

# Malibu Vineyards

By Sonja Magdevski

People once believed that the Gods took over their body when they drank wine. While modern advances in science and technology have adequately demystified wine on some levels, they seem to have increased its enchanting mystique on others. The success of the Malibu Wine Classic in April is testament to the continued allure of wine that seems to be growing daily and stirring up new magic along the way.

Close to a thousand people arrived at the sands of Zuma Beach anxious to taste Southern California wines in the heady mixture of sunlight and ocean breeze inherent to Malibu, which is fitting, after all, since Malibu creates its own magic. With this power in tow, one of the most best-known cities in the world with one of the most captivating names in the world is today on the cusp of becoming famous for one more thing, world class wine.

Three winemakers are responsible for pioneering wine in Malibu today, Michael McCarty, George Rosenthal and the Semler Family. Located in three unique locations, these individuals have paved the way for the dozens of small, private vineyards that have started to dot the Malibu landscape and they will all tell you that hard work, patience and determination had more to do with it than magic. Having learned from their 25 years of wine experience between them, they seek the success of everyone involved to the benefit of the entire Malibu community. In admiration of the California mavericks before them, these Malibu winemakers are striving to produce the true taste of Malibu in a bottle.



## From the Cellar with Malibu's Pioneers

### The Malibu Vineyard

Michael McCarty was first a pioneer of "California Cuisine" well before he became a pioneer in wine. In 1979 at the age of 25, he opened his first restaurant, Michael's, in the sleepy town of Santa Monica to critical acclaim. His goal was to make food and wine an American institution by highlighting the incredible variety of outstanding food and wine being produced in this country.

It seemed fitting then that McCarty decided to plant a vineyard around his home in Malibu. As he puts it, he was young and frisky, and it was his business after all. In 1985 he planted two-acres of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, chardonnay and pinot noir vines on a steep, terraced hillside 750 feet in elevation overlooking La Costa Beach.

"We always knew that this was going to be difficult, but the idea was to just wing it and do what you were supposed to do plant grapes and see what happens," McCarty said. "We quickly found out that the pinot noir did the best – the others were always difficult and struggling."

Discovering that pinot noir was the best varietal for his relatively cool, coastal climate conditions was perhaps the most important lesson McCarty learned in the early days, in addition to determining the different microclimates found within even his small vineyard, each requiring individualized management practices. He also learned that a vineyard needs to be monitored and tended to each day, likening it to a preschool full of three-year olds all screaming for attention.

He produced his first vintage in 1989, and continued production until the Malibu fire of 1993 burned down his home and most of the vineyard. After a series of difficult years, in 2000 he made the courageous and costly decision to start anew by replanting his entire vineyard with pinot noir and expanding to three acres. In the interim while he waits for his vines to mature, McCarty has continued to make great wine with grapes he purchased from the same clones he planted. He is preparing for his first estate harvest this fall.

"It has been a labor of love and we have struggled to make it work, but here we are in Malibu making wine," McCarty said. "And as Malibu develops its own style of food and wine, it will remain what it is, small and boutique, with people working on their little cool gems."

### Rosenthal – The Malibu Estate

Looking for a temporary respite from the dreaded June gloom, George Rosenthal, Chairman and CEO of Raleigh Enterprises, took a drive through the Santa Monica Mountains in search of the sun when he unexpectedly found paradise in the Newton Canyon area of Malibu. According to Rosenthal, he was granted the privilege of buying 250 acres in an area he maintains with the utmost environmental respect in honor of its previous owners. His vineyard management practices have kept in line with his commitment to preserving the property in its most natural state with the help of an onsite arborist.

Although Rosenthal always loved wine and had the good fortune to travel all over the world tasting great wines, he never intended to plant a vineyard upon purchasing the property. That epiphany came later during one particularly lovely evening in Spain, accompanied shortly after by a conversation with Michael McCarty whose own work made his dream more tangible. After extensive research and soil testing to determine the right varietals for the area, in 1987 Rosenthal began planting what would eventually amount to almost 28 acres of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, petit verdot and chardonnay at 1,450 feet above sea level.

The first vintage of his 1991 Cabernet Sauvignon garnered high ratings. Little did he know, he said, how difficult it is to maintain those ratings through the years, with

his production of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and chardonnay. Today, advances in viticultural technology using satellites have allowed Rosenthal to better monitor vineyard conditions that help in creating a unique Malibu wine. Based on the distinct growing conditions found in his vineyard, Rosenthal filed a petition with the U.S. government for an American Viticultural Area (AVA) designation for the Malibu-Newton Canyon property that was granted in 1996.

"Wine is about people getting together in an environment that is conducive to the enjoyment of what nature is all about," Rosenthal said. "The biggest challenge in it all has been to convince people that Malibu can produce extraordinarily fine wines, as good as any other part of the world. People come here and say, 'you should be growing surfboards, not wine,' so the challenge is educational, really. I hope the people of Malibu enjoy the fruits of Malibu (no pun intended) and believe that we can produce excellent wine."

### Semler Malibu Estate

In 1979, the Semler family came to the hills of Malibu in search of a ranch they could call home and found it on a 1000 acre parcel of land that had been previously devastated in a rash of fires that swept through the area. According to his oldest daughter Tami, Ronnie Semler didn't seem to notice the charred piece of land all he noticed was its potential. Today, that land is known as Saddlerock Ranch, the largest working ranch in LA County, and is well on its way to becoming everything the Semler family envisioned.

Saddlerock Ranch started its operation with avocado trees and in a good year produced a million pounds of fruit. But the Semlers soon realized that the costs outweighed the benefits, particularly after a 1992 freeze destroyed their entire crop and a third of their trees. They carefully sought an agricultural alternative well-suited for their area and discovered the diverse opportunities of a vineyard. The following year they began replacing avocados with vines and initially planted 14 acres of cabernet sauvignon and merlot. The success of those vines led to the expansion and today the ranch currently has 70 acres of vines planted with a goal of 100 acres total. The majority of the vineyard is dedicated to cabernet sauvignon, followed by syrah and merlot.

"We did a lot of research before we planted and we have the perfect area to grow red wine grapes in terms of climate, sunlight, and elevation, which ultimately gave us so many other options in terms of growing, selling and producing wine," said Tami Semler. "We are blessed and so fortunate to own an amazing piece of property that can produce fantastic fruit."

Their first harvest produced the coveted 2000 Semler Malibu Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, and since then the production of their more recent wines, in addition to

their Saddlerock vineyard label, has been moving smoothly with the help of the entire family. Ronnie Semler is a seminal part of the entire business. His wife, Lisa, is the winemaker. Grandma Semler at 89 does most of the art work for the wine labels. Tami is the vineyard manager, and her eight other sisters and brothers all play integral roles in helping to produce their wine, particularly during harvest when they hold their famous annual harvest party celebration.

"In the next 20 years I see Malibu becoming a wine region to reckon with," Semler said. "Malibu already has an international reputation and LA is already a destination city. How great would it be to come to LA, go to Disneyland, go to the Hollywood Bowl and come to Malibu for wine tasting?"

