

George Rosenthal is a businessman in the Los Angeles area, involved in real estate and the film industry as well as a number of other projects. Some years ago he started brainstorming about what it took to grow great Bordeaux varieties.

After more than a little thought, Rosenthal took a helicopter flight over the Malibu area, a region dotted here and there with million-dollar homes on multi-acre parcels of brush land that sit just a scant few miles from the Pacific Ocean.

What Rosenthal saw looked to him like a perfect little protected valley. It was raw and filled with rills and boulders, but it was protected from the coastline by not one, but two low-lying ridges. He had to see the soil up close.

And when he did, Rosenthal was surprised at the fact that it had a more porous nature than many of the clay-like outcroppings nearby. It was perfect, he thought, not only for a getaway ranch, but also as a place to experiment with grapevines.

The result was The Rosenthal Estate, a Cabernet Sauvignon specialist in the heart of a prestigious residential area. The first wines were, in fact, startlingly fine, but the quest to make great wine on a continual, daily basis, didn't come easily.

Or inexpensively. First came the plating. It was arduous work partially because there is no ready agri-cultural labor force in Malibu. Then the amount of information available wasn't readily accessible; the Internet was yet to be a major force back in the early 1980's.

Then arose the problems such as equipment: most of it is sold in northern California. Grape stakes, wire, grapevine cuttings and bench grafts, drip irrigation systems, and the like were readily available elsewhere. L.A. residents haven't seen this sort of gear. Water also is expensive. So is the labor to do the fieldwork to prep the soil, remove boulders, erect fences, and build paths for the tractors.

The work was difficult and very expensive, and Rosenthal soon knew he needed help. But he had already spent a small fortune on this project, so he hired the best, Central Coast viticulturalist Jim Efrid. Then he realized he had no place to make the wine.

And getting a permit in Los Angeles County for a winery was not going to be easy. So George made arrangements with Sanford Winery to handle his first few crushes. Needless to say, this story is far more complicated than a short article could ever convey, but today The Rosenthal Estate produces a Cabernet Sauvignon that sells out at \$35 a bottle, makes an outstanding Merlot (also \$35), and a small amount of a splendid Chardonnay.

True, it was George Rosenthal's passion and commitment that pushed this project to completion. But without literally millions of dollars to see it through, the project would have failed.

Money was a stumbling block, of course, in that Rosenthal wouldn't have continued to pump money into it had the resulting wines not showed great character from the start. And he admits he was lucky he had the wherewithal to fund it properly. But it was commitment, passion, and a willingness to use all the tools modern wine making requires to make the wines that show this terroir in a wine that now is a staple on the California wine scene.

In many ways, the opening of the Malibu "wine growing district" is not yet a major story. Other than a few other tiny projects (Saddle Rock, Jussila and the Malibu Vineyards project of restaurateur Michael McCarty [Michaels]), the Rosenthal Estate is the only major one in the region. But he single-handedly proved that great red wine could be grown in the area, and other major projects are sure to follow.

Commentary by Dan Berger