

Los Angeles City of Wine

Text & photo: Claes Löfgren

California is world-famous for its wines. The city of Los Angeles is not. However, a couple of visits to the city made me start looking around and actually, there was some local wine production. Worth writing about? I assumed it would be a very short article. How wrong you can be!

This is where it started. I'm standing in front of Ramona "The Mother Vine", the vine planted by Father Junipero Serra 250 years ago. It is one of the vines that Spanish Franciscan monks brought from Castilla-LaMancha to plant on the new continent. They needed wine for communion and meals.

Mission is the name of the grape in California, in South America it is known as pais or criolla chica. In Spain, it is now only found in the Canary Islands, where it is called listán prieto. If only Father Serra had realized that he was starting the biggest wine industry in the New World here!

The vine's arms stretch out along the pergola that surrounds the monastery church, its trunk reminiscent of an old oak. The vine was allowed to decay for many years, but has now been taken care of by a group of enthusiastic winemakers who have also recreated Angelica, the first wine made in Los Angeles. DNA tests show that the grape is a hybrid of mission and the native grape *vitis girdiana*, spontaneously cloned along the way.

Los Angeles "City of Wine"

So it all started, as so often in the world of wine, with the monks. On the orders of the Spanish king, expeditions were sent north from México to conquer new lands. In their wake were the Franciscan friars who established themselves in so-called Missions along the California coast. The first was in San Diego and eventually 21 missions and four large forts were built. The monastery of San Gabriel Archangel in what became Los Angeles, was the largest and most important monastery and it was from here that the wine culture originated which then spread further into California.

The influence of Spanish priests declined when Alta California became part of Mexico in 1821 and the Church lost its power. European immigrants were allowed to start planting vines. Some Spanish burghers were the first to establish vineyards. Frenchman Jean-Louis Vignes from Bordeaux was not the first to arrive in Los Angeles, but when he started in 1831, he was the most knowledgeable and had the most impact.

A new page was turned when California became a separate state in 1848 after the Mexican-American War.

At the same time, gold was discovered and the great rush began, with thousands of adventurers flocking the state. They were thirsty, so many entrepreneurs followed in their wake. More and more vineyards were established and Los Angeles became North America's largest source of wine. Visitors traveling to the city were greeted by vineyards everywhere. Los Angeles earned the name 'City of Wine'.

The previously rather rustic wines gained in reputation as knowledge increased and European grape varieties were imported. By 1857, production in LA was reported to be 1.3 million liters of wine and demand was constantly increasing.

Until the late 1930s, Los Angeles was the largest wine-producing area in California and the entire United States.

The vineyards were mainly located where the old city center is today. The Los Angeles River provided abundant water. The vineyards grew and spread further towards the San Gabriel Valley, then further east towards the San Bernadino mountains in Rancho Cucamonga. The lack of new grape varieties became more apparent as mission dominated until the end of the 19th century. The

market went up and down and competition from the areas north of San Francisco began to be felt. The planting of new grape varieties from Europe took off. Pierce's Disease hit the vineyards and as the growing population of Los Angeles began to spread, development began to take over farmland. Prohibition, 1919-1933, was a disaster for California winemakers, but not as dangerous for grape growers. Homemade wines were allowed thanks to a loophole in the law. But many vines were uprooted and replaced by other crops. Here in LA, more were planted instead, to cater to home winemakers.

A few producers like San Antonio Winery survived by making communion wine for the church, which was also allowed. San Antonio is the only surviving winery in Los Angeles and can be visited with wine tasting and restaurant. The wines, however, are made in Paso Robles. After Prohibition, viticulture was no longer profitable and urban development took over.

San Gabriel Mission and Los Angeles Vintners Association

When we visit the San Gabriel Monastery, we are greeted by the director Terri Huerta who shows us the 250-year-old vine. She got in touch with the Los Angeles Vintners Association, formed by three enthusiastic producers with a common interest in saving Los Angeles' dwindling wine culture. Together, they've nurtured the vine, which has now perked up and harvested three rounds of grapes. The wine they make is called Angelica after the wine produced by the monks in the 18th century. The grapes are pressed and the fermentation is suspended with locally produced brandy, resulting in a sweet, moderately strong wine that was very popular in the past.

Jasper Dickson and Amy Luftig started **the Angeleno Wine Company** in 2013 and began buying grapes to make wine on a small scale. They ramped up production and bought a space in a rough industrial area south of LA's China Town. Jasper works full-time but Ami has a day job that brings in extra income. They are open on weekends for tastings and sales of wine, you sit nicely surrounded by oak barrels, in the middle of production. They have a small production, a couple of thousand bottles, but work with many different grapes and make really good wines.

