



SANTA BARBARA
NEWS-PRESS

SECTION **D**
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OCTOBER 9, 2011

OUT & ABOUT



Chad Smith

Smith joins Music Academy council

Chad Smith has been named to the Music Academy of the West's National Advisory Council. Mr. Smith is vice president of artistic planning for the Los Angeles Philharmonic. He previously served as artistic administrator for the Los Angeles Philharmonic and New York Philharmonic and as associate artistic administrator at the New World Symphony in Miami. He serves on the board of the American Music Center.

—Charlotte Boechler

OUR TOWN

Free admission at Botanic Garden

The Santa Barbara Botanic Garden is offering a "Community Free Day" as part of its year-long anniversary celebration of "85 Years: Growing Native." MarBorg Industries is sponsoring the free-admission day 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Oct. 16 at the garden, 1212 Mission Canyon Road. Along with free entry, visitors can participate in docent tours at 11 a.m., noon, 1 p.m. and 2 p.m. For more information, call 682-4726, ext. 132.

Funding terrorism

Dr. Rachel Ehrenfeld, Ph.D., will speak on the topic "Funding Evil: How Terrorism is Financed and How to Stop It" at a Channel City Club luncheon beginning at noon Monday at Fess Parker's Doubletree Resort, 633 E. Cabrillo Blvd. Dr. Ehrenfeld, a consultant to the State and Defense Departments, is the director of the New-York-based American Center for Democracy and the Center for the Study of Corruption and the Rule of Law. Tickets are \$28 for members and \$35 for nonmembers. For more information, call 884-6636.

—Marilyn McMahon

ON STAGE

College to present "Trojan Barbie"

Santa Barbara City College Theatre Arts Department will perform "Trojan Barbie" Wednesday through Oct. 29 at Interim Theatre on the West Campus, 721 Cliff Drive. The play is the story of Lotte Jones, an English doll repair expert who suddenly finds herself transported back in time to the ancient camp of Trojan women. Curtain will rise at 7:30 p.m. this Wednesday and Thursdays through Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays. The 2 p.m. Oct. 16 matinee will be live-captioned for the hearing impaired. Tickets cost \$15 for general admission, \$12 for seniors and \$8 for students. To purchase, call 965-5935.

—Dave Mason



Vintner Geoff Rusack stands amid the pinot noir grapevines on the "View Block," three acres that offer beautiful views of popular Little Harbor and the Pacific Ocean in the distance. He and wife Alison Wrigley Rusack have planted the first vineyard on Catalina Island and will soon debut the wines.

ISLAND VINTAGE

Santa Barbara vintners launch first-ever Catalina wine

By **GABE SAGLIE**
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

News that Alison Wrigley Rusack and husband Geoff Rusack are about to launch the first-ever wines grown on Santa Catalina Island is fresh off the press.

After much buzz and speculation among vintners in the know, their debut release — an island-grown chardonnay, pinot noir and zinfandel from the 2009 vintage — is just months away (and has serious wine drinkers on a growing

waiting list ready to pop the cork). But in some ways, this story really began close to 30 years ago.

"Alison and I had just started dating and I remember we were riding horseback along a ridge, looking out to the ocean," recalls Mr. Rusack, 55, during an exclusive in-flight interview en route from the South Coast to Catalina. He pauses to gaze out the window of his private plane, 45 minutes after taking off from its Santa Barbara Municipal Airport home base, as he begins the descent toward a rural runway on the island; three neatly manicured vineyards are

coming into view through the parting clouds. "And we said to ourselves, 'Wouldn't it be neat to have vineyards here one day and make wine?'"

Quite the prophetic notion, it turns out.

But many years would go by before their romantic conception would become reality. The Rusacks married in 1985 and settled in Los Angeles, where she developed consumer products for Disney and he worked as an aviation law attorney. They made the pastoral

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MIKE ELIASON / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

An aerial view of Santa Catalina Island Vineyards. The vineyard in the foreground is mostly chardonnay, along with some pinot noir vines. Beyond that, two blocks of pinot noir, Clone 777 on the left and Clone 667 on the right. There's also a zinfandel vineyard.



At left, with harvest just a few days away, winemaker John Falcone checks on the progress of chardonnay grapevines. Santa Catalina Island Vineyards has two acres of chardonnay planted. At right, the three wines that make up the debut release of Santa Catalina Island Vineyards are, from left, a chardonnay, zinfandel and pinot noir, all from the 2009 vintage. Below, vintner Geoff Rusack looks out at Little Harbor, a cove popular with leisure boaters and campers. The spot is also visible from the Rusacks' Santa Catalina Island Vineyards property.



Catalina Island may just be the next wine destination

WINE

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leap to Ballard Canyon in the early '90s and, before long, the vintner bug bit. Rusack Vineyards and Winery was established in 1995; the doors to its tasting room opened two years later. And today, thanks in large part to the talented stewardship by winemakers John and Helen Falcone, the brand is synonymous with some of the best Rhone and Burgundian wines in Santa Barbara County.

