

The maturing south

It would be easy for a Southern Californian winery to feel overshadowed by the buzz surrounding Napa and Sonoma valley wines. But, Orfila Vineyards and Winery is not a poor cousin of its much-vaunted Northern California relatives.

Text & Photographs: Gustasp and Jeroo Irani

Orfila Vineyards and Winery is an ultra-premium boutique winery, which has cocked a snook at many of its famous Californian competitors by winning around 1,300 national and international awards for the elegant complexity and opulence of its wines.

Orfila is a tough little pugilist minus the hype and glitz, typical of its Northern California counterparts. Located in the dreamy San Pasqual valley, 30 minutes north of picturesque San Diego, the lush estate is washed by cool Pacific Ocean breezes (the ocean is just 24 km away) and each morning,

soft tendrils of mist hug the softly heaving landscape. Here, wine tourism with its attendant wine spas, hot-air balloon rides, romantic chateaux, cooking classes, blending seminars and lumbering tourist coaches is not big; but excellent award-winning wine is!



A world away

A palpable hush envelops the well-tended vineyards that unravel on hillsides that dot the 70-acre estate. The climate and terroir are reportedly perfect for Rhone-style varietals because the soil is similar to the Mediterranean region. Today, over 40 acres of the estate are planted with Syrah, Merlot, Viognier, Sangiovese, Marsanne and Roussanne grapes.

This is a hidden gem which snuggles in a 10,000-acre agricultural preserve and few people are aware that California's multi-million dollar wine industry first struck root in San Diego County. Way back in 1769, Father Junipero Serra established San Diego de Alcalá, California's first mission,



located about 37 km south of Orfila, and planted vines there. Much later, in 1973, two wineries sprung up, one of which was bought in 1993 by Ambassador Alejandro Orfila, Orfila's owner. (In fact, the Argentinean-born Ambassador hails from a winemaking family, whose interest in viticulture goes back four generations and even today, the family owns a winery in his home country).

AT A PRESTIGIOUS BLIND-TASTING WINE COMPETITION—WHERE OVER 5,288 WINES FROM 38 COUNTRIES PARTICIPATED—AMERICAN WINES WON THREE GOLDS.

In the course of an educative wine tour that started in the vineyard and ended in the cellar, we picked up more juicy nuggets of information. It was the late Leon Santoro, the founding winemaker who, after extensive research and experimentation, decided to change the configuration of the vineyard from Chardonnay to emphasise Rhone-style varietals. Indeed, Leon was the first to realise that the granite soil conditions in the San Pasqual valley were similar to the Mediterranean region and

arrived at the current successful vineyard pattern. The once recalcitrant vineyard land submitted to his ministrations and became submissive in his hands and produced plump luscious grapes, which in turn yielded beautiful, award-winning wines.

Powered by vision and passion for the nectar of the grape, Leon and his team then crafted fine wines, proving that Southern



Californian winemakers should not be reticent about touting their ripe and fruity vintages. Soon, his boutique winery began making big waves and he put San Diego County firmly on the international wine map. They even managed to storm the ultimate bastion of winemaking – Bordeaux, France in 2007. At a prestigious blind-tasting wine competition—where over 5,288 wines from 38



U.S. WINE EXPORTS—90 PER CENT FROM CALIFORNIA—REACHED A RECORD OF \$1.39 BILLION IN WINERY REVENUES IN 2011, A 21.7 PER CENT INCREASE COMPARED TO 2010.



AMERICANS DRANK 3.96 BILLION BOTTLES OF WINE IN 2010, COMPARED TO 3.85 BILLION BOTTLES OF WINE SIPPED BY THE FRENCH, ACCORDING TO GOMBERG, FREDRIKSON & ASSOCIATES, A WINE INDUSTRY CONSULTING FIRM IN WOODSIDE, CALIFORNIA.



wine-serving area, which is the focus of the large barn-like room.

