

MONTECITO WINEMAKERS

BRYAN AND LISA BABCOCK BY EVA VAN PROOYEN

Situated on the western side of the Santa Ynez Valley, just nine miles past Buellton and tucked off Highway 246 down a long drive, is Babcock Vineyards. Established in 1978, Mona and Walter Babcock purchased the 110-acre property, planted 20 acres of grapes including Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, and Chardonnay, and yielded a first vintage in 1983.

In 1982 their son, Bryan, was having trouble getting accepted into the business schools of his choice. Bryan reports Harvard, Stanford, and Wharton had seemingly tossed his “modest undergraduate credentials”

into the trash, and he felt it best to “check out the wine thing with mom and dad.” As a result, he pursued majors in biology and chemistry from Occidental College and applied to UC Davis to start a master’s degree in enology.

After spending two years on course work, Bryan says he was supposed to return to Davis to put together a thesis for his degree in the fall of 1984. “I started crushing Gewurztraminer that September and forgot about school altogether,” he admits.

His studies clearly primed him for his first harvest, as he was awarded

(photo by Valentina Glidden)

gold medals at the Los Angeles and Orange County Fairs for his 1984 Estate Grown Sauvignon Blanc. Bryan notes one of his more memorable early career moments was being invited to lecture the business students at Wharton a few years later on the “ins and outs of the wine industry.”

LANDING IN MONTECITO

Bryan grew up in Southern California in the Seal Beach area, and met his wife, Lisa, when they were attending Occidental College. They married in 1992. Lisa was born in Redondo Beach; her father flew commercial planes as a flight engineer, which took the family around the world, and she ultimately came back to the States to finish out high school in Washington.

“Lisa and I first moved to Montecito from San Roque over fifteen years ago and at this point we kind of feel like we’re locals. Both of our

kids (Chloe age 17 and a senior in high school and Sean age 21 currently at UCLA) went to Montecito Union. We are fulltime residents of Montecito, and I commute most every day, and during harvest I’m [in the Santa Ynez Valley] every day,” says Bryan.

Bryan recalls the first house they moved to in Montecito was a “Mediterranean charming house” and then ten years ago they found another charming Mediterranean house, this time with a pool, right down the street and perfect for their kids at the time. “We basically moved down the street and Lisa turned that house into a really spectacular short-term rental.” They call it Babcock Vintner’s House & Guest Cottage and it is available as a vacation rental.

Babcock wines are found in all Montecito wine stores and on most restaurant wine lists. “We are super well supported in Montecito. We tend to bounce around and eat at a lot of different places. We are really blessed in Montecito – if we want Italian we either go north two minutes to Pané e Vino or west two minutes to Tre Lune. We love what they did



(photo by Valentina Glidden)



4,600± AC Rancho Latigo | Santa Ynez
\$36,000,000



1,000± AC Estelle Vineyards | Santa Ynez
\$29,500,000



6,500± AC Cañada Larga | Ventura
\$27,650,000



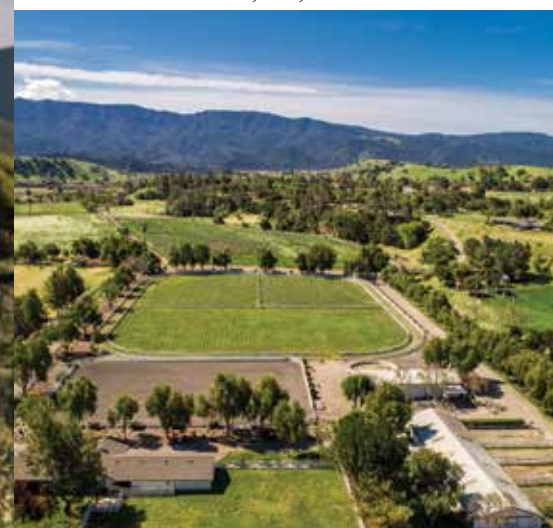
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\$9,500,000



65 AC Foxen Canyon | Los Olivos
\$6,900,000



298 AC Drum Canyon | Lompoc
\$3,250,000



10 AC Equestrian Ranch | Santa Ynez
\$2,395,000



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at the Miramar, and I just put a private label together with San Ysidro Ranch. The sommelier came up to the winery, picked his favorite Pinot Noir, and we put a private label on it,” says Bryan, who also notes he and Lisa recently celebrated their wedding anniversary there.

