

LIQUID ASSETS

SAN DIEGO OENOPHILE

STORY AND PHOTO BY
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Take a lunch break in any village restaurant while touring the Burgundy region in France and you're likely to sample one of the dozens of local wines featured on the wine list. Stop for dinner in one of the Napa Valley's many charming towns and you'll surely partake of a cabernet or chardonnay from the surrounding vineyards. In fact, travelers from Tuscany to Capetown, Chile to New Zealand, do exactly the same thing. Sampling a region's wines while enjoying the local cuisine is a time-honored travel tradition.

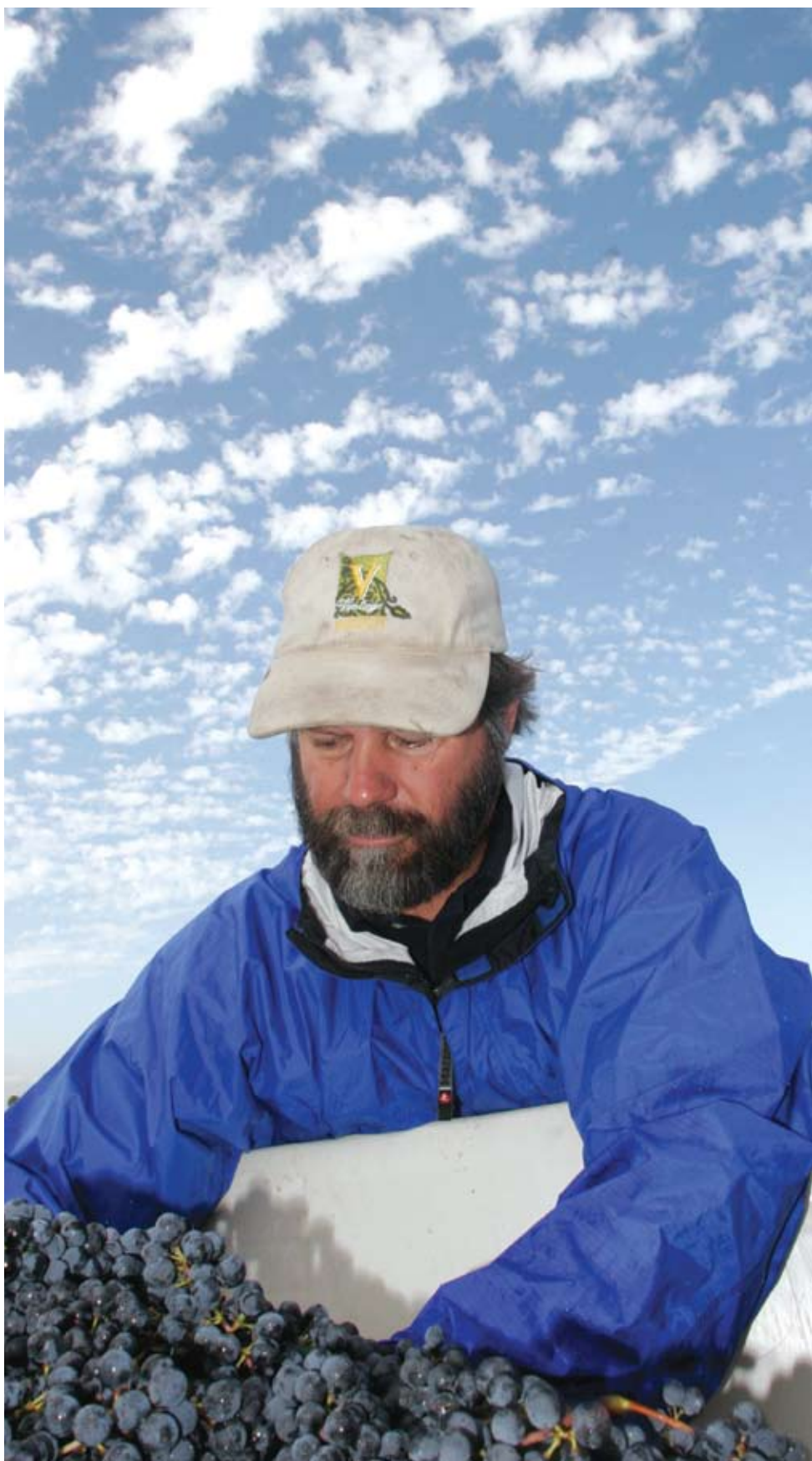
So why are San Diego County wines so rarely seen on local restaurant wine lists?

Part of the answer can be found through a historical perspective. Viticulture was initially brought to this area by Franciscan missionaries in the late 18th century. Not only was wine needed for the celebration of the mass, but it was a daily table beverage of the padres. Later, commercial wine production was established here and prospered until circumstances intervened.

Jim Jenkins, owner and winemaker of J. Jenkins Winery in Julian, is well aware of these events. "Before the double whammy of Prohibition and phylloxera (a vine pest), Southern California actually grew more wine grapes than Northern California," he says. "By the time Southern California recovered, Napa and Sonoma had already established themselves as centers of quality winemaking."

