

675+ WINES
REVIEWED

THE ROSÉS OF
PROVENCE

SUMMER SOLSTICE
COCKTAIL PARTY

ARGENTINA'S
TASTE MAKERS

WINE ENTHUSIAST

JUNE/JULY 2021

BEYOND
NAPA VALLEY
CABERNET

L.A. COUNTY
WINE GROWERS

WHITE WINES OF
PASO ROBLES

GOLDEN STATE
GRILL PAIRINGS

DRINKING
IN SONOMA
COUNTY

CALIFORNIA

the
Issue

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WINE ENTHUSIAST

THE CALIFORNIA ISSUE

June/July 2021



40

Swayze Vineyard,
Los Angeles County

Cover Photo Illustration
by Wine Enthusiast



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Charred,
I'm sure

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Divine
Provence

The

L.A.



The

Los Angeles basin was California's first wine country, with tens of thousands of vineyard acres and hundreds of wineries that quenched the state's thirst from the 1830s. But the post-World War II development boom made building houses more profitable than growing vines. The memories of vintages past were buried under asphalt and apartments.

Grenache

LATE HARVEST

Revolution

Los Angeles was California's first wine country before urban sprawl took over. A new wave of vintners is promoting that forgotten past.

BY MATT
KETTMANN

PHOTOS BY
BRINSON +
BANKS

From left: Jasper
Dickson and Amy Luftig
Viste, Angeleno Wine
Company; Patrick Kelley,
Cavaletti Vineyard;
Jenny and Mark Blatty,
Byron Blatty Wines

A new generation of winemakers wants to change that. As they craft and serve their wines amid the urban sprawl, they're discovering overlooked or forgotten vineyards in the region's hidden canyons and high deserts.

Some source from the handful of remaining vineyards that were planted nearly a century ago in the Cucamonga Valley. A few take grapes from vines at Mission San Gabriel to connect with California's colonial roots.

Similar Dreams

The morning wind spins turbines and tosses tumbleweeds across solar farms in the Antelope Valley of northeastern Los Angeles County as Monty Swayze shows off his seven-acre vineyard, planted 17 years ago. Here, he grows Zinfandel, Grenache, Alicante Bouschet, Sémillon and Sauvignon Blanc.

The Sauvignon Blanc is used in California Crackler, a sparkling blend made by Angeleno Wine Company, which is owned by Amy Luftig Viste and Jasper Dickson. Luftig Viste and Dickson, along with Patrick Kelley of Cavaletti Vineyards and Mark Blatty of Byron Blatty Wines, remember how surprised they were to find these vines.

“You wouldn’t expect the vineyard to do as well as it does,” says Kelley, in reference to its desert landscape, which hugs the southern edge of the Sierra Nevada mountain range but sits just 75 miles from the Hollywood sign. “Everyone was skeptical when we came out here.”

The three wineries started independently with a similar vision to focus on Los Angeles County-grown grapes, only to find out about each other later. Rather than compete over limited fruit, they formed the Los Angeles Vintners Association in 2019. That’s allowed them to tackle challenges together, from viticultural quirks to commercial resistance.

“When you talk to people who make wines from the Central Coast or the North Coast, they seem to have different experiences than we do,” says Blatty. These L.A. vines require different canopy management techniques due to the heat and sunshine, and harvest there tends to start early in the season and go very late.

“What’s been so great about becoming friends and getting all on the same page is that we’re not alone,” says Blatty. “We have our own little support group.”



Jasper Dickson
and Amy Luftig
Viste, Angeleno
Wine Company

Sales were slow at first, but that’s starting to change. “People would come in extremely skeptical, and maybe even nervous, about trying the wines,” says Luftig Viste. “People thought they would taste like tires or smog.”

Once people try the wine, many are happily surprised. “The most common comment I hear is, ‘Wow, these are actually good.’” says Kelley.

Philosophy professor-turned-vintner Abe Schoener is also betting on the region. He’s dreamed of starting an L.A. winery since 2005. Two years ago, he left rural Northern California, where he’d made The Scholium Project wines since 2000, to set up shop alongside the L.A. River with Winemaker Rajat Parr.

“The connection to urban wineries and vineyards in cities goes back to Rome,” says Schoener.

Such involvement from established players will only help the momentum.