Lisa had a career in the fashion industry for more than 30 years. When asked about her role in the winery, she explains, “Among many other things, I’m the quirky mind behind the labels, the furnishings, and tchotchke-laden landscape of Babcock Winery. Both of my parents were spirited, adventurous, and open minded. I grew up traveling the world with them, and have grown to love open markets and the search for one of a kind items that inspire.”



SOULSTRUCK VINTAGE

“The big picture here,” says Lisa motioning to their massive 5,000 sq ft high ceiling open floor plan barn-like tasting room in an interview at Babcock Winery & Vineyards, “is that eight years ago we converted this from a production warehouse into our new tasting room. I decided to clear out this big warehouse for a party, and in doing so saw this space could be cleared permanently.”

The new tasting room is organized into a variety of sitting area vignettes with “something for everyone” – spanning an array of items to “amuse, entertain, and stimulate curiosity” including everything from small books, cards, and candles, to signs, furniture, an impressive

collection of vinyl records, and an eye-widening assortment of mostly vintage finds.

The original tasting room, just a few steps across the courtyard, is a mid-century modern “unique sipping lounge,” often dubbed a rock-n-roll retro fantasyland, and formally named Soulstruck Lounge.

“These are all found objects,” says Lisa, adding, “I really like that feeling of reusing and repurposing, so almost everything you see here had a former life which is kind ‘a fun. I think it helps to bring a good energy to the space.”

Lisa adds, “I wanted the space to feel really casual and open to anyone and everyone to gather, connect, and relax. You can get

hundreds of people in here and it still works.” Quirky, colorful, and personal, “this is an eclectic array of vintage items to serve as a backdrop for my husband’s incredible wine.”

Bryan says the change in the tasting room environment and atmosphere was commensurate with the fact that at that point he was making about 25,000 cases of wine and distribution had become “no fun,” so he decided to cut production in half and, “focus on better wine.” (Babcock currently produces roughly 12,000 cases each year.)

“I’ve got some new ideas in farming and the development of Agristhetics,” says Bryan, explaining Agristhetics is a term he coined – the concept, definition, and philosophy he’s given it thus far is, “the treatment of an agricultural domain as a piece of art.” I’ve been inspired

by everything in this room, and once I immersed myself in its mojo for a few years, I started thinking, why can’t I do this on one hundred acres? Why not get the whole thing to be like this?”