Most of the grapes are bought from Juan Alonso, an immigrant Spanish chef, who in 1980 bought a run-down motorcycle bar in Agua Dulce, outside Santa Clarita. La Chene became a success and in 1995 he started planting his favorite Spanish grapes on the property. He bought more land and today has about 4 hectares planted with loreiro, verdelho, albariño, syrah and grenache. Angeleno Wine Company buys most of the grapes, but some wine is made by his friend Stephen Hemmert from the Antelope Valley.

Juan Alonso is a lovely, slightly grumpy gentleman, who welcomes us and offers an incredible chicken stew. The wines he offers are those made by Stephen and are consistently good.

We meet again a few months later when I am at the harvest of the albariño grapes for Angeleno's production. Jasper and Amy are there with some members of the wine club and in a few hours the grapes are picked. After a few hours drive to the winery in Downtown LA, the work of pressing the grapes remains. In addition to Jasper and Amy, the LA Vintners Association was founded by Patrick Kelley of Cavaletti Wines, Jenny and Mark Blatty of Byron Blatty Wines. Members also include Acri Wine Co. and Golden Star.

Santa Clarita, Agua Dulce and Cucamonga Valley

In addition to Juan Alonso, Santa Clarita has become a bit of a hub for LA's winemakers. The Sierra Pelona Valley is called the AVA and borders the Antelope Valley AVA. Here is Pulchella Winery, the largest production facility in Los Angeles County. They receive grapes from about twenty winemakers and make wine according to customers' wishes. Many grapes come from the north, Santa Barbara and Paso Robles are only a few hours away.

Aqua Dulce Winery is also located here, 37 hectares planted with syrah, cabernet sauvignon, zinfandel among others. One of the few producers with a production facility on site. The wines are not much to write about, the whole place gives an abandoned impression. The fact that the owner has tried to sell the place in recent years gives a clue. But the vineyards are beautiful and many TV series and movies have been made here.

The nearest neighbor Reyes is much more lively. Good wines and a very present owner. Robert Reyes grew up in the Dominican Republic and emigrated to the United States. He carried the dream of making wine with him for thirty years and after a career in real estate, he took the plunge and bought six hectares twenty years ago. Production is small, 40,000 bottles, partly with purchased grapes, but what I tasted was decent. A restaurant project in Santa Clarita fell through, but the wines can be bought and tasted on site during the weekends.

A relic from LA's heyday is the fabled Lopez Vineyard in Cucamonga Valley. Owned by the Galleano family, who planted the vineyard in 1918, Cucamonga Valley, on the border between Los Angeles and San Bernardino, is a desert landscape surrounded by freeways. The old vines are struggling against the drought and the roots are digging deep into the soil. Yields are understandably low, but the quality of the old zinfandel grapes is outstanding. Somewhat surprisingly, palomino grapes also grow here, a reminder of the 'sherry' production that was popular in the past. The grapes are sold to winemakers in Sonoma and Napa, in addition to the local winemakers, so competition is fierce for the few grapes left.

Downtown LA, Boyle Heights

One of the main proponents of these old vineyards is a big name in the wine world.

Abe Schoener started his career as a philosophy professor, but wanted to learn more about wine.

That was 25 years ago and he never returned to university. From the start, he wanted to make natural wines with little or no sulphur added, well ahead of his time in other words. Living in New York, wine took him to California where he made cult wines from odd vineyards. His wines ended up on the wine lists of top restaurants, and the small editions have made them highly sought after. He calls it The Scholium Project and he owns no land, renting old industrial premises. Now he's moved down to Los Angeles, where he's found an old warehouse in Boyle Heights, a really rough neighborhood near the LA River. The project is called the Los Angeles River Wine Company. His partner in this is no less than Raj Parr, one of America's foremost sommeliers and winemakers. Here in Sweden, Parr's wines Sandhi, Domaine de La Côte and Evening Land in collaboration with Sashi Moorman have been widely acclaimed. He sells LA wines under the name Scythian Wine Co. Kaeley Weinberger is the winemaker and cellar manager. Now they make wines from 100-year-old mission, palomino and zinfandel grapes among others. Never irrigated, never sprayed, planted on their own roots. A grape treasure that must be preserved. All the wines are made in very small volumes and at high prices.

I met Abe and Raj on the premises and tasted a few different wines, all made according to the conditions that existed, as Abe puts it. There are no recipes, he goes by gut feeling.

I return a few weeks later when the first load of palomino grapes has been harvested in Lopez Vineyard.

Two tons of grapes are to be trampled and Chiara Pepe from Italy is visiting. She is a winemaker from Abruzzo and is used to foot stomping. Together with Kaeley, they jump in among the grapes and trample in the heat. It's the first grapes of the season and it's late July. The grape must is transferred to barrels and allowed to ferment without the addition of yeast or sulphur.

An exciting project that I will follow with interest.

The nearest neighbor is another winemaker.

Adam Sabelli-Frisch came to the US in 2010 after ten years in London working as a

cinematographer.

