

March 30, 2014

Wines with a view: Malibu inspires latest California AVA

By Gabe Saglie

Few city names conjure up striking images like Malibu. Beaches, sunshine, celebrities, mansions, opulence. And with an impending nod from the federal government, that list might soon include wine. The Malibu Coast AVA is imminent — it could happen within weeks, according to people involved in the application process. As Southern California's newest AVA, or American Viticultural Area, the federal branding will mean an important recognition: that the conditions within its boundaries — the soil, the climate — are unique in their ability to grow wine grapes of distinction.

"That's our 'hood, that's our home — so when you can create something and name it as such, it's really powerful," says Sonja Magdevski, winemaker and owner of Casa Dumetz Wines. The label features mostly Santa Barbara County-sourced wines and runs a popular tasting room in Los Alamos. But it also includes a pinot noir made from the half-acre vineyard that flanks the Point Dume home that Ms. Magdevski shares with fiancé and actor Emilio Estevez. "You choose a location, you choose what you want to do, and you want to pick the most distinct name possible to represent your wine."

The boundaries of the soon-to-be Malibu Coast AVA, which Ms. Magdevski was not involved in spearheading, will actually reach well beyond Malibu's city limits. It stretches as far north as coastal portions of Oxnard, as far inland as Newbury Park, as far east as the Hollywood Hills and as far south as Santa Monica. Wine made from grapes grown anywhere in this region will be able to be identified as coming from the Malibu Coast. This is also not the first AVA distinction for Malibu. The Malibu-Newton Canyon AVA, relegated to the popular Rosenthal label, was established in 1996, while the Saddle Rock-Malibu AVA, encompassing the projects of Malibu Family Wines, was formed 10 years later. Both of these will continue to exist within the new Malibu Coast AVA.

The area's committed vintners are celebrating the new AVA. For vintner Elliott Dolin, part of the original team that petitioned the federal government back in 2011, it will be a boon for a hobby that's become a bona fide winemaking endeavor. His backyard, off Kanan Dume Road and about a mile from the shore, is a one-acre vineyard of chardonnay with an ocean view.

"The challenging slope here almost had us planting a cutting garden," he tells the News-Press during an exclusive tour of the grounds, pointing down a decidedly steep hillside comprising volcanic soils capped by silty clay. "But then I saw vineyards popping up all along Kanan."

The Dolins planted vines in 2006 and launched their Dolin Malibu Estate Vineyards label with their inaugural harvest in 2009. That chardonnay won a silver medal at the prestigious San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition, and "that was the solid encouragement we needed to move forward," he says.

In 2010, the Dolins hired Kirby Anderson as winemaker, the same man who, until 2008, led the award-winning wine program at Gainey Vineyard in the Santa Ynez Valley. The Arroyo Grande resident now consults on boutique wine projects, like Mr. Dolin, and with significant success. The 2010 Dolin Estate Chardonnay won double gold in San Francisco. Mr. Anderson admits that the new Malibu Coast AVA is expansive. "But the first Paso Robles AVA was monstrous and now it's been broken up into six or seven pieces," he says. "If we carve out a piece of land in L.A. County and call it Malibu AVA, what a great first step. We can go in and divvy up that area later. But these people having to label their wine L.A. County — it lacks cachet."

And therein lies the biggest source of pride for Mr. Dolin: being able to replace the current grape source nomenclature on his labels — the only two options for Malibu winemakers right now are L.A. County or California — with the far sexier, and more precise, title of Malibu Coast. "It gives us credibility and gets people to take us more seriously," he says. "And it brings to light that winemaking is taking place in Malibu." Currently, about 200 AVAs exist within the state.

The Dolin brand has grown quickly — from 200 cases in 2011 to 2,000 cases in 2012 — by buying additional grapes like cabernet sauvignon from the nearby Rosenthal estate and pinot noir from vineyards like Bien Nacido in the Santa Maria Valley and Sebastiano in Santa Barbara County's Sta. Rita Hills.

Other serious winemaking is also flourishing in Malibu these days. Rosenthal Estate, with plantings dating back to 1987 and a buzzing tasting room along Pacific Coast Highway, manages 37 acres of vines perched 1,500 feet above sea level; its estate cabernet gets high marks. And Malibu Family Wines, which first planted vines in 1997 and recently opened a tasting room in Los Olivos, is expanding its plantings of grapes like cabernet sauvignon, merlot and syrah from 65 to 100 acres.

Just up the road from Dolin, off Kanan Dume, Malibu Rocky Oaks is a 37-acre estate perched high atop a pinnacle along the Santa Monica Mountains whose dramatic elevation is hard to miss from the canyon road below. Owner Howard Leight wholeheartedly embraces the titillating vibe his ZIP code brings: the deluxe Tuscan-style villa enjoys sweeping 360-degree views and has been featured in movies like "The Hangover Part III" and TV shows like "The Bachelorette" and "Keeping Up with the Kardashians." But Mr. Leight's home is also enveloped by 10 acres of vines — all set on a precipitous landscape. Planted in 2003, they grow in rocky, porous volcanic soils. And a handful of varieties are strategically distributed: the pinot noir faces north, to limit sun exposure, while the cabernet sauvignon looks west, to capitalize on the heat that comes with a 2,000-foot elevation. The cabernet franc rims the infinity pool.



The 2012 Dolin Rosé is made from Santa Barbara County pinot noir grapes and retails for \$22. The label features an iconic Malibu tile.

Elliott Dolin inspects his backyard chardonnay vines regularly throughout the growing season.

GABE SAGLIE/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

The 4,000 annual cases of wine are made in Healdsburg; the grapes get there by refrigerated truck. And the brand is gaining in popularity. "We're in almost every supermarket chain in Southern California — Whole Foods, Gelson's — and we're the fastest-moving wine at the Ralphs in Malibu," says Mr. Leight. "We're also on wine lists in Wall Street and Florida."

