

# Jonata Wines

by **seánan forbes**  
 photography provided by **jonata wines**



## Santa Ynez Valley, California

If you find wine intimidating—if the word “wine” invokes images of scary sommeliers, fragile glasses, elegant restaurants and high-priced meals. If you think that the life of wine is barrel-to-decanter elegance, then winemaker Matt Dees is just the man to bring things back to earth.

Not that there isn’t elegance. There certainly is, but that’s at the end of the story. If you want to make beautiful wine, then your tale has to start in the dirt.

Matt Dees is the winemaker for Jonata (ho-na-ta), the kid sister of the renowned Screaming Eagle. Matt’s roots are in Kansas City, and his interest in soil sprouted when he was young. Imagine a little kid playing softball. Now, imagine one boy out in left field. The ball goes soaring over him, but he doesn’t see it. He’s not looking for fly balls. He’s down on the ground, looking at different kinds of bugs.

“I was always that kid,” Matt’s smiling confession has no notes of regret. “I was always a plant/soil/bug geek—probably since I was two. It naturally progressed from being the dirty kid to a plant and soil science student at the University of Vermont.”

Matt, who grew up in what most people see as beer country, was a college freshman

studying soil when someone asked whether he’d help start a vineyard in what Matt cheerfully describes as “this frozen tundra.” What did Matt say? “Sure.”

That was his foray into winemaking, and he was bitten by yet another kind of bug. “I was smitten.” You might say that Matt got into wine before it was legal for wine to get into him. He immersed himself in learning wine history, global industry and varietals. “The grapevine became my passion.”

For Matt, it’s an earthy business. “Winemaking is truly just farming, in many ways. You tend a vineyard and you make a connection with a plot of land, and you pour your heart and soul into farming, and the winemaking is almost done by the time you bring those grapes in.”

It’s probably just as well that Matt’s introduction to winemaking was nontraditional, readying him for vineyards yet to come. Jonata’s vineyard is “basically purely beach sand.”

Early on, he hired a French consultant to tell him what he should plant where.

“After two days, he said, ‘I think you’re best off planting asparagus.’” Matt sighs. “People don’t think sand is a soulful medium to grow grapes.” As a soil scientist, “I had to agree with

them. It’s an unorthodox soil.”

The land wouldn’t change, so Jonata changed their approach to the land. “We found a way to make wines that are uniquely Jonata.” The wines are true to their varietals, true to the Santa Ynez Valley appellation, and distinct to Jonata’s vineyards. The grapes express the region and the region informs the people. “We continue to grow, year after year. It doesn’t stop.”

At the start, Matt recalls, there was an overnight lesson. Santa Ynez Valley is wild country, with wild creatures; wild cats, bears, badgers and boars. Some animals

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like grapes—and a few are discerning. Bears appreciate Semillon. “Wild boar,” Matt says, “love Sangiovese.” Three days before harvest was planned, one boar claimed the grapes. Matt is a pacifist, but on the second night, he said, “Give me the gun.” He sat on the top of the hill, and waited and waited and waited. And then the sun started to come out and the thing had been there all night, basically eating out of his hand.

Future harvests beat the bears and the boar. Jonata has Cabernet Franc, Sauvignon Blanc, Semillon, Sangiovese and more. “The whole Noah’s ark of grapes is planted on our property—two by two. We’ve proven that this ranch can produce world-class wine.” Next step:

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diversification. There are animals. Chickens turn and fertilize the soil and provide eggs and meat and there are turkeys, goats, boar-Berkshire piglets. This is old-style Old World; provide for the people who work for you and with you. Oh, yes, and hops. It’s back to beer. And grow more world-class wine.

According to Matt, “The story isn’t about the winemaker; the story is not about the owners; the story isn’t about anybody at all. The story is about that special piece of land, and the wines that it produces.”

In 2011, the land produced “a beautiful vintage.” Matt likes that year; his daughter was born in 2011. “She’s a Cabernet Franc girl.” He’s laying some down for her future.

With Matt being a food-lover, it’s perhaps inevitable that the conversation ends with pairings; charred rare rib-eye with maitre’d butter and 2005 or 2007 El Desafio de Jonata Cabernet Sauvignon; grass-fed spring lamb, rack or chops with La Sangre de Jonata Syrah, which “has an earth-driven side.” Abalone is now being sustainably farmed. Pan-fry it with garlic and butter, and serve it with La Flor de Jonata Sauvignon Blanc.

Keep it simple. Beauty starts at the roots. Oh and when people tell you that you can’t grow anything but asparagus? Plant your vines. ■

