

L I F E S T Y L E T R A V E L

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QUARTERLY

FALL 2010



THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE

BEHIND THE WINES OF
SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

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THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE

Ever wonder what happens before a winemaker catches lighting in a bottle? **LESLIE A. WESTBROOK** looks behind the foliage—and beyond the romance—into the real lives of some of Santa Barbara County's finest crushers, tasters, managers, and marketers.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK ROBERT HALPER

PEOPLE TEND TO VIEW winemaking as a romantic endeavor, but it's a highly demanding venture. There are vines to plant and tend. Then there's the waiting—and hoping Mother Nature spins her magic. Fall is for gathering and crushing the noble fruit, barreling the juice in oak or steel, and adding a few secret ingredients before fermentation begins. After obtaining the desired effect (brix and balance are tested and tasted), there are bottles to fill; labels to be designed, printed, and adhered; a public to inform; and tasting rooms, restaurants, distributors, and retail outlets to deal with. It's all in a day's work. And then some. As winemaker **Alan Phillips** notes, "You need a broad skill set; you need to be banker, artist, scientist, salesperson, agriculturalist, and affable. It's a lot of hard work."

Certainly, harvest time is ripe for celebration, for popping the cork (or turning the screw top) on a newly released vintage. When a wine is awarded a medal, or high scores and praise from wine critics, fans, family, and friends, there is more joy of the grape. But let's not forget the sweat and tears, the contemplation and concerns—all of which were captured by photographer **Mark Robert Halper**, who turned his lens to the winemaking and wine-toting community of Santa Barbara County in the pages of his book, *Sunlight and Water*.

Currently home to more than 175 wineries and 22,000 acres of vineyards, the region's colorful cast of cutting-edge winemakers produces superb pinot noir, chardonnay, syrah, sauvignon blanc, and at least 60 other varietals, including rose, viognier, and blends.

Affable **Bill Mosby**, who will turn 80 in December (he's been making wine since he was 17), of Mosby Winery, is one of the early pioneers and patriarchs of local winemaking. The dentist-turned-winemaker first acquired land in the area in 1963 and planted his vineyard in 1971. He got the bug after making his first hooch, "applejack," by fermenting his grandmother's apples in his native Oregon.

"When you are out there in the vineyards at night, and you are one ball of stickiness and you are tired and you still have another load of grapes to bring in, the romance is gone!" laughs Mosby with a twinkle in his bright blue eyes, adding, "Anything that is worthwhile isn't easy." His favorite time? Friday afternoons, when he and his team gather round the kitchen table tasting bench samples that hark from near and far. "The camaraderie is what makes it all worthwhile," he gleams.

Doug Margerum began his career as a restaurateur and wine shop owner before finally succumbing to his true passion: creating marvelous fruit for his own label, as well as for other valley vintners. Doug's cool



Opposite: The family behind Fontes & Phillips Wines. Alan Phillips with Rochelle Fontes-Phillips and their daughter, Shelby.

Above: Bill Mosby, a pioneer of S.B. County winemaking, planted his first local vineyard nearly 40 years ago.

Right: Doug Margerum uses only the best grapes for his small lot wines. His S.B. wine shop and restaurant, Wine Cask, has long been ground zero for the local wine culture.





Left: Photographer Mark Robert Halper.



Above: In 1978, one of Fred Brander's sauvignon blancs was the first S.B. County wine to receive a gold medal.

Top center: Nick de Luca studied law in France, but his appreciation of fine wine and the European lifestyle ultimately led him to S.B. County.

Top right: At Happy Canyon Vineyards, Jodi Barrack Pitts handles sales and marketing while her brother and their dad work the family's land.

factor? Not many can boast Miklos S. Dora, the representative for Chateau Mouton-Rothschild and father of legendary surfer Miki "Da Cat" Dora, as their mentor. The happiest part of the business for Margerum, who focuses on small handcrafted wines, may be in the vistas. "I love seeing and experiencing the different seasons as I drive over the hill [from Santa Barbara]," he says. "Autumn views, the smells of harvest; the fermenting red grapes apropos to that time of year; the green grass and poppies in the spring. Winter is pretty cool too: we get time off and shut down for about a month." The biggest challenge, he says, is selling the product. "Finding the customers and getting people to buy your wines is difficult. We like making wines, we don't like selling."