The 2012 reserve cabernet won two gold medals in the San Francisco Chronicle contest, a product of location-specific conditions that give the wine a special jammy character, according to Mr. Leight. "When the hillside heats up, it heats the rocks and they release nutrients into the grapes. Even the winds we get up here move the leaves around, so they get maximum sun exposure," he says.

When the new AVA goes through, Mr. Leight says he'll finally start submitting his wines for review by Robert Parker, the uber-influential wine critic. Despite the new name's appeal, he says, "there's no substituting quality and that special taste to our wines." But the distinction will help bolster the regional commitment to making wine, he adds. "We're all sort of a team here, and the more people in Malibu who sell wine, the better."

Jim Palmer would agree. The self-described "one-man show" is a business manager who planted his own vines in 1997 along Decker Canyon; the twisty avenue reaches PCH on one end and becomes Westlake Boulevard on the other. He grows syrah, cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, merlot and sangiovese, and he makes the wines for his Malibu Vineyards brand himself. Santa Barbara growers like Qupe's Bob Lindquist and Lucas & Lewellen's Louie Lucas have mentored him over the years. And his location — an organically farmed, south-facing, well-drained plot of volcanic, sandy, clay soils — produces 400 cases a year of award-winning wines found on wine lists from Nobu in Malibu to Spago in Beverly Hills.

"Most people don't know we have wines out here," he admits. "Malibu is famous for movie stars and surfing beaches, but we can also be famous for creating world-class wine." The new AVA, he adds, "does give us credibility." He doubts, though, that the new distinction will buck what he sees as a price cap generated by a still-weak economy. Mr. Palmer's wines retail for about \$30 and the new AVA "still won't get us \$40 or \$50 a bottle," he says.

Winemaking in Malibu hasn't grown without meeting hurdles. Complaints by next-door neighbors have forced many residential grape growers to invest in organic spraying methods. The California Coastal Commission has strictly managed, and prevented, the planting of grapevines in some areas, deeming them non-indigenous. And the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors recently voted through a plan that puts limits on the expansion of existing vineyards.

Malibu winemaking also isn't without its critics. Several dozen vineyards would fall inside the new Malibu Coast AVA — 48 growers, according to Mr. Dolin. And while many are recognized as legitimate endeavors, the disposable income in this posh community has also generated hobby projects fueled by non-traditional practices that may undermine the push to have wines from Malibu taken seriously.

"Who's making the wine and who's growing it? That's the end all of good wine — it's the people factor," says winemaker Bruno D'Alfonso, who gained fame as the former longtime winemaker for Santa Barbara County's Sanford Winery and who currently makes wines under the D'Alfonso-Curran label, based in Lompoc. Mr. D'Alfonso has worked with a slew of Malibu producers, including Rosenthal, and has been making the popular pinot noir for Michael's restaurant in Santa Monica since the late 1980s, from owner Michael McCarty's three-acre The Malibu Vineyard. He suggests some Malibu growers have not made correct planting choices. "Whites like chardonnay should be planted closer to the coast, because they don't hang on the vine as long. Reds hang longer and so have greater exposure to disease pressure from mold and mildew," he says.

Mr. D'Alfonso says he has developed proprietary methods to help Malibu wine grapes combat moisture-driven ailments, but he's keeping them secret. And he believes the new AVA "is more about marketing appeal than recognition as a grape-growing area."

Winemaker Kirby Anderson concurs. "Gentleman farmers try to do it on their own out there and they're just not going to hit the mark," he says. For Dolin's vineyard, he's employed the professional services of vineyard manager Kevin Wilkinson, of Coastal Vineyard Services, which tends vineyards in Paso Robles. "So there's a learning curve in Malibu," he adds, "and there are some obstacles and potholes ahead."

More pointed criticism comes from Emilio Estevez, the actor and Golden Globe-nominated filmmaker, whose Malibu backyard pinot noir vineyard is sourced for Casa Dumetz Wines. "I suppose for marketing purposes, the Malibu name may give the label a certain designated distinction, but 'Malibu winemakers' have to start making good wine to really be taken seriously, and that just hasn't happened yet," he tells the News-Press. "I'm not saying that good grapes and good wines can't come out of Malibu. But unless your life and your livelihood are dependent on creating a great bottle of wine, you are simply a 'hobbyist.'"

"Which is why we moved our entire operation up to (Santa Barbara County), where there is not only consistently great fruit, but also a network of talented growers and winemakers to share ideas and tasting notes with — something I don't believe a Malibu AVA will be able to achieve among its many hobbyist vintners and gentlemen farmers." His partner Ms. Magdevski adds, "Everyone is trying to differentiate wine by sense of place. We're into distinction. Unfortunately, that gets into a (fighting) match. But it shouldn't be about ego; it's about community."

Aware of others' concerns, but undaunted, vintners like Elliott Dolin continue to embrace the looming Malibu Coast AVA. Mr. Dolin, who believes most future growth will occur inland, where land is less expensive and less restricted, suggests Malibu wine's next big hurdle might be Malibu's cachet itself.

"That beach is world-famous, but we need people standing on the beach to turn around and to see that this perfect climate can generate great wine, too."



Elliott Dolin planted his backyard vineyard in 2006, the year he moved in. The vines' first vintage was 2009, which resulted in an award-winning chardonnay.

The Dolins' chardonnay vines, which feature an ocean view, are set on a slanting hill made of volcanic and clay soils.

Leaves are making a comeback on the Dolin estate's chardonnay vines. The vineyard straddles a custom-designed poolside gazebo.