

March 2, 2005 WINE TALK

## The Vintages of Malibu

By FRANK J. PRIAL



### MALIBU, Calif.

I had been hearing about vineyards in Malibu for some time, but I wrote them off. Had to be a tourist gimmick, like Knott's Berry Farm or the La Brea Tar Pits. Malibu was the playground of the stars, a surfers' mecca, but cabernet? No way.

I once spent some time here working on a book with Burgess Meredith. The book never materialized, but we had fun tooling around the hills in one of the cars he earned doing Honda commercials. We drank decent wine, as I recall, but it didn't come from Malibu.

I was recalling those times recently while racing along the Pacific Coast Highway, trying to keep up with Michael McCarty, he of the Michael's restaurants in Manhattan and Santa Monica, who was leading the way to his vineyard in, yes, Malibu.

Malibu extends deep into the chaparral-covered hills east and north of the beach. There are a number of vineyards in the canyons cutting through the coast range to the ocean. Only a few matter commercially.

The Malibu Vineyard is one of them. It's tiny - about three acres - and Mr. McCarty features the wines in his restaurants. The other two serious vineyards are Rosenthal - the Malibu Estate, owned by George Rosenthal, a real estate developer in Los Angeles, and the Semler Malibu Estate, owned by Ron Semler, much of whose considerable fortune comes from avionics and trucking.

Mr. McCarty's vines surround the dramatic home he shares with his wife, Kim, an artist. The house is perched 750 feet up a dizzying slope overlooking the sea. "I put in the vines in 1985," he said, "because I was told they were a great firebreak." He was misinformed. After producing some pleasant wines for a few years, almost all his two acres of cabernet, merlot and cabernet franc were destroyed, along with his house, in the big fire in 1993.

Some vines survived, and Mr. McCarty, aided by purchased fruit, even produced some wine. But by then, he and his winemaker had come to realize that something, maybe the fires, had changed their weather. So, out came the Bordeaux varieties and in went pinot noir. Some early bottlings, with purchased fruit, are promising. The 2005 vintage will be the first produced entirely from grapes from the estate, now three acres in size, all of it pinot noir.

The Rosenthals' estate is five miles inland from the beach in rugged country once devoted mostly to avocados. George Rosenthal has lived most of his life in and around Los Angeles, but he got the idea for his spectacular Mexican-style estate while visiting the Domecq family at their finca, or ranch, near Seville, Spain. He bought what is now the Rosenthal estate in Kanan-Dume Canyon, 30 minutes by Bentley from his home in Los Angeles.

Mr. Rosenthal planted his first vines in 1987, two years after Michael McCarty. Today 27 of the estate's 250 acres are under vines. "And," Mr. Rosenthal said, "that's probably it." The vineyards - there are 12 - are planted on rugged terrain. Everything has to be done by hand. The various blocks include all the classic Bordeaux grapes, and a small lot of chardonnay vinified in the steely Chablis style, not the usual overoaked, oily California style.

The first Rosenthal vintage was 1991. In one competition it outranked a wine from the Napa Valley's legendary Grace Family Vineyard. "I thought, 'Gee, this isn't as tough as I had thought,'" Mr. Rosenthal said. A friend in the business cooled him off, saying: "You've done it once. They've been doing it for years." The current Rosenthal wines are excellent, particularly the cabernet and merlot, but high ratings, as Mr. Rosenthal has found, are not automatic.

Until recently Los Angeles County banned the coupling of vineyards and wineries. So every year Rosenthal has trucked its grapes to a winery up the coast in San Luis Obispo. But laws have been changed, and Mr. Rosenthal said he would build a modern winery, mostly underground, over the next several years. There will be an elaborate tasting room as well.

When Mr. Rosenthal made that life-altering visit with the Domecqs in the 1970's, he and his wife at the time were enthralled by their hosts' stable of magnificent Andalusian horses. Soon a stable appeared on the Malibu estate, its residents an equally impressive group of Andalusian horses. That woman is gone now and so are the horses. The handsome stable is to be the new tasting room.

Saddlerock Ranch, the Semler family's home, is three miles from the Rosenthal spread, but their lifestyle, and their microclimate, are different. They have considerable success, for example, with syrah, a hot climate grape. Ron and Lisa Semler have lived at Saddlerock for some 25 years. They have 65 acres planted in cabernet, merlot and syrah, and hope to have 100 acres, as well as their own winery. In addition to their Semler Malibu Estate label, they have a second line called Saddlerock Vineyards.

When I stopped in to visit and taste a few wines recently, the Semlers and those of their nine children still at home were living in temporary quarters on the ranch, having turned their own ranch-style home over to NBC for taping "The Biggest Loser," the reality series about dieting. Driving through the vineyards, we would glimpse two or three contestants staggering along a trail meant more for deer or goats.

We saw no deer or goats but there is a menagerie on the ranch, including camels, zebras and emus. There is also an equestrian center and Mr. Semler's collection of exotic autos. More than 100 movies and television series have been filmed at Saddlerock, and some of the cars have been in more films than Robert De Niro.

The 2000 vintage was the Semlers' first, 600 cases of cabernet sauvignon. "We want to go for 20,000 cases a year," Mr. Semler said. "We didn't put out 8,000 avocado trees for nothing."

"I say 'we,' " he said, looking at his wife. "She is the real winemaker, she and the kids. I just play with the numbers."

The Semlers have another wine business: creating vineyards for customers in Southern California. "We install them," Mr. Semler said. "One acre, two, three - we can do it."

It's all a far cry from the days when Los Angeles was the center of the California wine business. Disease and urban sprawl wiped out most of the local vineyards early in the last century. The Malibu vineyards and one other, Moraga, in Beverly Hills of all places, are rich men's hobbies, not signs of a wine renaissance. But they make good wine, and certainly the world needs no more avocados.