Certainly, the potential for growing quality grapes and making quality wines here in San Diego County is exceptional. "Just the sheer variety of microclimates here in the county is incredible," says Duncan Williams, winemaker at Fallbrook Winery. Williams oversees production of some 30,000 cases a year, making Fallbrook Winery the largest local wine producer. "You have growers here working in areas that have a predominant maritime influence, while others are in an alpine environment, with every possible variation in between."

The result is a staggering mix of locally grown varieties, from the omnipresent Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc to Syrah, Viognier, Carignane, Sangiovese, Grenache, Bar-



Duncan Williams of Fallbrook Winery

bera, Pinot Grigio, Zinfandel, Pinot Noir and even some South African varietals.

The Ramona Valley, the latest region in the country to acquire American Viticultural Area (AVA) status, is in the thick of this grape explosion. The very active Ramona Valley Vineyard Association (RVVA), with over 100 members, meets monthly to share information about grape growing and wine making. A lot of people are experimenting, finding out what grows well in different conditions here. In Europe, it took centuries to determine which grapes yielded the best results in which areas.

“We want to learn from what has been done before—all the research on growing grapes and making wine,” says Carolyn Harris, co-owner of Chuparosa Vineyards in Ramona as well as secretary and legal counsel for the RVVA. “By the same token, we don’t want to be crippled by centuries of history. We want to be able to experiment in a dynamic way.” That process of determination has only just begun here in San Diego County. Dozens of small wineries and growers throughout the county are involved in the process, making the San Diego area one of the hotbeds of developing viticulture in America. Percentage increase of vineyard production in the county is among the highest in the United States.

Certain San Diego County vineyards have been established for some time. The Shadow Mountain Winery and Vineyards are located high in the mountains near the Palomar Observatory along the historic Butterfield Stage Line route that brought many European settlers to California in the mid 1800s. The original vineyards were founded by Augusto and Helen Mase in 1944. A second generation of the family planted extensive vineyards in the 1960s and ’70s. Current owners Alex and Pam McGeary acquired the estate in 1990 and have continued the tradition of growing and producing premium varietal wine. Some of their vines are more than 60 years old.

“Geographical separation is a big issue here,” says Alex from his perspective as immediate past president of the San Diego County Vintners Association. “We need ancillary economies, restaurants and farm stands, to make the diverse wine-producing areas of San Diego County true agricultural destinations.”

Certainly, the local wine industry suffers from this geographical dispersion to a certain extent. It’s difficult to visit a large number of local wineries in one day because of the distances involved. On the other hand, the diversity of microclimates and resulting profusion of different grape varieties within the county translate into a tremendous assortment of local wines to be sampled. There is literally a wine for every taste and budget.

A visit to any of our local wineries, or even a look at their websites, will give a good indication of the extensive number of offerings, many of them rarely found in other wine-producing regions. There is perhaps a greater variety of wines produced and bottled in San Diego County than in any other single wine region. There are classic Cabernets and Chardonnays, beguiling Rhone- and Italian-style wines, intriguing cross-cultural blends and even a first-rate dry apple wine.

Collectively, local wines have won dozens of awards in wine competitions in San Francisco, Atlanta, Long Beach, Riverside and Orange County. They have been awarded medals in the Florida and California state fairs, the Los Angeles County Fair and the prestigious San Diego National Wine Competition.

True consecration for our local wines will ultimately come from a variety of sources. Acceptance on local restaurant wine lists is a big part

of the equation. The difficulty lies in the fact that most consumers are focused on wines from Northern California. Additionally, most local wineries have very small production and limited marketing resources, making it extremely challenging for them to get their products in front of consumers. Currently, there are only two places where one can sample a substantial selection of San Diego County wines: the San Diego Wine & Culinary Center in downtown San Diego and the Country Cellars tasting room 4 miles west of Julian on Highway 78 in Wynola. Local restaurateurs remain hesitant to put local products on their wine lists. There is a perception among them that the local wines are inferior to wines from other growing regions, as well as a belief that consumers are just not interested in purchasing them.

Yanni Pihás, owner of the highly regarded Yanni’s Bistro in Poway, is a tremendous supporter of the local wines. “We have a number of wines from Fallbrook, Escondido, Ramona and Julian on our list,” he says. “When our guests try them, they are absolutely amazed by the quality of the wines and continue to order them time after time. I feel very good about introducing local residents to the wonderful wines that are produced in their own backyard.”

Probably the most exciting development in the local wine industry occurred in April of this year. By a unanimous vote, the County Board of Supervisors approved the Boutique Winery Ordinance, permitting San Diego County wineries to open tasting rooms on their properties to serve the public directly. For now, the ordinance applies only to wineries on public roads. Those on private roads may need to obtain an administrative use permit. This initiative will pave the way for consumers to gain access to the many boutique wineries in the county. From there, we may even begin to see these wines in shops and restaurants throughout the San Diego area.

Someday, somewhere, you’ll be sitting in a fine dining establishment in a cosmopolitan city. The sommelier will hand you the wine list. You’ll open it, peruse the contents and note with surprise the presence of several San Diego County labels. That will be a great day, indeed. ☛

www.sandiegowineries.org

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