

Arts & Culture

By Frank Nelson



LEFT: The artist, photographer Mark Robert Halper.
RIGHT: Bob Lindquist, owner and winemaker, Qupé Wine Cellars.

THE ART OF THE VINE

Mark Robert Halper's new book shows a different side of Santa Barbara winemakers.

MOST BOOKS ABOUT WINEMAKERS show the subjects, often flanked by rows of bottles, hoisting a glass of wine. Maybe they're strolling amid the vines, or in their cellars carefully examining barrel samples. But Los Angeles commercial and fine art photographer Mark Robert Halper has steered well clear of those sorts of images in his new book, *Sunlight and Water: Celebrating the Winemakers of Santa Barbara County*.

"I wanted to get past the clichés," says Halper, who doesn't believe winemaking is as glamorous as many people think. "It's hard work though it is still romantic and creative."

Readers of this coffee-table book, brimming with 110 portraits of local winemakers, grape growers, and vineyard owners, will struggle to find even a single glass of wine, and Halper includes only a few bottles, barrels, tanks, and vines. It's a deliberate, calculated, artistic approach, as is Halper's decision to shoot everything in black and white, using mostly natural light supplemented by "a few lights from Home Depot," rather than sophisticated studio lighting.

The result is a series of gently unassuming, romantic images that look almost like they could have been taken many years

ago. "Black and white strips things down and is more timeless," explains Halper. "They are soft in places and have the look and feel of very old photos." His back-to-basics technique even recreates traces of the "beautiful imperfections" often apparent in very early photography.

The book was officially launched last month amid wine tasting and hors d'oeuvres at Avant Tapas and Wine in Buellton. Proceeds from the evening's ticket sales (and silent auction) went to benefit the Valley Foundation's scholarship fund supporting local college students. Halper said he had wanted to do something to repay and benefit the local community; he decided on this particular charitable organization because one of the winemakers, Priscilla Higgins of Three Creek Vineyards, was involved with the foundation.

Halper has been a professional photographer for 20 years, and has taught photography for UCLA Extension and at the renowned photographic workshops in Santa Fe; he is also on the advisory board of The Art Institute of California. He captured the images for this book over a six-month period last year in four trips to Santa Barbara County, each one lasting five days.



LEFT: Fred Brander, The Brander Vineyard, Santa Ynez Valley.
RIGHT: Winemaker Karen Steinwachs, Buttonwood Farm Winery, Solvang.



Halper chose his subjects from large and small wineries, from well-established ventures to relatively new ones, and from a variety of backgrounds—some connected with the land, others from completely different walks of life. What attracted him here, rather than somewhere like Napa, was the intimate nature of the local wine industry.

“Santa Barbara winemakers are very hands-on, and they’ve got a lot of personality,” he says. “There’s a lot of character in the wines and in the people.”

During the creative process, Halper came up with the idea of a “Meandering Gallery” to showcase the photos in the book. “I thought it would be fun to take over Los Olivos,” he jokes, referring to the eight tasting rooms, one restaurant, and one hotel, now each displaying between half a dozen and 20 examples of artwork from the book (through mid-February). The venues, all a short walk from one another around the heart of Los Olivos, are: Fess Parker Wine Country Inn, Los Olivos Café, and the tasting rooms of Andrew Murray Vineyards, Blair Fox Cellars, Coquelicot, Daniel Gehrs, Qupé-Ethan-Verdad, Scott Cellars, Stolpman Vineyards, and Tre Anelli.

In conjunction with these exhibitions, Halper will also be signing copies of *Sunlight and Water* over the next few months at some of the roughly 100 wineries and tasting rooms captured by his camera, as well as at other events in Los Angeles, Santa Monica, and Santa Barbara. Copies are priced at \$40; a custom-made, leather-bound and boxed limited edition sells for \$795. These signed, special editions come with a print of one of the book’s images, which is chosen by the buyer and also signed by the photographer. (Visit sunlightandwater.com for purchasing information and book-signing schedule.)

The book’s title is taken from a quotation attributed to the Italian-born astronomer and mathematician Galileo: “Wine is sunlight, held together by water.” The tome includes an introduction by Anthony Dias Blue, former *Bon Appétit* wine and spirits editor and currently editor in chief of *The Tasting Panel* magazine. ■