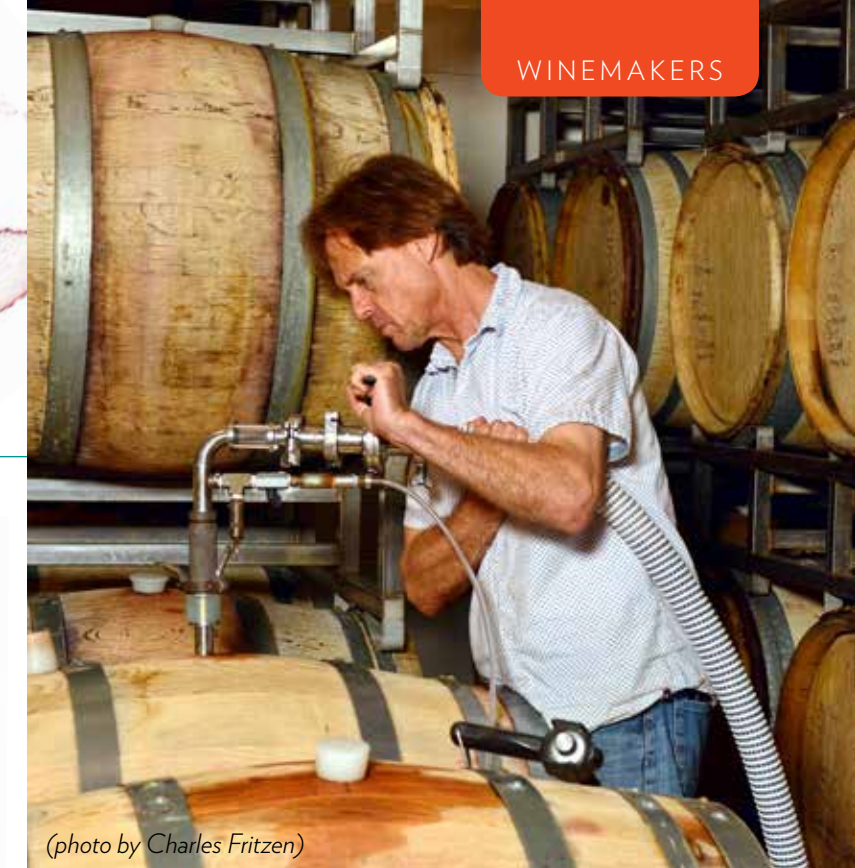
GOING NATURAL

Along with this evolution, Babcock has a new label. “We are going to start doing some Pét-Nat wines. It is the méthode ancestral, where you have a wine and you bottle it just a little bit before fermentation is finished. Fermentation then finishes in the bottle and you cap it. It’s kind of the crude street version of Champagne,” says Bryan, explaining it is most likely the first way anyone made sparkling wine, probably by accident. “Stick a cork in it a little bit too soon and the next thing you know you got bubbles. It’s fun, you don’t have to add any SO₂, there’s no preservatives, so the wine is a little hazy and funky which totally fits into what’s happening right now in this whole natural wine movement.” Bryan reports they are also making rosé and the new brand name is Love Garden. “In two words, Lisa has captured what this atmosphere is really all about – it’s a big barn full of friends.”

Bryan explains their branding is now built around different labels in addition to Babcock including Bright Fortune, Rita’s Earth, “a less expensive Pinot Noir – my daughter drew a beautiful pencil rose for us for this label.” Bryan’s old FATHOM label has made a return, too – it was originally “a Bordeaux varieties blending program from our original observations of Cabernet Franc that is back with some new mojo.”

NATURE AND AGRISTHETICS

Out in the vineyard, Bryan says, two things are going on with the new farming: Agristhetics and Integrated Nature, which at this point, is the name of his entire approach. “Basically what I’ve done is to move away from Vertical Shoot Positioning (VSP), which is what you see



(photo by Charles Fritzen)

most fine wine growers worldwide do. I did VSP for the better part of 25 years myself until I had my epiphany and started to think about ways to more or less work with gravity opposed to against gravity. You do VSP for 25 years and you start to forget what a naturally growing vine looks like.”

Bryan reports ten years ago he spent hours simply standing in his vineyard looking at a grapevine to specifically explore what vitis (grapevines) would do naturally. He was looking at the vines for “its nature.”

He explains VSP is a rigid system where you take vitis, which wants to grow in a fluid organic loose gently outward direction and you redirect it up into a wire trellis, which is expensive and forces the vine to do what it would not otherwise do naturally. “So, I moved my platform up. The starting point for all the growth is now up at about eye level. I decided to start up higher and see if we could discover opportunities where just letting vitis be vitis actually gives us some advantages in terms of wine quality and certainly farming cost.”

When asked if this farming technique is unique to him, Bryan says, “What this is, is a radicalization of the integration of vitis with the forces of nature that are in play – namely gravity, wind, wind direction, sun, sun position vis-à-vis time of the growing season, and the average height

of a human being. I don't know anybody doing this. Nobody does this: Integrated Nature and Agristhetics. We've been farming this way now for five years."

Bryan continues to explain the idea of letting a grapevine start naturally and just grow is primitive, but he's doing it in a way to take advantage of the nature of a grapevine and then position it in such a way to maximize what it can do naturally.

"The really crazy thing that just hit me like a ton of bricks in how lucky I am is, in my case, the wind runs the same direction as the sun which is huge because it creates an [even canopy dispersal] in September and October.

"Because things are relatively loose, what is really nice is the breeze starts to push things around and the vines start to undulate and we call it 'the dance.' This is really good as far as allowing sun and air to penetrate deeper into the core of the canopy, which helps to mitigate mildew in the early part of the season when we do canopy work. And if we do canopy work... it's all right here at eye-level. I'll never farm down there again," he says, motioning lower to the ground.

"There's a bigger fruiting zone because there is more room, and we can create more individual cluster architecture – free-floating ripening clusters – and if you have a natural canopy you can reach through at an [easy angle] knowing where the sun is going to be in August and September and pluck out leaves as the sun arcs across the side of the canopy. If you want fifty percent direct sun on your Pinot Noir – which is where my gut tells me I should be – then you can do it. With VSP the only thing typically between the cluster and the sun on an east-west row is one leaf – take it away and you have one hundred percent sun. Leave it on and you have one hundred percent shade. If you just let vitis grow, it will set you up."