There's always been that connection to Santa Catalina Island, though. Anchored 22 miles off the Southern California coast, it's the third largest isle on the Channel Island chain and the only one that's privately owned. And that's where Mrs. Rusack — and her pedigree — feature prominently.

William Wrigley Jr., her great-grandfather, is easily one of the great businessmen in American history. He founded the Wrigley Co. in the 1890s and would go on to make a fortune selling wildly popular brands of chewing gum to the American public. In the decades that followed, he'd own the Chicago Cubs baseball team; their historic hometown ballpark was named in his honor. And he'd own the luxury, landmark Arizona Biltmore Hotel in Phoenix.

But a significant chapter of his legacy is what he did for Santa Catalina. He joined investors in the 75-square-mile island in 1915 — they were the Santa Catalina Island Co. — and, four years later, bought them out to own it outright. In the years that followed, he made major improvements, such as revamping water systems and public utilities, and developing real estate, which included building the island's iconic Casino building. He also founded a company that used local clay to make glazed tiles and housewares which, today, command big money from collectors. And he regularly hosted his Cubs for spring training on Catalina, on a custom diamond he called Field of Dreams.

The Wrigley generations that have followed have continued the legacy of enhancing the island. Son Philip (also a baseball buff, whose creation of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League was depicted in the 1992 Tom Hanks film "A League of Their Own") created the Santa Catalina Island Conservancy and deeded 88 percent of the island — 42,000 acres — to it. One percent of what remained is held, to this day, by private individuals, mainly longtime shop- and homeowners. The other 11 is managed by the Santa Catalina Island Co., which Philip's son, William, inherited; when he died in 1999, controlling shares in that company went to his daughter.

That daughter is Alison Wrigley Rusack.

Today, she and husband Geoff have taken the reins in restoring the company's portion of the island. That includes much of the tourism attractions on Avalon, Catalina's main town and, for years now, a popular daytrip for Southern Californians. "We're primarily a real estate company," says Mr. Rusack, referring to their three hotels and three restaurants in Avalon, including the much buzzed about Avalon Grille. The company also manages several new tourist-friendly attractions — including semi-submersible boats, fly-fishing outposts and a 4,000-foot zip-line — and general stores at the resort town of Two Harbors, which is popular with leisure boaters.

But the most important part of the company's portfolio, if for nothing more than sentimental reasons, is El Rancho Escondido, or The Hidden Ranch. The rustic property was founded by grandfather Philip as a training ground for the Wrigley family's Arabian horses, which were, for years, shown throughout the United States. Until recently, and for some 70 years, the property was open to the public and became an effective attraction to get visitors off the beach and into



The grounds of historic El Rancho Escondido once housed the Wrigley family's Arabian horses. The property is at the center of Geoff Rusack and wife Alison Wrigley Rusack's plans to create a destination visitors center, complete with winery and ocean-view tasting room.

the island's unspoiled interior, which, to this day, is marked by rocky roads, meandering canyons and wildlife. Breeds of fox, quail and shrew unique to the island are still readily spotted, as are more than 200 bison, which were brought in as extras for a movie back in the 1920s and which, today, are allowed to roam free. Native mahogany and ironwood trees dot the landscape.

The ranch is now closed, as the Rusacks begin the process of restructuring the property into what will one day reopen as "a spectacular visitors center," says Mr. Rusack as he takes the News-Press on an exclusive tour on a recent day. "We're envisioning this as a destination for weddings, concerts and corporate events."

The property's stable still houses expertly maintained carriages that, decades ago, would whisk VIP guests in from Avalon, as well as hand-crafted silver saddles owned by generations of Wrigleys. Numerous black-and-white photos depict the family's history; some, dating to the late 1940s, show the Wrigley family arriving on the island for visits aboard their private DC-3. And an old ranch house still abuts the stable; it's home to dozens more old photos (one shows Phil Wrigley making music alongside Walt Disney), various taxidermed catches and a bathroom done entirely in that coveted Catalina tile.

But the most exciting part of the Rusacks' project may be what Mr. Rusack animatedly outlines in pantomime fashion as he exits the stable: "Here, here's where we'll put a winery," he declares. "And here, a tasting room with a deck," pointing to a plot overlooking the ocean in the distance and — this is where the project's uniqueness is most evident — a beautifully manicured vineyard in full bloom.

Prophetic notion fulfilled.

The Rusacks began to explore in earnest the idea of planting grapevines on Catalina Island in 2002. They flew in experts from as far away as Australia to help study things like soil conditions and climate. On the soil front, the initial news was not good; unrelenting ocean exposure had resulted in the presence of boron and, mainly, salt at significant levels. The Rusacks would go on to do intensive soil flushing and rinsing; they would also plant vines at elevated heights to promote water flow, build a sophisticated drain system under each vineyard row and install a drip irrigation system.

