



George Rosenthal

2017 | Pioneer of the Year

Interview by Dan Fredman

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The Malibu Coast Vintners & Grape Growers Alliance is proud to name George Rosenthal as the recipient of its annual Pioneer Award. His vineyards at Rosenthal: The Malibu Estate grow Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and other Bordeaux varieties in Malibu's Newton Canyon, and the winery's tasting room on Pacific Coast Highway has drawn thousands of visitors to the town and raised the profile of all winemaking in Malibu.

Wine is but one part of Rosenthal's diverse portfolio. His property management and investment group, Raleigh Enterprises, has been responsible for more than 10 million square feet of commercial and residential property around the world. His various entities include Raleigh Studios, the Sunset Marquis Hotel in West Hollywood and File Keepers, among others. The low-key entrepreneur recently paused at his Spanish-style home set amid the vineyard to talk about the Malibu wine scene, and about what has driven him to engage in so many varied undertakings during his lifetime.

“Rosenthal Vineyards came about in a serendipitous way. I was spending significant time traveling to Mexico and Spain for business and fell in love with their tradition of working hard all week in the cities but then escaping on weekends to relax at their Ranchitos or Fincas outside of the metropolitan areas. I was living in Santa Monica and began to look for my own weekend vacation spot in the hills above Malibu. My goal was to be above the elevation of the June gloom fog so I would have sun on the weekends. One very memorable day, my explorations led to some property behind a locked gate where Latigo and Newton Canyon meet. I discovered that it was owned by a gentleman named Clayton Worthington. Clayton had purchased most of Newton Canyon prior to the construction of Kanan Dume Road, buying the land for his wife, a biologist who wanted to study the ecology of the surrounding mountains. Over time, I was able to accumulate approximately 250 acres of the property. The beauty and serenity of the area was exactly what I had been searching for.

Mr. Worthington had various agricultural products planted on the property, which even then was zoned for agricultural use. My original intent was to plant the surrounding property with avocados, but after several years, we found the significant temperature variations to be less-than-friendly for our avocado trees, and secondarily, we couldn't produce enough water from the property to keep them healthy. In researching other agricultural crops that

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would be appropriate for the area, we determined that a broad range of differing soil conditions and distinctive microclimates existed throughout the property and that they added up to being very well suited for grapevines.

One of the wonderful aspects of Newton Canyon is that in the evenings, cool air from the Pacific Ocean flows upwards through the canyons and pockets on the west side of Kanan Dume Road. This drives the warm air out and ultimately spills over the road and into our vineyard property on the east side of Kanan Road. These particular climate, soil and elevation factors on this property turn out to be



extremely conducive to creating just the right growing conditions that are favorable to Cabernet Sauvignon and the other Bordeaux grape varieties.

Jim Eford, a viticulturist from the San Luis Obispo area, and I commenced studies with the assistance of the University of California Davis to confirm, based upon soil, temperature and other factors, that these grapes would indeed be best suited for the area. With Jim's help and the immeasurable assistance of Bob Tobias, we ultimately planted approximately 27 acres of vineyards. 30 years later, Bob is still our esteemed viticulturist.

In the early days of our vineyard, I had visions of Malibu becoming a nationally known winegrowing area. With the exception of James Laube of Wine Spectator, we had great difficulty in convincing the wine critics that Malibu was capable of growing world-class grapes. Our first few releases, in 1990 and 1991, served notice that wine made from Malibu grapes showed tremendous potential. Other wine reviewers were reluctant to include Malibu in the scope of their reviews; in communications with Robert Parker, when we asked why he wouldn't review our wines, he responded that we were not

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like Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo or Temecula, and therefore he didn't know what wine region to place us in. He alluded to the fact that Malibu was well known for surfboards, but not wine.

In 1994, Malibu Newton Canyon was granted the American Viticulture Area (AVA) designation and that radically changed the awareness landscape for us. Simply acknowledging that we were an official viticulture area brought us that extra little bit of legitimacy and identity we needed – all despite the fact that wine grapes were grown in Malibu since approximately the 1840's. By 1998, significant numbers of wine critics had begun reviewing and commenting on our wines and we were garnering multiple medals in wine tastings throughout the country.

The Malibu Coast AVA has such wide variations in the conditions of soil, temperature, elevation and days of full sunlight that it provides us the opportunity to make truly unique wines from the grapes we grow. From the moment we planted the vineyard, we have worked hard to produce wines reflecting our original intent to create a consistency of style.

Using very careful and well thought-out viticulture practices, we focus on growing the highest quality grapes possible, knowing that this will be reflected in the quality of the wines we produce. There is a discernable uniqueness inherent in the flavors and aromatics of the wines from Malibu. It is particularly noticeable when they're tasted alongside wines from other regions, whether from California or other wine growing areas in the world.

I have often been asked what my motivation has been to create vineyards and wine tasting rooms in Malibu. Having visited vineyards around the world, I have noted with scarcely a single exception, that a visit to a wine country environment by visitors and patrons produces joy, contentment, good conversation, and a general enjoyment of life. It is that quality of days well spent that I wanted to share with not only the local residents of Malibu, but with the thousands from all over the world that have visited us over the years.