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*Photo by Carol Penn-Romine*

KNOWLEDGEABLE ENOLOGIST:  
ROOTED: THE GROWTH  
OF HOME VINEYARDS  
THROUGHOUT LOS ANGELES

BY LISA KRING



Los Angeles is famous for many things, but local wine is not at the top of the list. Traditional thinking dictates that one must plant elsewhere, up north in established wine regions, such as Napa, Sonoma or the Central Coast. But I live in Los Angeles, and I have a home vineyard.

Surprisingly, I am not alone in my endeavor. Amid the sprawl of strip malls and the glare of brightly lit billboards, there exists a growing community of home vineyard owners throughout Los Angeles. Bucking conventional wisdom, a handful of intrepid and pioneering homeowners are digging deep and planting vines—right in their own backyards.

As an antidote to the stresses of modern urban life, growing grapes has immense appeal. For vineyards, natural seasonal rhythms trump manmade timetables, and the physical demands align you with the forces of the natural world. What better place than fast-paced Los Angeles to cultivate this kind of wisdom? What other city environment actually affords one the luxury of urban farming?

There is also growing evidence to support the claim that fine wine can actually be sourced in Los Angeles. Vineyards require certain conditions to ensure success. Surprisingly, perfect microclimates exist here. While some home vintners truck their grapes to facilities outside the city, for most, it is pure *vin de garage*.

According to John Daume, owner of The Home Beer/Wine/Cheesemaking Shop in Woodland Hills, this kind of endeavor does not require a big pocketbook.

"People who are wealthy don't do this," he states. With a one-time outlay of capital for equipment, which often includes plastic trash cans as fermentation vessels, he estimates that good homemade wine can be made for as little as four dollars per bottle. All told, as the following examples reveal, home vineyards look to be a permanent fixture dotting the Los Angeles horizon.

## WESTSIDE CHIANTI

When architect Cosimo Pizzulli planted his Sangiovese vines five years ago in Pacific Palisades, he carried into the twenty-first century a tradition handed down through generations in his Italian family since the 1700s in Puglia. Inspired by memories of making wine in the "original method" with his grandfather in Brooklyn, his aim was to craft modern Cal/Ital wine.

Driving onto his sprawling canyon property, the Old World meets New World theme is evident. A wooden shed, or "Tenuta," near his classic ranch house acts as his makeshift winery. Not far off, in lieu of an expensive wine "cave," rests a 20-foot insulated recycled shipping container that he has masterfully converted to hold his 3,000 bottles of wine and barrels for ageing. Sourced from the Port of Los Angeles, the container is FDA certified for food.

Cosimo beamed with excitement and pride as he led me to his half-acre hillside vineyard just steps away. While he had never grown grapes before, Cosimo learned what he could by assisting winegrowers in the nearby Malibu wine community. Old World wisdom arrived in the form of a 78-year-old Italian vineyard hand visiting from Tuscany. Embracing the old man's advice, Cosimo now prunes "vine by vine," staying "close to the mother," the main cord.

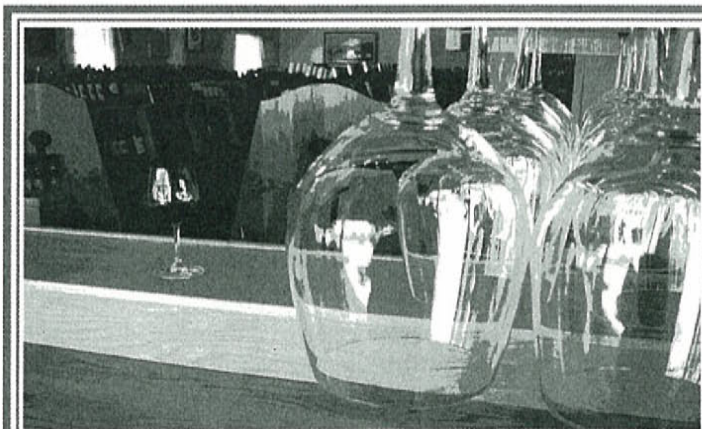
Maintaining the family tradition of organic farming presents constant challenges. But each year, the vineyard produces more than the previous year, and his entire family, including his wife and two teenage children, make up the vineyard crew. His Sangiovese is wonderful, full of bright cherry flavors. Recently, it took a Gold Medal in the 2007 Los Angeles Cellarmasters Thirty-Fourth Annual Wine Competition and a Silver Medal in the 2008 International Amateur Wine Competition.

Awards aside, he takes a sip and comments, "It's the total excitement of it all, all on your own, and with your own hands."

## TASTING TOPANGA

Further east lie the vineyards of Cosimo's friend and mentor, Stephan Hagopian. An inspired farmer who fully embraces biodynamic farming practices, the vineyard emerged as a byproduct of his evolution in this direction. Stephan and his wife came to Los Angeles from the east coast. At first, Stephan struggled with culture shock, but he loved the climate and proceeded to plant fruit trees in his backyard. Soon the hobby of growing edible things became an obsession.

