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Toasting a new venture on Catalina

A Wrigley descendant and her husband have launched a winemaking enterprise using grapes from their vineyard in the island's backcountry. They plan to refurbish the family ranch, adding a wine-tasting room and offering buggy rides to picnic areas.

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Alison Wrigley Rusack and husband Geoff Rusack have planted a vineyard on Santa Catalina Island. They plan to build a wine-making operation and invite the public to visit the complex.

Alison Wrigley Rusack and husband Geoff Rusack have planted a vineyard... (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles...)

Alison Wrigley Rusack stepped off the porch of an old house on a private ranch on the rugged southwestern edge of Santa Catalina Island, where her clan once raised Arabian horses.

Under sunny skies, she cast an appraising eye at the surrounding peaks, lush ravines and aging structures of El Rancho Escondido. It was a favorite family gathering place, passed down by her great-grandfather, chewing gum magnate William Wrigley Jr., who bought Santa Catalina Island Co. — which owns all the developable land on the island — in 1919.

"I loved watching the horse shows my dad put on for visitors," she said. "I will never forget hunting for shells and talking about life with my mother."

"Times change," she said. "So we have come up with a plan to share this beautiful, peaceful place with visitors who might not otherwise have reason to venture into the interior of this treasure of an island. We're going to establish our own winery here."

Alison, 52, and her husband, Geoffrey, 54, have planted the island's first vineyard on the slopes above scalloped beaches, near the ranch house. They plan to refurbish the entire ranch, adding a wine-tasting room with panoramic views and offering horse-drawn buggy rides to picnic areas in backcountry that is largely unknown to the public.

They envision the winery complex offering an alternative experience on the island, which currently revolves around cruise ships that disgorge thousands of day-trippers who spend a few hours exploring boutiques and restaurants in Avalon, 17 miles east of the ranch, and then leave.

California's wealthy have always planted vineyards. What sets the Rusacks' apart is that they are doing it on an island about 22 miles offshore that has no history of wine making. Both motivated and burdened by the Wrigley family legacy, they face a double-edged marketing challenge: how to get a high-end product off the ground during tough economic times and avoid the trap of becoming just a novelty.

This year has been tough on the vineyard. Too little rain and an unusually cool summer were followed by a record heat wave and plagues of wasps that ruined a third of the grapes.

Geoffrey pointed to the post-harvest patchwork stretching across mountain slopes in neat rows. They represent an investment of millions of dollars spent on consultants, irrigation systems, equipment and manpower that so far has yielded a modest 3,600 cases of Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Zinfandel.

"If you take the investment on infrastructure and electricity and divide it by the number of bottles produced, it is a few hundred dollars a bottle," Geoffrey said. "We plan to sell it for less than a hundred dollars a bottle, which we believe is reasonable given the quality of the product and where it comes from."

But wine lovers will have to wait a little longer to taste the Rusack Santa Catalina Island vintages of 2009 and 2010. The label design remains a work in progress.

The art on the label began to take shape six months ago on the drawing board of Lompoc artist Leonardo Nuñez. Since then, one image after another has been completed, polished, submitted and then changed, again and again.

Now, they are tantalizingly close to achieving their goal: crisp, elegant scenery that signifies a distinctive product and honors the island's natural beauty and Wrigley family heritage. It's a finely detailed etching of an endangered Catalina Island fox gazing out at the vineyard.

The main sticking point has been how to pose the fox, which symbolizes an environmental success story for conservancy biologists. After teetering on the brink of extinction, the housecat-sized canines have recovered to levels not seen in a decade since canine distemper ravaged the population.

"Alison and Geoffrey are very particular about how that fox should look, so I keep drawing sketches and they keep making suggestions," Nuñez said. "We've had that fox sitting, laying down, standing in the middle of the road and jumping out of the image and onto the label. We've switched it from one side to

the other. It's been thin and chubby; looking away from the vineyards, and gazing over them toward the ocean."

"We've almost got the fox where we want it," he said. "It's going to take just a little more time — I hope — to complete a label that grasps the story behind the wine."

The idea of planting vineyards on Catalina dates to a summer day in 1983 when Geoffrey and Alison were on their second date, riding horses over the hills between the ranch house and the beach.

"I looked around and said, 'Wow. This would be a great place for a winery,' " Geoffrey recalled. "Later, we broached the idea to Alison's father. He just shook his head and said, 'Not in my lifetime.' "

Alison Elizabeth Wrigley and Geoffrey Clafin Rusack were married at All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena in 1985. The bridegroom's father, Bishop Robert C. Rusack of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, performed the ceremony. A Wrigley descendant and her husband have launched a winemaking enterprise using grapes from their vineyard in the island's backcountry. They plan to refurbish the family ranch, adding a wine-tasting room and offering buggy rides to picnic areas.

In 1994, Geoffrey, who grew up in Los Angeles and worked for a number of years as a civil defense attorney, and Alison, who was raised in Chicago and worked for Disney consumer products, moved to the Santa Ynez Valley. In 1995, they opened Rusack Vineyards Winery near their home.

A few years later, they assembled a team of soil experts and vintners to explore the viability of establishing a Catalina vineyard on former pasture lands. Their conclusion: It would be challenging, but doable.

The Catalina climate is relatively mild and steady, with temperatures similar to those found in the quality wine-producing regions of the Russian River Valley in Northern California and the Santa Rita Hills near Santa Barbara. Strafed by seaborne winds, the soil, however, was saline and required elaborate drainage pathways to flush out excess salt.

In March 2007, the Rusacks planted three varietals — chardonnay, pinot noir and a special zinfandel collected from century-old remnant vines on Santa Cruz Island — during a ceremony that ended with blessings by a local priest.

Catalina's first crop was hit hard by crickets and harvested earlier than anticipated amid a September 2009 heat wave that caused the sugar content in the grapes to soar. This year closed with another withering heat wave and yellowjackets.

It wasn't just Catalina. "There were short crops all over the state this year," said Robert Smiley, director of wine industry studies at UC Davis' Graduate School of Management.

"The difference was that the Rusacks could not predict what they were getting into, because they were sitting out there alone on an island," Smiley said. "If you are surrounded by other vineyards, you can talk to neighbors and get a sense of what's coming your way and what to do about it."

The harvested grapes were airlifted from Catalina's Airport in the Sky to the Rusack winery in Santa Ynez for processing, fermentation and bottling overseen by winemaker John Falcone.

Now, an air of anticipation and anxiety hovers over the Santa Ynez winery storage facility where the island's first bottled vintages are in cases stacked to the rafters.

"We're just waiting for the labels," Geoffrey said. "Once we get the design nailed down we can get the wine out on the market."

"We just have to tweak the fox a little bit," Alison said. "Its nose still isn't quite right."

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