

From Baywatch to Winemaking — Malibu Shows Another Side

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By Tara Weingarten

Everyone knows that Malibu, California, produces some of the best surf, an abundance of tanned and toned beachgoers and an occasional mudslide or two.



George Rosenthal (left) poured his Rosenthal-The Malibu Estate wines at the dinner at Saddle Peak Lodge, which is owned by Ann Ehringer (right).

But dude, did you know it's also a budding wine region?

At an early summer "coming out" party, three intrepid local producers showcased their wines at a favorite Malibu haunt, the Saddle Peak Lodge. About 80 guests — mostly friends of the vintners — dined at twilight on a patio set deep in the coastal canyon where they

tasted six wines from **Rosenthal-The Malibu estate**, Jussila Vineyard and Semler Malibu Estate Wines/Saddlerock Vineyards.

While nearby Los Angeles was the center of California winemaking in the 1800s, Malibu — the canyon, not the beach — doesn't have a long viticultural history. Its steep and craggy terrain, warm days, gentle coastal breezes and cool nights make it less-surprising choice for grape growing than one might initially think. And yet, though there are scores of millionaires living among the hills with acreage to burn (or plant), only three brave souls have recently ventured to make wine.

George Rosenthal, a real-estate investor who owns several hotels and two Los Angeles movie studios, was the first to give winegrowing a whirl. In 1987, he planted the first of his Bordeaux varietals, which now flourish on 25 acres at an elevation of about 1,500 feet. Soon after the release of his first wine, a 1991 Cabernet, his estate was granted the Malibu-Newton Canyon American Viticultural Area designation; Rosenthal is this AVA's only producer.

Of the wines from the three producers, Rosenthal's 1998 Cabernet Sauvignon Founder's Reserve (\$75, 175 cases) was the most balanced and French in style.

Kevin Jussila, a financial adviser with Merrill Lynch, said he planted Syrah vines in 1996 mainly as a hobby. "Ignorance is bliss," he explained. "I've always loved gardening, and I thought this would be fun." Jussila's "hobby" now includes 1,650 Syrah, Grenache, and Sangiovese vines on about 1.5 acres, and he is producing tiny amounts of wine, having started with a 1999 Syrah. He said, "People's expectations of the Malibu area wines are really low, so it's great when they taste it and say, 'Wow!'"

Having yanked out 8,000 avocado trees on his hilltop Malibu property to make way for grapes, Ron Semler, owner of Semler Malibu Estate Wine and Saddlerock Vineyards, is literally betting the farm. With Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah planted on 60 acres, the telecommunications executive is just getting started. While he awaits word on whether he will be granted his own Malibu appellation, Semler has plans to double the size of his vineyard, hoping to produce 20,000 cases in the next few years. His first releases are from the 2000 vintage, including the tannic Semler Malibu Estate Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (\$45, 650 cases).

Saddle Peak chef Warren Schwartz cooked the showcase dinner, matching up dishes such as pan-seared Arctic char with lentils with the lightly jammy Jussila Topanga Estate Syrah 2001 (\$22, 75 cases) and a roasted caribou chop with crispy potato confit with the 1998 Rosenthal Cabernet.

Schwartz said he was surprised by how hard it was to pair his food with the Malibu wines. "I did a test a few days before and found that I had based my food on the strength of Napa Cabernet, and these wines are nothing like that," he said. "They are less robust and yet tannic. I had done pairings a hundred times and yet this time, I had to put a lot of thought into my menu."

Finally, something from Southern California that's subtler than its Northern California cousin. Go figure.