In pursuit of more land, Stephan and his wife purchased the Topanga property. At first he planted exotic fruit trees. Then, he stumbled onto a great discovery: When he used biodynamically produced compost, in contrast to the organic compost he had been using, the re-



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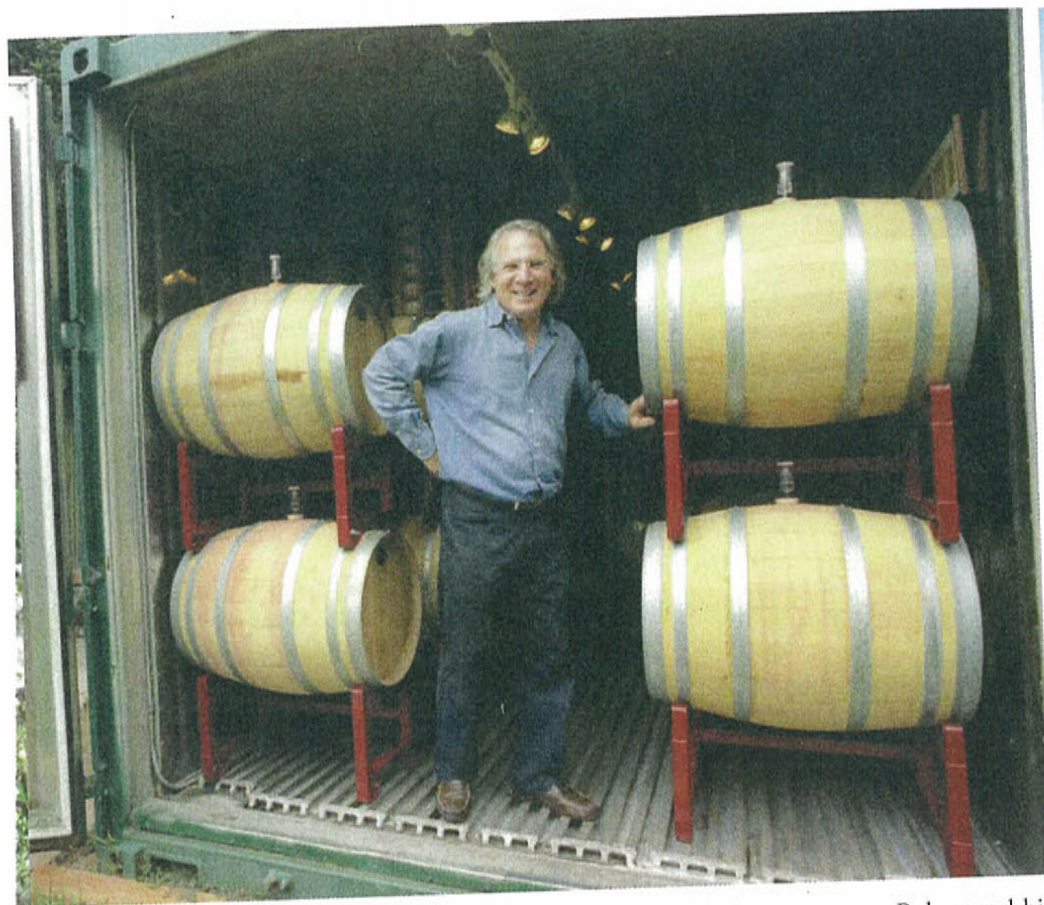
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sults were astounding. While he had never been a connoisseur of wine, he realized that a vineyard was his next step, because while his exotic fruit went bad in weeks, in the form of wine, he could bottle and actually preserve the "fruit" of his labor.

Stephan fearlessly planted the first vineyard in the area. Farming biodynamically, he treated the site as a self-sustaining organism, involving all interdependent factors, even planetary forces. Regarded now as an important trend, at that time biodynamics was dismissed as witchcraft. Stephan persevered and proceeded to plant more than four acres of Bordeaux varietals. Last year, he even purchased a small flock of baby doll sheep to act as "natural mowers," controlling weed growth between the vines.

Keen, intense and lean, Stephan never seems to keep still for long in his vineyard, even while taking in the majestic views of the surrounding canyon. While the work involved is daunting, the refined result bears it out. Because the fruit is grown with such incredible care, the wine basically makes itself. He mainly "crushes it and lets it evolve." His Topanga Skyline wine can be found in local restaurants. For Stephan Hagopian, a practicing family physician, vineyard farming and healing go naturally, hand in hand.

## PASADENA PIONEER

Robert Key was always ahead of the curve. He planted his vineyard more than 14 years ago in the foothills of Pasadena. A wine collector since the early sixties, vineyard ownership was simply a natural final step in his quest to grasp wine at its very core. After he met a wine importer (a former Vatican priest) who sold him wine at cost, he became smitten. Before long, he found himself leading wine appreciation classes.

"At the time, no sommeliers existed," he says matter-of-factly with a shrug. His interest naturally led him to Napa, where he made significant connections. He then began purchasing Napa grapes and making wine there for his own enjoyment through his various connections.

Robert and his wife bought the Altadena property 17 years ago with the clear intention to finally plant a vineyard. Now, with 88 vines in total, Robert is involved in every step of the process. Weary from the day-to-day challenges, he offers up some vineyard wisdom, hard won.