“There was a time in the beginning where commercial buyers would not give you the time of day,” says Blatty. “But if we can just get wine into someone’s glass, we can open their mind and change their mind about L.A. wine.”

**L.A. VINES
REQUIRE
DIFFERENT
CANOPY
MANAGEMENT
TECHNIQUES
DUE TO THE
HEAT AND
SUNSHINE.**



Monty Swayze



Shared Vines

Angeleno Wine Company operates in Mission Junction, a graffiti-decorated warehouse district just east of downtown Los Angeles, near where the Riboli family has run San Antonio Winery since 1917. Dickson works full-time in the winery, while Luftig Viste maintains a day job in the county's public health department. ("We're a little busy," she says, referring to her pandemic workload.)

It took them three years to find a location. "L.A. zoning still considers wineries to be heavy industrial manufacturing, like airplane engines and petrochemicals," says Luftig Viste. Unique Tinseltown issues continue, like having to shut down for the weekend so Michael Bay could shoot an action film on their block.

Byron Blatty Wines shares a facility in Santa Clarita with brands like Pulchella and Hoi Polloi. Those wineries buy fruit from the Central Coast, but the facility recently welcomed a new Southern California-focused producer, Acri Wine Company.

A former television producer who worked on *Real Housewives of New York City* for 10 years, Blatty owns his winery with his wife, Jenny Blatty, a television producer for Warner Bros.' Stage 13 Network. The couple just had their second child.

Kelley's winery lies just west, in the Ventura County city of Moorpark. A pharmaceutical executive by day, Kelley named his brand Cavaletti after the smallest of horse-training jumps, a nod to both his equestrian-inclined daughter and wife, who works as an equine masseuse. He also grows grapes in his Santa Rosa Valley backyard and sources from across Ventura County.

All three wineries buy grapes from many of the same vineyards, from the Malibu Coast and Bel Air (where Moraga Vineyards has existed since 1989) to Mission San Gabriel, where they've harvested grapes from vines planted in the 1800s. They also source from Antelope Valley of the California High Desert, the official appellation name approved in 2011. Even just from Swayze's scant seven acres, the three brands make about 15 combined wines each vintage.

**"NOT ONLY ARE THERE 15 WINES COMING OUT OF THIS VINEYARD, BUT THESE WINES ALL DRINK VERY DIFFERENTLY FROM EACH OTHER."
—MARK BLATTY**



Mark and Jenny Blatty, Byron Blatty Wines

**“SOMETHING
ABOUT GRAPE
GROWING
WAS CALMING,
GETTING MY
HANDS DIRTY
...IN THE SOIL.”
—LEE WILLIAMS**

Helen and Lee Williams, Golden Star Vineyards

“Not only are there 15 wines coming out of this vineyard, but these wines all drink very differently from each other,” says Blatty, whose wines tend to be the richest. Angeleno tends to be leaner, and Cavaletti sits in the middle.

In the same appellation, Lee Williams started to grow grapes in 2001, as an escape from his career in nursing.

“Something about grape growing was calming, getting my hands dirty not in blood, but in the soil,” says Williams, whose Golden Star Vineyards grows Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon, Muscat of Alexandria and Malbec.

He’s now president of the Antelope Valley Wine Growers Association, which includes about a dozen growers over the nearly 700-square-mile appellation. He also buys grapes from other vineyards, many of which were originally planted by Efred Chavez.

A vineyard worker in Sonoma County since 1978, Chavez came to the Antelope Valley in 1999. His efforts launched the modern vineyard movement. Chavez died in June 2020 at age 61.

Malbec also stars at the Smith Family Vineyard, which lies just east of a popular state poppy reserve.

“We realized that Antelope Valley and Mendoza have quite similar climates,” says Blatty of the Argentinian region. “It should come as no surprise that [varietal grapes] like Malbec do well.”

Forgotten Places

As you drive south into the Sierra Pelona Mountains, the San Andreas Fault carves a dramatic landscape that features natural sag ponds called Lake Hughes and Elizabeth Lake. Last year, tipped off by tipsy customers on Valentine’s Day, Kelley discovered hundreds of head-trained, unirrigated vines next to the community’s elementary school.

Records show that they were planted by pioneer John Munz around 1899. They were shown to be of the Mission variety, according to an analysis conducted by researchers at the University of California, Davis.