Fred Brander's Argentine roots and longtime kudos and credentials aren't too shabby either. His trademark sauvignon blanc is found on wine lists around the globe and has been served everywhere from casual Santa Barbara seafood joints to the hallowed dining rooms of the White House. Brander, who established his winery in 1975, greets each new harvest with fresh eyes and "looks forward to trying new ideas accumulated throughout the year." This winemaker who trained as a chemist at Harvey Mudd College recently adopted biodynamic growing practices on his estate, one of several updates on the property that have renewed his passion after more than three decades in the industry.

After all the sweat and tears, when the wines have finally been bottled, there are tastings and interface with the public—a job handled deftly

"When you are out there in the vineyards at night, and you are one ball of stickiness and you are tired and you still have another load of grapes to bring in, the romance is gone!"

by Jodi Barrack Pitts of Happy Canyon Vineyards. One imagines she may prefer being at home with her two-year-old daughter, Grace, to pouring her brother's reds: Chucker 09, Piocho, and Ten Goal—named after her father's and brother's passion for polo. But she doesn't let on. "I love planting something, seeing it grow, and making something out of it. Winemaking is not a science, it's an art." She notes that the vineyard is a family project: "My dad, [Tom Barrack], decided to plant the grapes, my brother, [Thomas J. Barrack III], manages the vineyard, and I sell and market the wines. I didn't realize how complicated the business is."

Also working in Happy Canyon is jazz bassist-turned-winemaker Nick de Luca, the director of winemaking for Dierberg Estate Vineyard/Star Lane, where long days can be part of the job. De Luca remembers the "craziest, most insane harvest of all," when he was one of just three people processing 3,250 tons of grapes at a Napa Valley winery on a deadline. "We marched through a wedding in progress with the hose of grape juice," he recalls. Needless to say, the bride and the mother of the bride were none too happy—until he explained the uniqueness of the blissful day. The best part of his job? "Standing in a vineyard and imagining how a wine will be in four years. It's intuitive, sometimes you just know, you get

a gut instinct that a great wine will come out of the vineyard."

Alan Phillips, his wife, Rochelle Fontes-Phillips, and their six-year-old daughter, Shelby, recently launched a new family label, Fontes & Phillips, which includes Panky, a rosé whose made-up name means "anything cool." Phillips' least *panky* wine moment? His first year in the wine business, which nearly killed him. In 1976, the then-teenager was coordinating grape deliveries in 110-degree heat when a truck spraying chemicals passed by. He was waved away, but ended up with toxic chemical spray poisoning that almost killed him. More than three decades later, Phillips has found not only a place to make his own wines but a job helping others make wine, acting as "air traffic controller" and director of winemaking at Terravant Wine Company, a winemaking facility in Buellton. "Winemaking starts as a labor of love, but when you break it down it's just plain labor, no different than anything else." Perhaps, but a sip of Fontes & Phillips chardonnay and one realizes that this day labor produces the stuff of dreams.

Wonder what Frank Ostini, photographed wearing his trademark pith helmet and balancing on a wood pile, is dreaming about in that moment? Could the chef/restaurateur/winemaker be lost in a *Sideways* revelry? Nope. "I was trying to make certain I didn't fall off the wood pile!"

