

By [VIRGINIE BOONE](#)
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

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Back when Melissa Stackhouse was studying winemaking at UC Davis in the 1990s, she figured any serious California winemaker would go to the Napa Valley and make cabernet sauvignon. Making high-minded hearty reds, she thought, would be the path to glory.

TASTE LA CREMA

Where: 235 Healdsburg Ave., Healdsburg

When: Open daily 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Cost: Complimentary tasting

Information: 431-9400, www.lacrema.com

More Photos:

- [La Crema Winery](#)

And for a time, so she did. But paths can take funny turns and lead to somewhere unexpected. Now Stackhouse is almost a decade into being the winemaker at La Crema, a Santa Rosa-based pinot noir and chardonnay producer devoted to California's cooler-climate growing regions — Sonoma Coast, Russian River Valley, Anderson Valley, Monterey and Carneros.

“Pinots in my mind were really average for a long time,” Stackhouse said. “When I graduated from Davis, I was not wooed by it. I think we’ve come a long ways, though we have a ways to go to define our California style.”

She is attempting to do just that at La Crema, where she oversees the making of pinots and chardonnays from a series of marquee appellations throughout the state.

“They’re one of the best quality high-production wines,” said Kenneth Goldfine, the general manager of Syrah Restaurant, where he carries several of La Crema’s wines. “If I carry the pinot by the glass, bar none, it turns over faster than any other pinot. There’s a certain comfort level, people order it and they like it.”

One of Jess Jackson’s entities, owned by his daughters, Laura Jackson Giron and Jennifer Jackson, this is no boutique operation; La Crema makes some 200,000 cases of its Sonoma Coast pinot noir alone. But even at that size, the wines are consistently delicious and impressively over-deliver on price, providing the pinot or chardonnay lover with respectable bottles of locally grown wine for about \$20.

“Even though some of our wines are a larger case amount, we still make wine like we’re a small winery,” Stackhouse said. “We produce the pinot noir in open-top fermenters,

keep all the lots separate from outside growers, from our estate vineyards, as if each one of those vineyard blocks is going to be a wine on its own, but in the end we blend.”

Moreover, every bin of grapes that comes in is hand-sorted, a real nod to artisanal-style winemaking and a surprising fact given La Crema’s size.

Stackhouse explains that to get it done, she has five people sorting at any one time during harvest. She relies on some 20 international interns and another 20 local interns, changing people out after every two hours through a process of sorting that runs 24 hours a day.

That level of detail, along with separate lots and Stackhouse’s ability to cultivate new sources of fruit wherever they may be, adds up to good-quality wines.

Take La Crema’s 2007 Monterey Chardonnay, the inaugural vintage for this wine. It’s a blend of about 250 distinct vineyard blocks all barrel-fermented separately. Stackhouse and her team will taste the lots blind all year long, putting together trial blends to see what they like or don’t like and then decide on a direction for the final blend. They don’t allow themselves to rely on whatever the blend was the year before.

“Years ago, people would bring huge amounts of fruit in and blend it all up and make juice and then they’d ferment it and that was it,” she said. “Most winemakers now truly believe the integrity of your blend resides in the integrity of those small lots.”

The results provide real insight into an appellation’s better characteristics. The 2007 Sonoma Coast Chardonnay (\$20), for example, is a citrus-tinged, mouthwatering chardonnay that, as Stackhouse describes, doesn’t “have any elbows,” with just a cameo appearance of oak, juicy but not flabby, a result of its cool-climate fruit.

The 2007 Los Carneros Chardonnay (\$30), another of the winery’s inaugural vintages, on the other hand, is full of lemon zest and stony minerality, a little more coy, with some of the grapes coming from the Durrell Vineyard.

The winery’s 2007 Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir (\$24), which includes fruit from La Crema’s estate Annapolis Vineyard, is all cherry and plum, full of vivid fruit and silky tannins. Its Monterey Pinot Noir (\$24), the first vintage of which is the 2007, is more savory, first showing a taste of herbs before delivering notes of strawberry — a more “dirt-driven” wine, as Stackhouse herself puts it.

La Crema didn’t always belong to Jackson. It’s been around since 1979, suffering through a period of bankruptcy before being taken into the Jackson Family Estates fold in 1993. Stackhouse credits Jackson and former La Crema winemakers Dan Goldfield, now at Dutton-Goldfield, and Jeff Stewart, now at Buena Vista, for turning the winery’s fortunes around and reclaiming its reputation in a relatively short period of time.

But it is Stackhouse's mission now to take the winery to the next level, to build on its recent past and find new, amazing grape sources to work with. To that end, she is increasingly excited about Monterey.

"In my mind, Monterey is probably the coldest appellation in California," she said. "You get early bud break, fruit comes in late, there's long hang time, it's dynamic, incredibly windy and one of the only grape-growing areas that's not a monoculture. You've got grapes next to lettuce next to artichokes."

She's particularly stoked about an estate vineyard she's developing with vineyard manager Hector Bedolla called Panorama, tightly spaced with many different clones that's not far from Pisoni Vineyards, a renowned Santa Lucia Highlands grower whose pinots Stackhouse particularly loves. It's no surprise then that La Crema is also considering working with more growers, or buying vineyard land, from the Santa Lucia Highlands, or possibly, Santa Rita Hills, another great spot for pinot and chardonnay near Santa Barbara.

"It's a stunning product," added Goldfine, "with a small winery feel."

Virginie Boone is a freelance wine writer based in Sonoma County. She can be reached at virginieboone@yahoo.com or visit wineabout.pressdemocrat.com.

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