**“THIS WASN’T
SOMETHING
THAT I WANTED
TO DO. IT JUST
HAPPENED.”
—JUAN ALONSO,
ON BECOMING A
RESTAURATEUR,
VINTNER AND
MOTELIER**

Juan Alonso, Alonso Family Vineyard

With the help of volunteers and fellow vintners, Kelley has chopped back the yucca stalks, red buckwheat and scraggly coyote bush that choked these vines, bringing many of them back to life.

“They were happy to have us farm it,” he says of the school district. “They had no idea there was anything there. It was just a brushy hillside.”

Over splashes of Cavaletti rosé, Blatty looked at the vines that have been unearthed, treated with compost and given the chance to once again grow. “To me,” he says, “this vineyard just parallels the whole Los Angeles wine revival.”

Leading away from the lakes, through the Leona Valley (approved as an appellation in 2010), and down into the Sierra Pelona Valley (approved in 2011), the highways pass a few dying vineyards. Water supply is an issue for these arid lands, but estate wineries like Agua Dulce and Reyes survive along the Old Sierra Highway.

That’s also where to find the green oasis overseen by Juan Alonso, a Spaniard from Galicia who was trained as a chef in France. He ventured first to the Canary Islands, and then to Los Angeles in 1973.

In 1980, he purchased a rundown biker bar and recast it as a French restaurant with an extensive cellar named La Chene. He started to plant in 1995, where he expanded acreage annually for many years.

“This wasn’t something that I wanted to do,” says Alonso of becoming a restaurateur, vintner and motelier, his energized eyes glimmering from behind a thick beard and weathered skin. “It just happened.”

Today, the nearly seven-acre vineyard, whose fruit now goes almost entirely to Angeleno and Blatty, features Grenache, Tempranillo, Tannat, Treixadura, Godello, Loureiro, Albariño and three rows of possibly the oldest Mencía in California.

“The wines naturally come out pretty mellow, even though it’s a warm area,” says Dickson. “You don’t get big concentrated wines. They are more mellow and more elegant.”

A man in a light pink button-down shirt stands in a cellar, smiling and looking upwards. He is surrounded by numerous wooden wine barrels. The background is a brick wall. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**LAST YEAR,
TIPPED OFF
BY TIPSY
CUSTOMERS ON
VALENTINE'S
DAY, KELLEY
DISCOVERED
HUNDREDS OF
HEAD-TRAINED,
UNIRRIGATED
VINES.**

Patrick Kelley, Cavaletti Vineyard

Cucamonga Connection

From 1838 until the suburban explosion of the 1970s, the Cucamonga Valley, just east of Los Angeles County, thrived as a viticultural hub. That wasn't apparent by the time David Potter of Municipal Winemakers grew up there in the 1980s.

"The city's logo is a bunch of grapes, and there's a harvest festival," says Potter of Rancho Cucamonga. "But it's all kind of lip service because the wine industry there is pretty much dead."

Potter, who started his brand in Santa Barbara 14 years ago, began to make old-vine Zinfandel from Cucamonga's Lopez Ranch in 2009. That property is owned by the Galleano family, whose winery and estate vineyard from the 1930s lies next to the whizzing traffic of Interstate 15 in Mira Loma. (The city was named Wineville until the nationally publicized "chicken coop" murder spree forced a name change in the 1930s.)

Fourth-generation vintner Domenic Galleano makes mostly Port- and Sherry-style wines in massive redwood tanks and half-century old barrels. He's humdrum over the future of this historic piece of land.

"Let's go try some Port," he says during a recent tour, snaking through a yard of sun-soaked barrels filled with such forgotten varieties as Rose of Peru. "We can talk about the sad stuff later—Southern California wine and its future."

In 2017, Potter started to make Grenache from Hofer Ranch in nearby Ontario. Sandwiched between the rumbling runways of the Ontario Airport and massive UPS warehouses, Hofer's 30 acres of vines were planted in the 1930s, but they've been under threat of development almost ever since. Scar of the Sea's Mikey Giugni, another Cucamonga kid who has become a Central Coast winemaker, also buys this Grenache.

Paul Hofer's family settled this property in 1882, but everything started going downhill in the 1950s, when grape prices plummeted.

"The pressure of urbanization changed everything," says Hofer. "It's really hard for agriculture and urbanization to coexist. We're very blessed to be here."