Hollywood beckoned and he has managed to make his way in the tough market.

With his interest in wine steadily growing, seven years ago he started to move from home winemaking to more ambitious wine production. He buys grapes from old vineyards in Lodi in the Central Valley but has become increasingly interested in the old vineyards in Los Angeles. The production is small but consists of an impressive collection of grapes. I taste mission, white zinfandel, syrah, flame tokay and cabernet. The wines are made as naturally as possible, he uses perhaps a little more sulfur than before to keep the wines stable. Adam also makes his version of Angelica, the original wine made from mission grapes by monks in the 18th century. His wines are available through importer Vinunic and appear as occasional releases at Systembolaget.

Malibu Coast

The idea for this article on LA wines was actually born on the famous Pacific Coast Highway. In the surfing paradise of Malibu, we drove past a big sign saying “Wine Tasting” and a small building just off the road. We walked in and were greeted by Marc Appelbaum who was behind the counter.

The wine is called Rosenthal after the owner George, a very rich hotel magnate in Los Angeles. His most famous hotel is the stars' favorite hotel, the Sunset Marquis. In 1987, he decided to plant the first vines since Prohibition on his land in the Santa Monica Mountains above Malibu.

- 'He wanted his name on the bottle of wine he offered his guests,' says Marc.

They produce around 10,000 cases, but only the Rosenthal wines come from their own vineyard where they have 11 hectares growing at 500 meters altitude. They were, by their own admission, the first to plant in Malibu and have their own AVA Malibu Newton Canyon. A second label is Surfrider made from grapes from San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara. Part of the proceeds go to a fund for surfers in Malibu.

The grapes are transported to Santa Clarita outside LA where the production facility vinifies a large part of the local grapes.

During our visit to Rosenthal, it is very quiet. Two young ladies sit on a sofa and drink wine, outside is a limousine with driver parked. If you look at the website, it is party, party that applies, no vineyard visit is offered. According to gossip, the vineyard has been for sale for a long time but has not found the right buyer ...

On the other hand, according to Marc, it is full of activity on weekends when the surfers have stepped out of the waves.

The wines? Decent craftsmanship, but not much more and not worth a price level of 50 dollars and up.

More people have followed in Rosenthal's footsteps and today there are about 20 members of Malibu Coast Vintners.

Cielo Farms, high up on Mulholland Highway, with beautiful views of the Santa Monica Mountains, is the most public and most stylish. They are investing heavily in the experience industry with wine tasting on the terrace, yoga and wellness, and perhaps above all in parties and wedding arrangements. The wine production itself seems to be a bit overshadowed, but the wines can be purchased through their wine club.

You can book a visit for a \$25 table fee, with wine added. On weekends it costs 15 dollars to park. In other words, it's expensive, but YouTube is filled with great videos of happy people sliding into limousines and toasting the sunset. Here it is really LaLA land that applies.

Right next door is the Malibu Rocky Oaks Estate Vineyard, built in 2003 as a sumptuous Tuscan villa high on a hill surrounded by 4 hectares of vines. The third major vineyard is Saddlerock owned by the Semper family.

What the Malibu wineries have in common is a bunch of billionaires building large villas with

gardens, where a few acres of vines provide a fancy atmosphere.

Until 2018, however, there were about fifty smaller winegrowers, often retired, who dreamed of having their own vineyard. That dream was brutally shattered when the Woolsey fire destroyed hundreds of houses, displacing 200 000 residents and spreading rapidly through the dry bushes of the steep mountains. The narrow, winding roads made it difficult for the fire brigade to get there. I meet Greg Barnett at Nabu Wines. He was president of the Malibu Coast AVA Association and was at the forefront when it was at its worst. He estimates that there are barely 20 percent of the smaller growers left. He still buys some grapes from those that remain, but mostly takes grapes from Napa Valley. He also runs a wine bar and earns a living as a graphic designer, so he gets by. Nabu Malibu Coast sangiovese is surprisingly good, full-bodied with a good length.

Palos Verdes.

At the southern tip of Los Angeles County lies the Palos Verdes peninsula with stunning views of the Pacific Ocean and Catalina Islands. It is LA's newest AVA consisting of nine different wineries run by enthusiasts. Jim York who owns Catalina View Gardens has been the driving force and owns the largest of them. When we visit, they are busy building a new house but Jim still takes time to show us around. The grapes are taken to Santa Barbara for vinification and the idea is to have events here when everything is ready. Many of the wines are sold locally at the huge Terranea luxury resort a stone's throw away.

Jim York bought the land when Marineland closed and built the resort. When he sold it a few years ago, he kept some land that he has now planted.

Los Angeles' wide range of wines has really surprised me, and the unusual and quirky in the wine world is right on time.

There are more producers and I have saved the most exciting for last.

In this issue, you'll also read about LA's best kept secret, Moraga Bel Air!