At first, they considered planting syrah, a varietal with which they'd already had great success on the mainland, in Santa Barbara County. "But all the data that was coming back was telling us that the conditions were so good for Burgundian grapes that pinot noir and chardonnay became a no-brainer," says Mr. Rusack. In 2004, Mr. Rusack and two of their sons, Parker and Austin, flew out to neighboring Santa Cruz Island to hand-pick rugged grapevines that had long been growing wild. Nature protection groups on both islands already enjoyed a collaborative relationship in myriad species recovery and environmental restoration projects, so when the Rusacks requested access to the vines, the Nature Conservancy's Santa Cruz Island project "was happy to do so," explains Mr. Rusack. Cuttings were sent

We're making wine — really good wine — in a spot in the world where no one else has ever done it before.

Geoff Rusack,
co-owner of Santa Catalina Island Vineyards



MIKE ELIASON / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

Chardonnay grapes are nearing harvest-ready conditions on the El Rancho Escondido estate. Top left, crates that bear the Rusack Vineyards name await the fruits of the harvest from Santa Catalina Island Vineyards on the tarmac of the island's Airport in the Sky. The Cessna in the background will carry them to Santa Ynez Airport for delivery to Rusack Vineyards' facility on Ballard Canyon Road.

to UC Davis, where two grape varieties were identified: mission and zinfandel. The former enjoys little caché in the wine business, but the Rusacks made the call with little hesitation to include the newly discovered zin in their budding Catalina wine project.

In March 2007, the Rusacks joined members of Buellton-based Coast Vineyard Care in planting the very first vineyards on Santa Catalina Island: one acre of zinfandel, two acres of chardonnay and three acres of pinot noir; the pinot vineyard was quickly dubbed the "View Block" for the generous glimpse of ocean it offers.

It's unusual to see pinot noir and chardonnay, which thrive in cooler environments, planted in such close proximity to the warmer-weather zinfandel. "But we have the zin on a south-facing slope," says winemaker John Falcone, "and it's amazing to see how different the conditions there can be. It works!"

Mr. Falcone, 54, has two digital weather stations positioned in the vineyards, which he can check electronically even from the comfort

of his Ballard Canyon home. During harvest season, he flies out to Catalina at least weekly to check on growing conditions; usually, he rides along on flights aboard the Rusacks' personal plane, tagging along with other employees on important

family business. When the grapes are harvested, they are transported to Catalina's Airport in the Sky (it sits at an elevation of 1,600 feet above sea level), packed inside oversized bins and loaded on a jet engine Cessna Caravan that's been outfitted as a cargo plane. They arrive, often in the early morning hours, at the Santa Ynez Airport before being trucked to the Rusack Vineyards winemaking facility. "I've never had grapes arrive by plane before," admits Mr. Falcone with a chuckle.

The first harvest from the new vines took place in autumn 2009. There were, naturally, several challenges; among them, vastly different yields between the varietals and uneven bud break on the zinfandel. "That's common with zin," says Mr. Falcone, "but here, it was definitely exacerbated." The 2010 yields were considerably smaller, due in large part to an unforeseen infestation by tens of thousands of yellow jackets.

The harvest for 2011 is going on now; no buzzers have been spotted on the horizon.

"When we planted, we really didn't know what to expect," admits Mr. Rusack as he meanders through the vines, inspecting grape clusters quickly nearing pick-ready conditions. "But what's really great to see now is how healthy the vines look."

The 2009 debut crop resulted in 265 cases of chardonnay, 125 cases of pinot noir and just 60 cases of zinfandel — a small production for a truly unique wine project. Real wine merits aside, these bottlings are, naturally, already generating buzz among the wine curious; prices are still being set and a waiting list is growing quickly for exclusive allocations of the first Santa Catalina Island Vineyards releases within a few months. (You can find more information and join the waiting list at www.catalinaislandvineyards.com.)

But novelty aside, these wines are remarkably noteworthy and decidedly distinct.

"They were made the same way we make the Rusack wines" that use Santa Barbara County fruit, says Mr. Falcone, "but they are very different."

What the industry defines as the expression of terroir — how a sense of place translates to flavor in the bottle — may be especially alive here. The chardonnay is rich and tropical on the nose, with great acidity in the mouth. The pinot noir is especially unique, with dark, earthy aromas but delicate red fruit flavors. And the zinfandel displays wonderful elegance, generous in fruit and refreshingly lower in alcohol than many popular California zins. (Look for detailed tasting notes in this writer's regular wine column in Thursday's Food section of the Santa Barbara News-Press.)

Distinctiveness is allowing the Rusacks to find the real thrill in what started as an experiment and bona fide leap of faith. For Mr. Falcone, the project has balanced a fair share of anxiety-producing unknowns with the type of professional satisfaction that may only come from doing something truly special.

"We're making wine — really good wine — in a spot in the world where no one else has ever done it before," he says as he swings shut the gates to the vineyard that have been erected to ward off wandering bison. "And that's pretty cool."

And so, with the investment and commitment of another generation, the Wrigley legacy continues.

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Santa Catalina Island is home to more than 200 protected bison that are readily seen roaming free in the island's interior. The animals were brought on the island in the 1920s as extras for a movie and remained. At left, the "View Block" was named for the ocean views it offers on a clear day. It is home to Clone 777 pinot noir, which helped produce 125 cases of pinot noir wine in the 2009 vintage.