

A Vineyard Blooms on Catalina

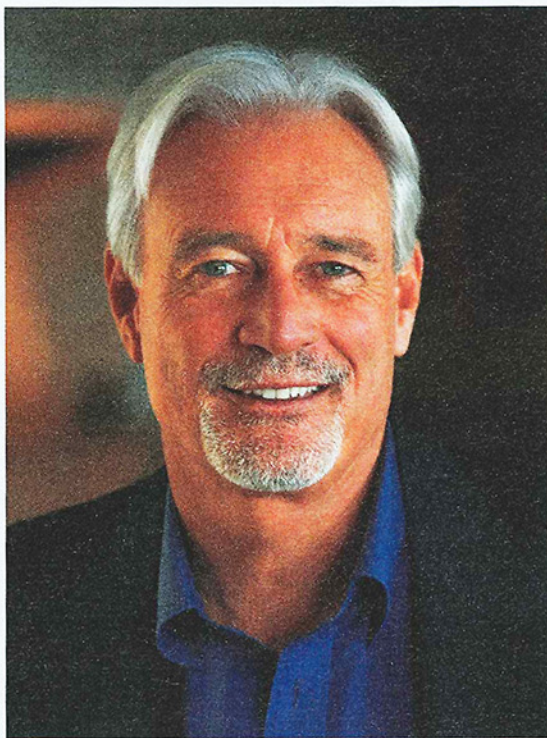
The swift flight from Los Angeles to Santa Catalina Island brings you to a remote airstrip atop this rocky landscape that rises from the Pacific. Catalina is a privately owned tourist mecca 22 miles from the mainland and 22 miles long. It is famous for its quaint harbor at Avalon, rugged terrain and pristine marine habitats. And now, since 2007, it even has a vineyard—and a wine.

Winegrowing is the newest chapter on this “island of romance,” as a 1950s pop song dubbed Catalina. The proprietors are Alison Wrigley Rusack, 55, and her husband, Geoff Rusack, 57, owners of Rusack, a winery in Santa Barbara’s Ballard Canyon. She is an heir to the Wrigley fortune and the majority owner of the island, one of California’s eight Channel Islands.

First settled by Native Americans, the island was used for various purposes over the centuries, including hunting and smuggling, before William Wrigley Jr.—Alison’s great-grandfather and founder of the chewing gum company—began to develop it for summer tourism in the 1920s. Most of the island is still open space, overseen by a local conservancy.

Catalina has been an integral part of Alison’s life. She spent summers there, riding Arabian horses and collecting seashells. She met Geoff on a blind date in the summer of 1983; on their second date they crisscrossed the island on horseback. “I looked around and said, ‘Wow. This would be a great place for a winery,’” Geoff recalls. Later they brought the idea to Alison’s father. “He just shook his head and said, ‘Not in my lifetime.’”

In 1995, when the Rusacks bought the former Ballard Canyon Winery, they revisited the idea of planting a vineyard and building a winery on their 650-acre Catalina ranch. The couple planted 5 acres to Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, along with a half-acre of Zinfandel. The Zin is the most intriguing. The grape has a surprisingly long history on the islands; the Zin cuttings the Rusacks used came from wild vines on nearby Santa Cruz Island, which has vineyards dating to the late 1800s.



Winegrowing is the newest chapter on the privately owned island of Catalina, a tourist mecca off the California coast.

The Rusacks’ 2011 bottlings from Catalina carry a California appellation, since there is no Santa Catalina Island appellation. Based on my non-blind tastings of the wines, the 2011 Zin (89 points, \$65) is rich yet graceful, a scaled-back style that tames the grape’s often assertive personality. The 2011 Chardonnay (91, \$60) and 2011 Pinot Noir (90, \$72) are both sleek and elegant: The former beams fresh white peach; the latter has an earthier profile.

“Nothing compares to Catalina,” says Geoff. Rainfall and climate are similar to Sta. Rita Hills’. The vineyard faces west at a 400-foot elevation overlooking the ocean. It’s cool and breezy enough for a jacket in the summer, yet it’s easy to sunburn. The wines are naturally high in acidity, but temperatures are warm enough for the grapes to fully ripen, says winemaker Steve Gerbac.

“This special climate results in a wide range of flavors and aromatics that make these wines so special,” Gerbac explains. The soil, fog and wind all help to naturally limit yields. These factors are especially noticeable in the reds,

says Gerbac, creating both fruity aromas and earthy notes that make for a unique “Catalina Island wine.”

Viticultural challenges have ranged from pesky crickets to wasps, foxes and deer, as well as non-native but protected bison. The winemaking has gone smoother. The grapes are flown back to the Rusack winery in Santa Ynez and processed there.

The Rusacks aren’t taking shortcuts or sparing expense. They plan to refurbish the entire ranch, adding a wine-tasting room with panoramic views and offering horse-drawn buggy rides to picnic areas in backcountry that’s largely unknown to the public. They envision the winery complex offering a different experience of the island, whose tourist culture revolves around cruise ships unloading hordes of day-trippers into Avalon.

One challenge was coming up with a label that depicts a unique aspect of the property. They chose an etching of an endangered Catalina fox gazing out at the vineyard. Once nearly extinct, the house cat-sized fox is an environmental success story. “Our family has been passionate in preserving the island,” says Alison. With the vineyard and winery, she and Geoff are adding their own contribution.

Senior editor James Laube has been with Wine Spectator since 1981.

WINESPECTATOR.COM

In his blogs, James Laube shares updates from his recent tastings and visits with winemakers, and discusses hot-button issues in the wine industry. Join the conversation with other members at www.winespectator.com/laube.