"You are forced to develop an extreme optimism because it can all go down the tubes," he explains. But improvements have come. After painstakingly hand de-stemming his grapes for years, Robert recently purchased a de-stemmer. While he can no longer purchase a bottle of 1962 Domaine De La Romanee Conti Echezeaux for \$10 like he used to, he is now more than content crafting and drinking his home cru, for about the same cost.

## HOLLYWOOD CUVEE

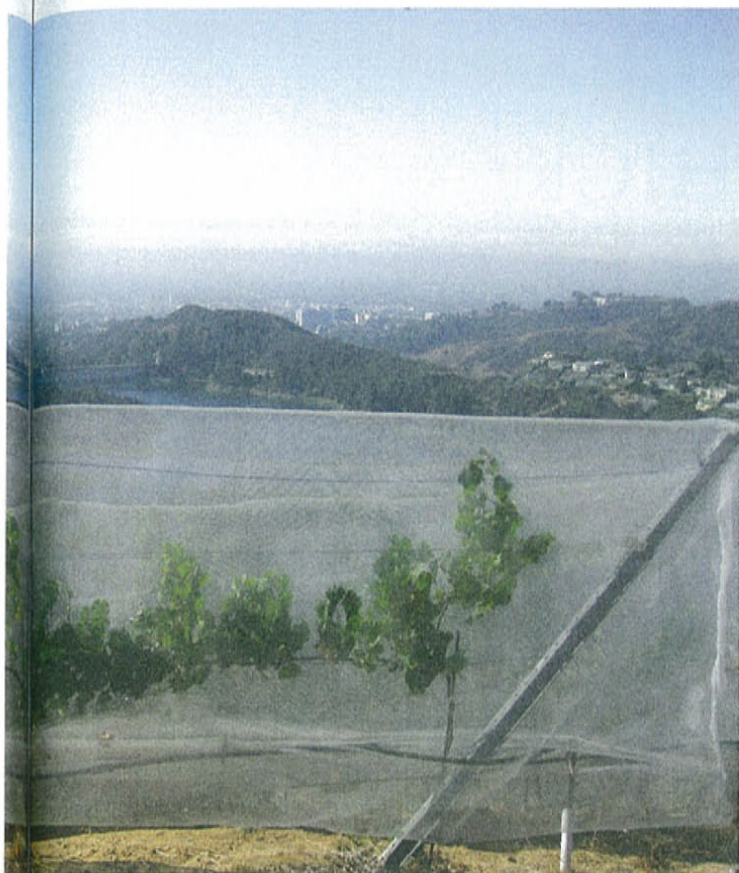
When tourists focus their binoculars on the Hollywood Sign, they may unexpectedly spy Ken York's vineyard. Rows of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot stretch over five acres covering a steep hillside in the sign's shadow. Ken, an ophthalmologist by trade, began to train his sights on a "farm in the city," when he moved to Los Angeles in the 1980s. After purchasing the Hollywood Hills property in 1999, and against the discouragement of professional consultants, Ken proceeded, following a gut instinct, with the aim of crafting a low yield, high quality Cab.

The physical demands of the vineyard are often exhausting, especially when balancing it with his busy practice and family life that includes his wife and their three young children. However, Ken cherishes the unique perspective.

"I love getting up early and seeing the sunrise, and then seeing the lights at night," he says. Tall, lean soft-spoken and bespectacled Ken is anything but "Hollywood." Five years later, while swarms of bees and grape-nibbling deer have provided challenges, Ken is more than happy with the result.

Furthermore, if the first 2004 vintage of his Hollywood Class wine is any proof, Ken's efforts to craft an elegant and balanced C





have paid off. I was floored by the quality and complexity when I tasted his wine. Ken shared it at a recent blind tasting of "California Napa Cult Cabs" led by Martin Weiner at *The Wine Advocate* in Los Angeles, and his wine scored an astounding 96, outscoring all but three of the other 21 wines, which included heavy hitters such as Screaming Eagle and Harlan Estates.

Ken attributes his success to the vineyard's unique microclimate and an attentive hands-on approach. Trucking the grapes each year to a friend's facility in Napa, Ken is passionately involved in every step of the process. With plans in the works to offer his wine commercially, he has miraculously crafted a fine wine that tastes of place in the least likely of places.

If you love wine and are not afraid to get your hands dirty, you might need to go no further than your own backyard to produce your own. Do you have a southwest-facing slope? Does your soil drain well? Do you have hot days and cool nights? Even better, do you live along a transverse canyon that carries maritime breezes?

Baby vines can be sourced through local nurseries, and home vineyard study guides and winemaking kits are just an online click away. Vines must be "stressed," forcing all of the vigor into the fruit, so less tends to equal more as far as water and soil are concerned. Once your vines are rooted, benign neglect can rule. Just expect periods of intense activity around harvest.

Last, do you have the passion? Take a look around your area. You might be surprised that someone nearby shares that passion and already has a vineyard. Go ahead, knock on his or her door and prepare to get connected. 🌱

*Far left and middle photos by Susan Becerra  
Far right photo by Carol Penn-Romine*

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