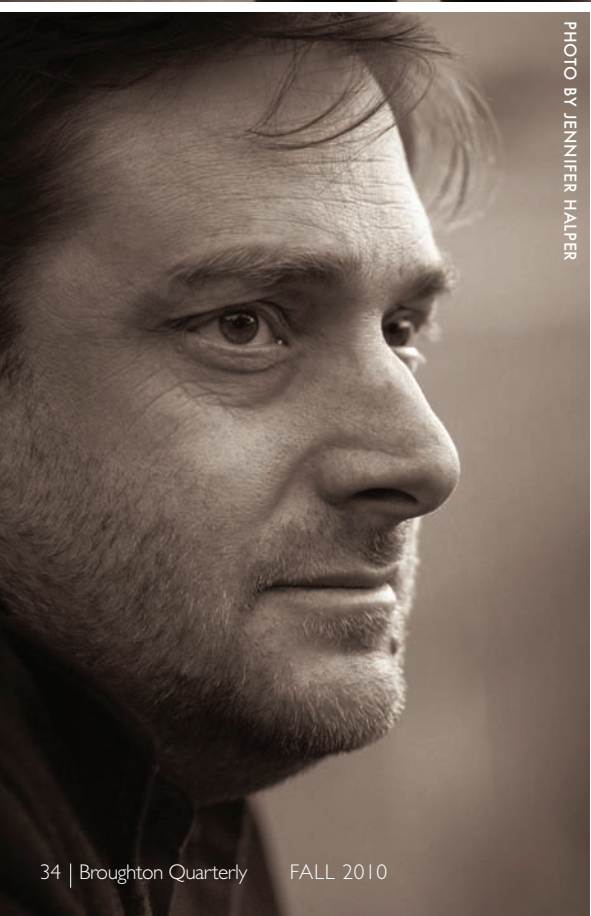


PHOTO BY JENNIFER HALPER




Frank Ostini was making wine and grilling steaks in Santa Barbara County long before *Sideways* (2004) shined the spotlight on his Hitching Post restaurant.



Angela Soleno's first crack at winemaking will be put to the *taste* in spring 2011. She caught the winemaking bug while working for sister wineries Consilience and Tre Anelli.

he exclaims. Captured with the coast live oak he uses to grill tasty artichokes, steaks, and seafood at his popular Buellton restaurant, The Hitching Post II, seems fitting. Ostini derives great pleasure from the act of winemaking. "The glory is to create a product that people can enjoy. You can move them emotionally and make something that they respect." The work, he echoes, is selling it. Nor does bottling thrill him. "The Devil is in the details," he noted while trying to smooth a wrinkle out of a newly adhered label on his 32nd vintage. "Every year, I feel like a kid again. The smell of the fermentation, being part of something that is beyond craft—it's an art."

Angela Soleno is one of the young, up-and-coming wine enthusiasts who not only toils inside an established wine concern—she is the project manager for Consilience Wines and Tre Anelli in Los Olivos—but also literally jumped into the barrel "feet first" for her premier crush. The single mother of two caught the winemaking bug, and her initial effort, under the label of Turiya wines, will be released next spring. "I'm having so much fun," effuses Soleno, "I am super small, with just two tons of syrah and cabernet grapes that I am blending into 'Perpetual Bliss.'" She gives herself high scores for "getting in there and getting my hands dirty," low points for "licensing and the technical mumbo-jumbo and bureaucratic crap."

Her infectious enthusiasm, while perhaps not evident in Halper's evocative photos, seems to be valley wide. May all the vintners experience something akin to "perpetual bliss"—or at least wine nirvana—when they pop the cork on their newest releases. 

SUNLIGHT AND WATER

Through February of 2011, the wine country town of Los Olivos in Santa Barbara County will be transformed into a meandering art gallery. Ten local establishments, mostly wine tasting rooms, are currently showcasing the work of fine art photographer Mark Robert Halper, whose intimate portraits celebrate the region's winemakers. The images are part of Halper's recently published coffee table book, *Sunlight and Water*. For more information about the book or the Los Olivos Meandering Gallery, log on to studiomark.com/sunlight.

WHERE TO STAY

IN THE VALLEY

A fantasy of cottages, chateau suites, and deluxe guest rooms in the heart of Santa Barbara County's wine country, the **WINE VALLEY INN** will coordinate guided tours (think designated driver) of the 40+ wineries and vineyards located within 20 minutes of the Solvang property. For reservations or more details, log on to broughtonhotels.com or call 800.824.6444.

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