But, the ultimate event at Orfila is the Grape Stomp that happens at harvest time in August. There's a wine tasting reception with hors d'oeuvres, tractor rides, dinner and dancing, and the highlight for most people is to jump into oak vats to stomp the grapes, just for fun; to feel the juice trickle between the toes and paint one's feet purple. No, this juice is not used in their wines but for fertiliser. Even today, tipsy guests unfailingly and naively ask this question—we did too!

Let's talk numbers

Quick question: Which nationality has the distinction of being the highest consumer of wine in the world? The French? Wrong! The Americans, of course! Americans drank 3.96 billion bottles of wine in 2010, compared to 3.85 billion bottles of wine sipped by the

French, according to Gomberg, Fredrikson & Associates, a wine industry consulting firm in Woodside, California. Americans are now the world's top wine consumers by volume, and U.S. wine exports—90% from California—reached a record of \$1.39 billion in winery revenues in 2011, an increase of 21.7% compared to 2010.

"It's stunning," winemaker Richard Arrowood, who had his first Sonoma County grape harvest in 1965, was quoted as saying. "If someone had said we'd get here, I'd have asked them what they were smoking."

The US is the world's largest world market, according to the Wine Institute. If California were a separate country, it would be the world's fourth-largest wine producer, for today, there are more than 1,200 wineries in the state, ranging from small boutique

wineries to large corporations.

The new-found interest in swilling wine extends to knowing more about the fascinating grape and its nectar. Not surprisingly, wineries and vineyards are the second most popular tourist destination in California after Disneyland! A total of 14.8 million tourists visit the state's wine regions each year. And believe it or not, some wineries are haunted, according to a Wine Institute press release, which reports paranormal sightings and happenings such as lights going off and coming on for no apparent reason, phones ringing, and wine corks of wine bottles being mysteriously lined up on the bar top in the Tasting Room of a winery at the crack of dawn. All the inexplicable goings-on happen after dusk or very early in the morning, and generally in autumn when the nights are longer! ☹

countries participated—American wines won three Golds. Of these, two went to Napa Valley wines and one to Orfila for its Estate-grown Lotus Lot No. 45! And Orfila has not looked back since, going on to winning even more awards.

The current winemaker Justin Mund's unbridled enthusiasm for creating wines that hit the award scene has yielded some rich dividends. The secret perhaps, as our guide revealed, is that at Orfila, quality is preferred to quantity, as well as wines that have a good concentration of fruit. Apparently, at Orfila, God lies in the details and the Integrated Pest Management Program proves the point. Owl boxes are placed high above the vineyards so that resident owls have safe places to roost and

nest in the autumn and produce owlets that ultimately help to keep rodents, gophers, starlings and insects at bay in an eco-friendly way. Indeed, these seemingly innocuous pests can annihilate entire vineyards.

Tasting notes

After our wine tour, we sat on the patio at a wrought iron table and chairs placed under large shady garden umbrellas. Bewitched as much by the backdrop of rolling vine-ruffled hills as an intoxicating bottle of 2010 Estate Lotus wine that we tasted, we revelled in the hushed quiet of the setting. Our laughter and conversation were muted and we swirled, sniffed and sipped expertly enough but preferred to eavesdrop on the eloquently pronounced judgments

of more experienced wine lovers at a neighbouring picnic table. They lauded the wine's structure, texture and fugitive notes of chocolate, toasted herbs, and cherry.

Just an arm's stretch away were the immaculate lawns, rose garden, grape arbour and a white permanent tent—ideal for a dreamy wedding, an anniversary dinner or a corporate event, where the winery's award-winning wines can be paired with menus served by select caterers. Nearby was the barrel-studded Tasting Room and Gift Shop with its faux rustic air. It was fragrant with the goodies on offer—candies, gourmet olive oils, cheese, salad dressings, healthy snacks and books on wine. Here, one can play the wine savant—taste six wines for just \$10 in the

