along with Jordan McKay, of *The Secrets of the Sommeliers: How to Think and Drink Like the Top Wine Professionals*, and a central figure in an ad hoc movement in California called In Pursuit of Balance, even if he has trouble defining exactly what that means.

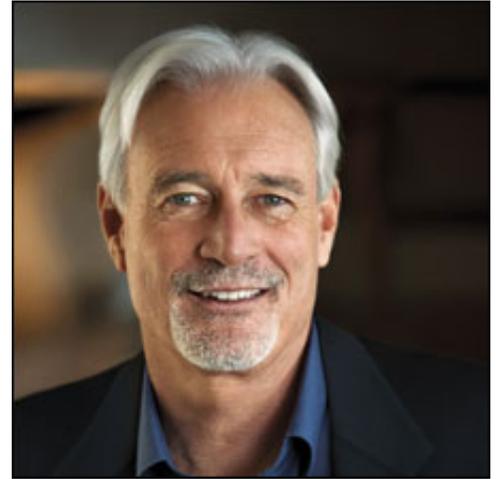
"Everyone has their own idea of what balance is," he told me. For example, he said, "There are two different styles of Pinot Noir produced in California. The opulent style is a different motivation, with greater intensity, richness and power."

He is an advocate of dialing back ripeness and alcohol levels (he is often cited as being at the center of the debate about what constitutes high alcohol and the 14 percent line of demarcation). But he insists that's a misnomer. "Alcohol is not the issue. There are plenty of [great] wines over 14 percent and [In Pursuit of Balance] has nothing to do with it. It's not a goal to take something down. I hope no one takes it out of context. There are," he said, "riper, juicer Burgundies and leaner Burgundies."

Regarding sommeliers, he added, "There's a definite difference among sommeliers [and their wine lists]. On a personal level, what the sommelier drinks doesn't matter. We're there to serve our guests. Sommeliers are not rock stars. That would go to their heads."

Bottom line: He prefers informal discussions of vine and wine balance—Pursuit has no mission statement.

With Sandhi, Parr & Co. is tapping the Sta. Rita Hills appellation for most of its wines, with multiple bottlings of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir made at the warehouse winery district in Lompoc known as the ghetto. Prices for Chardonnay range from \$28 for a Santa Barbara bottling to \$90 for the Bent Rock. The Pinots range from \$36 for the



#### James Laube

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Sta. Rita Hills bottling to \$90 for the Evening Land-Tempest.

The grapes for 2010 come from Sanford & Benedict, the area's best-known vineyard, along with Bien Nacido, which is further north, and newer sites within Sta. Rita Hills—Evening Land-Tempest, Rita's Crown, La Encantada, Wenzlau and Bent Rock.

The concept is to source grapes from one main soil type. Parr has targeted vineyards located on Santa Rita Road, which forms the southern boundary of the appellation with vines that face north. The soil is diatomaceous earth, an easy-crumbling, sedimentary rock.

"The whole point is to make a rich, unctuous wine with high acidity," he explained. "The reason I like Santa Barbara is it's got more natural acidity there." The area benefits from lots of sunlight and is cool and foggy, ideal for allowing grapes to ripen slowly and evenly. Parr hopes to plant his own vineyard there next year.

All of the wines are impressive, made in a very deliberate style. The Chardonnays are trim, clean and flinty, with green apple, citrus and mineral. My favorite was the rich, vibrant 2010 Rita's Crown, which showed more depth and complexity than the others.

The Pinots too are intensely flavored, dark and complex, with pretty floral scents mixed with subtle blackberry jam. The standout: Sanford & Benedict 2010, which is well-defined and detailed, with fresh, vibrant black cherry, wild berry, mineral and chalk notes.

Sandhi is off to an inspiring start.