

FROM THE GRAPEVINE

BY JOEL M. FISHER



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One of my favorite things about summer is that wine tastings and events move outdoors. It's a true luxury to enjoy good wine and good friends under the Californian sun. So while the sunlight was hazy that particular day, I was thrilled to receive an invitation to taste at [Rosenthal](#) – **The Malibu Estate** through my friend and Rosenthal manager Neil McNally. Yes, Malibu. Although that ritzy community is better known for its surf and sand, the cool microclimate in the Malibu canyons is conducive to producing notable grapes.

George Rosenthal, a successful businessman with real-estate and movie-studio holdings, began planting vineyards on his 250-acre estate in 1987. About 27 acres are now planted. The vines grow up hills surrounding Rosenthal's Mexican-style manse and near the stables, which are currently being converted into a tasting room and space to host wine dinners. A wine cave is planned for a nearby cliff, although I believe the wine will continue to be finished in Edna Valley, near San Louis Obispo. The winemaker at Rosenthal is the renowned [Christian Roguenant](#), who upholds his French roots through a slavish dedication to bringing out the *terroir* of the site in his wines. Roguenant first joined the Rosenthal team with a 1996 vintage, and has since steadily produced exceptionally Burgundian Chardonnays, and unfiltered Merlots and Cabernet Sauvignons.

We began our tasting for the *2003 Central Coast Chardonnay* (\$18), which had the crisp fruits and mineral traces characteristic of Burgundian whites. The wine was dry but balanced, and possessed a nice touch of vanilla.

Next came the Merlots. The estate-grown *1998 Malibu-Newton Canyon Merlot "The Devon Vineyard"* (\$30) is a blend of 82% Merlot, 9% Cabernet Sauvignon, and 9% Cabernet Franc. Aged in French oak, this velvety wine has strong berry and raspberry on the nose and cherry and spices on the tongue. This is a nicely balanced bottle with some nice tannins and a great finish. The second Merlot we tasted, a *1999 "Devon Vineyard"* (\$30), manages to be bigger and heavier while still feeling like a young wine. It is inky, with dark berries, mint, plum and cassis. It's pretty good.

We moved onto the Cabernets and started with the notable *1995 Cabernet Sauvignon*, which was the fifth vintage of this wine from the Malibu Hills vineyard. This was quite a

wine, full of herbs upon opening but smoothing out after just a few minutes into a rich bouquet of cherry, roses, cassis, berries and a hint of cocoa. The wine ends with a balanced finish. Unfortunately, this dramatic bottle is sold out. Still available are the enjoyable and nicely balanced *1996* and *1998 Cabernet Sauvignon* (both \$30), which consist of 87% Cabernet, 7% Merlot, and 6% Cabernet Franc. The nose on these wines present red berries, black currant and sage, plus some hints of tea and eucalyptus. Both end with a long, smooth finish. The blend of the *1998 Founders Reserve* (\$70) is slightly different – 75% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot, and 15% Cabernet Franc. This is a distinctive, deep-red wine with dark cherry and eucalyptus aromas plus a dash of spice. Less than 200 cases were produced of this big wine, which was neither filtered nor fined and is 14.1% alcohol.

We concluded with the *1999 Cabernet Sauvignon* (\$35), which is an 80% Cabernet Sauvignon, 10% Merlot and 10% Cabernet Franc blend. This was a very nice, supple bottle. It displayed a deep purple-red color, a nose of oak and woods, and flavors of coffee, cassis and dark berries. It wrapped up with a long, plush finish.

My visit came to an end as I had to race back to Santa Monica to teach my wine class and the winery prepared for a visit from the Spring 2004 graduates of UCLA Anderson School of Management. The tasting room is expected to open to the public this summer, and I strongly recommend that you make a visit if possible. The stunning estate has a touch of whimsy as well, displaying sculptures of sheep so lifelike that coyotes have been confused and graffiti-marked chunks of the Berlin Wall. Call Neil for further information or reservations: 800-814-0733 or 310-899-8900.

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I recently made my quarterly trip up to Santa Barbara wine country with my students. This visit was on a perfect golden spring day, in stark contrast to the gray rains we encountered last time. [Zaca Mesa](#) was again our first stop. We started with the *2003 Z Gris* (\$15), which was really good. This dry rose` avoided the trap of being boring by offering lush notes of strawberry and citrus and a crisp finish. Next was the crisp *2002 Estate Bottled Viognier* (\$14), which proved to be a pleasant medium-bodied wine with berry and cherry on the palate and peach and mandarin orange on the nose. Their *2001 Chardonnay Zaca Vineyards* (\$13) is really sharp. Full of citrus at first sniff, the wine opens up with mango, tropical fruit and some minerality. It ends with a full, rich finish and good acidity. I also enjoyed the *2001 Z Cuvee* (\$16), a blend of five Rhone varietals (44% Grenache, 26% Mourvedre, 19% Counoise, 8% Syrah and 3% Cinsault). This nicely balanced bottle is full of dark fruits and good spices. It could age another couple of years, as could the *2001 Estate Bottled Syrah* (\$20), which is quite refined and elegant. A full-bodied wine, berries and vanilla emerge first on the nose before a core of cassis and a hint of smoky oak are revealed. Good now, this bottle could stand up to a decade.

Our next stop was the [Fess Parker Winery and Vineyard](#), where my students always enjoy the tour and lunch. When we were ready to taste, we started with the *2000 Melange Blanc Santa Barbara County* (\$15), which threw a rich bouquet of floral, citrus, peach,

apple and pear aromas. Notes of melon and grapefruit unfurl on the palate, as does a long mineral finish. The *2001 Chardonnay "Marcella's Vineyard"* (\$26) improves every year and has received 90 points in Robert Parker's *The Wine Advocate*. This is an elegant chardonnay that presents citrus on the nose and palate, as well as some rich buttery notes on the tongue. Also scoring 90 points in *The Wine Advocate* is the *2000 Syrah "American Tradition Reserve"* (\$35). This remarkable wine bursts with dark cherry, blackberry, spice, licorice and herbal notes. I happily brought home a bottle of this for myself.

Our third and final stop was a visit to Iris Rideau's [Rideau Vineyard](#). Hostess Linda was her usual cheerful and gracious self. I liked the *2001 Reserve Viognier* (\$25), which had a great bouquet of citrus, banana and vanilla. Citrus and mango emerged on the palate, and a soft hint of apple came through on the finish. I thought the *2002 Sauvignon Blanc* (\$22) demonstrated clear Chablis notes and quite worth seeking out. The nicely structured *2002 Nebbiolo* (\$24) balanced significant tannins with rich coffee, tobacco, rhubarb and anise flavors. (How could I not love this wine? It evokes most of my favorite vices.) We finished with their *2002 White Riesling* (\$18), which exhibited strong floral tones in its aroma. It had an interesting acidity that provided an intense and silky finish. I picked up a couple bottles of these for the hot summer months. And with that, we wrapped up another successful tasting trip and headed home.

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Although the Santa Barbara County wine area does get hot during the summer months, the wineries provide lovely oases. If you find yourself with an open afternoon, grab some friends, pack a picnic and explore! You never know what treasures you may stumble upon.

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