



Tim Skogstrom

2016 | Pioneer of the Year

Interview by Dan Fredman

The Malibu Coast Vintners & Grape Growers Alliance is pleased to award its second annual Pioneer Award to Tim Skogstrom, proprietor of the Cornell Winery & Tasting Room in Malibu. While most of us think about wine primarily in the context of either making or drinking the wine, Tim is concerned with where the wines we drink come from and brings his years of experience into play as the region's foremost evangelist for the Malibu wine scene.

Photo by Janet Barnett | barnettlifestyles.com



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“I grew up in Pasadena, so Kanan Road was my avenue to the beach as a kid. I loved the way the scenery transitioned from the trees and hills on down to the beach.”

My mother was from Tulsa, Oklahoma, but getting a job as a stewardess for TWA was her ticket out of there. She met my father on a flight and pretty soon, there they were in Pasadena. My father’s best friend owned the Sawmill restaurant in town and as I got older, I’d spend Sundays in the bar with them watching football. Being open to earning extra spending money, I’d work behind the bar cleaning up after Saturday night and that led to official employment at the Sawmill as a busboy and barback. I became a manager at Pasadena’s Rose City Diner at the ripe old age of 19 and fell in love with the hospitality industry.

After moving to Nashville, I managed the Mid Town Café before coming to the realization that California had a whole lot more to offer me than Tennessee. I also realized that I didn’t want to be in the restaurant business any more, so back in Los Angeles, I took a job with Young’s Market Company. Starting at the bottom, I received a thorough education in wine distribution, eventually becoming VP of on-premise wine sales for Southern California.

Right about then, Francis Ford Coppola started his winery and I joined as National Sales Director. Those were exciting times – while there, our production went from about 10,000 cases per year to over a million. I met everyone important in the business and had a no-questions-asked expense account. There was a palpable sense of being immersed in history with Coppola’s connection to the old Inglenook property in Napa Valley, but we were growing really big, really fast and it was getting hard to keep that “sense of place” intact. I was on the road all the time and after ten years I felt like I just needed a break.

I’d been friends with Morgan Runyon for about 20 years. His family was among the first families to move to Malibu, and his father, Tom Runyon, owned The Old Place, probably the coolest steakhouse in the

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world, right here in Cornell. The menu was limited mainly to steak and clams, but it served as a clubhouse for celebrities such as Steve McQueen, Jason Robards, and Cecil B. DeMille, and was popular with in-the-know locals.

The building next door to The Old Place that was in dire need of a tenant, and it seemed like a great place to open a wine shop. My business plan was based more on the community than on numbers, and Tom liked what he



saw. One handshake agreement later, in 2007 I opened the Cornell Winery & Tasting Room. In 2009, Tom passed away and Morgan and I reopened The Old Place in honor of his father. It's now considered one of LA's top-five steakhouses and the Cornell Tasting Room has become a hub of the scene, offering Malibu wines that are essentially unavailable elsewhere.

Early on, we decided to focus on offering wine grown in what's now the Malibu Coast AVA. It was obvious that there was huge potential in wine from the region. Despite the 100+ year history of grapes in the area, only 10 years ago we were in an early stage in terms of viticulture and winemaking. What really struck me is that the beauty of these wines lies in their imperfections. It was the opposite of the seamless Coppola wines I'd been selling. In Malibu you have small, family grape growers making boutique wines that give you a feel for the specific vintage and the specific site in which the vineyard is planted. The personality of the vintner shines through in their wines,

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and this comes across to consumers in a way that's very satisfying to me. It's real winemaking. With about 50 grape growers and maybe 25 commercial labels out here, everybody's accessible to me as a retailer and I get to know these vintners on a personal level. At Cornell, I share their stories with my clientele; people love hearing about the personalities and how they came to plant vines on their property and that's the sort of info that sticks with them.

The wine grown in Malibu offers a unique insight into the place. When you're talking about small pieces of land, this is where terroir comes into play. Make 30,000 cases of one wine, maybe you'll reflect a region, but no way can you define a specific place the way a 200 case-production wine does. In Malibu we have micro plots of land producing wine that translates its origin in the glass. I love that "place" because that place is Malibu, where I live. There are tangible differences between grapes grown at the top of Latigo Canyon and those grown at the bottom Triunfo/Lobo Canyon; ocean view vs. canyon view sites, high elevation vs. sea level, whatever. You can define Malibu through its wines. We celebrate the fact each wine, each vintage is different – we're artisanal, hands-on winemakers and with such small quantities, we don't have a way to blend out the imperfections, but those imperfections are what defines the heart and soul of the wine and the vintner.

I recall my first trip to Italy and marveling at the fact that in everywhere I visited, the only wine available came from within a few miles of that town. So too did the produce, the meat, and even the art on the walls. The synergy of that experience stuck with me. I live at Malibou Lake, and the shop supports local wine and artists. The Old Place uses produce grown in the area. We have a brilliant local culture in Malibu, so I do my best to support and celebrate it."