

Pouring Pinot and Iconoclasm at Hilliard Bruce

By Matt Kettmann ([Contact](#))

Tuesday, January 6, 2015



Paul Wellman

POWER PAIR: John Hilliard and Christine Bruce opened their impressive glass, stone, and metal winery just off Highway 246 just in time for the 2014 harvest.

An Eye-Opening Tour of John Hilliard and Christine Bruce's Sta. Rita Hills Vineyard and Winery

There's a lot of green going on at the Hilliard Bruce vineyard and winery, located on a prominent knoll north of Highway 246 in the heart of the Sta. Rita Hills. John Hilliard's spectacles, for example, are a vibrant shade of fluorescent green. But they're not as surprising as the countless bright green LED lights that illuminate the recently erected winery, an industrialized yet eco-minded display of glass, stone, metal, and right-angled architecture. (Those lights can, of course, be changed to any color.)

Then there's the fact that the 101-acre property — which is also home to hungry Arabian horses tended to by Hilliard's wife, Christine Bruce — stayed green even in the driest days of the drought, thanks to the oasis-like reservoir atop their highest hill, where three bioremediation islands filter the water naturally.



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And, yes, the couple needs plenty of green money to fund it all, which comes mostly from Hilliard's successful career of expanding his family's barge-building business in Texas from one to four shipyards. Today, Southwest Shipyard is the primary maker and repairer of ships for inner coastal waters in America, the company's hand touching many of the vessels that navigate the Mississippi River or tend to offshore oilrigs.

But Bruce, a classically trained pianist, and Hilliard, who worked in maritime insurance and as an artist before reentering the family business — "I actually swept the barges as a kid," he said — aren't just writing checks either. After years of help from winemaker Paul Lato, he's now making the pinot noir, and she's focused on the chardonnay grapes that they're growing on 21 acres of vineyard. And both are acutely, refreshingly aware that their small project probably doesn't deserve such opulent digs.



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Hilliard Bruce vineyard.

“We only make 2,000 cases of pinot noir and 760 cases of chardonnay, so this is a little overkill,” Hilliard admitted with a smirk while walking through his new winery, where the three-story-high glass walls look out over his and other vineyards up Gypsy Canyon. “I know this is ridiculous. We could have just done a normal industrial design, but add a little money to that, and you get some real architecture. We did this solely because we could do this.”

Such blunt honesty prevails in the rest of Hilliard’s thinking, as well, and he’s not afraid of — indeed, he seems to relish in — knocking popular wisdom off its pedestal. He’s dismissive of how important the Transverse Range’s east-west layout is for wine grape-growing in the Santa Ynez Valley, thinks that overly wordy wine descriptions are a bunch of highfalutin show-off baloney, and gets rather riled up in describing how some organic farming practices are more damaging to the environment than conventional agriculture.

And don’t get him started on biodynamics, the lunar-calendar-based farming protocol created by Rudolf Steiner that’s become increasingly popular in vineyards from Buellton to Burgundy. He thinks it is “complete absurdity” and believes Steiner was an anti-Semite. “There’s no place in sustainability for magical bullshit,” said Hilliard, whose own eco-chops include a cutting-edge composting program, solar power, and the only LEED-certified winery in Santa Barbara County. “I’m about moving from darkness toward light, and mysticism isn’t the way we should be moving as a society.”



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Hilliard Bruce winery.

Though the property is not open to the public, the couple shares its wines with occasional guests inside the property’s “barn,” which is a large, high-ceilinged room filled with world-class art and surrounded by horse stables in which humans could sleep comfortably. (While in town roughly July through November, they live in the old, small house down the hill; they spend most of the rest of the year in Miami Beach, with obligatory Texas visits, as well.) The wines, boasting new-age names like Earth, Sun, Moon, and Sky, are quite good. That goes for both the riper style tended to by former consultant Lato and the lighter, recent vintages preferred by Hilliard, which, while more austere, are thankfully nowhere near green in flavor.

“You don’t need to be big,” said Hilliard while considering his latest sip of pinot, as tiny, well-groomed dogs jumped onto his lap. “You just need to be good.”

See hilliardbruce.com.

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