With this farming innovation, there is natural frost protection as shoots are higher off the ground, which also mitigates negative effects of humidity. One aspect of mechanization Bryan says he is big on is mechanical harvesting, and because there is no pulling wires apart like



(photo by Donny Heddon)



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SALT.

with VSP, which is essentially glued together with wire, pruning goes quickly. During harvest, “we now go twice as fast down line and we’re twice as gentle.”

Driving through the 100-acre vineyard, Bryan explains that at one point he was farming 80 acres, but due to Pierce’s Disease, a bacteria that prevents water being drawn up into the vines, he now has 25 acres planted and is hesitant to plant more until there is a clear remedy. The bacteria tend to survive through the warmer winter due to the proximity of the ocean.

A FOREST IN THE VALLEY

Stopping at the top of the Vineyard’s long entryway and gesturing to a large cluster of 15-year-old oak trees, Bryan states, “What I want is what you feel here with these trees. The idea is to create a periphery of forest around the property that you could hike through, walk through [with story signage along the way], and picnic tables up top where people can take a bottle of wine for lunch and enjoy the views. I have about 1,000 oaks in the nursery. My dream is to re-engineer the deer fence so the deer will come down from the habitat into the forest so as to invite wildlife.” He adds, “with a sign that says ‘Attention You’re Now Entering a Wildlife Zone Please Close the Gate Behind You.’”

Bryan describes his vision where the parking lot will be more of a forest and on a hot day you can park your car under a big, mature oak tree. In addition to the idea of a dense oak forest, he reports he’s been researching flowers and milkweed to design butterfly sanctuaries among the natural fields to create acres of color. Last year he looked at three species of milkweed favoring a robust butterfly-loving Narrow Leaf Milkweed. Stopping at a “laboratory” on a hillside, Bryan reveals a surprisingly vibrant fragrant purple mass of Cedros Island verbena. “This is the star of the show,” he explains, adding, “This is exactly what



I’m looking for in a flower species: it is robust, they like it here, and of course they attract butterflies. This has been blooming for a year – it never stopped. I call it the Terminator of flowers. It’s invincible.”

Bryan looks forward to the day the oak trees look more mature and says Agristhetics probably won’t be finished in his lifetime but “to get two hundred-year-old trees, you gotta start somewhere.” Continuing along, he notes an east-facing hillside will someday be home to a meandering trail through a solid forest of trees spreading out as it takes guests up to the top of the property. He is even playing with the idea of planting an English variety of oak that under the right conditions will produce truffles and envisions a sign saying, “You Are Now Entering A Truffle Forest.”

“Someday we’ll mix in some sheep or goats; it would be fun and really cool to make some cheese. I’m toying with the idea of planting cactus for the production of a beverage called Pulque. Agave makes the spirit tequila and mezcal. There are other species of cactus where when the plant is mature it puts out a big flower stock – you cut off

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the main trunk and you scoop it out to create a bowl and the sap – called aguamiel – oozes into the bowl and you ladle it out every day. It has an alcohol content of six or seven percent and is more like a beer,” says Bryan, laughing as he tries to figure out the costs and time on a project like that.

On the one hand, Pierce’s Disease has been a nightmare. But as Bryan says, “I don’t know if it’s a blessing in disguise, but if there was ever a time for me to feel like maybe I shouldn’t go run out and plant more grapes – if I know now as a business target I can make this place as beautiful as it could be, as fast as I can do it, I’ll be busy.

“The whole thing is just really fun. I don’t hold that when it’s all said and done the agricultural domain will be a piece of art. The challenge for me is in designing something where we can weave the man-made – the industrial, the vineyard, the trellising – with the natural, so that no

matter where you are it’s beautiful, and you start to have this feeling like when you’re experiencing art. Your senses are bombarded hopefully in a good way and that you just have this really good feeling about life in general and that’s really the goal.”

Bryan was named as one of the “Top Ten Small Production Winemakers in the World” in 1995 by the James Beard Foundation (the only American chosen) as well as both one of the “Ten Best Winemakers of the Year” and “Most Courageous Winemaker of the Year” by the *Los Angeles Times*. Babcock Winery & Vineyards is located at 5175 East Highway 246. The tasting room is open daily from 11 am to 5:30 pm. Some of Babcock wines are at the Santa Barbara Wine Collective in the Funk Zone in Santa Barbara at 131 Anacapa Street, Suite C. For more information visit www.babcockwinery.com or call (805) 736-1455

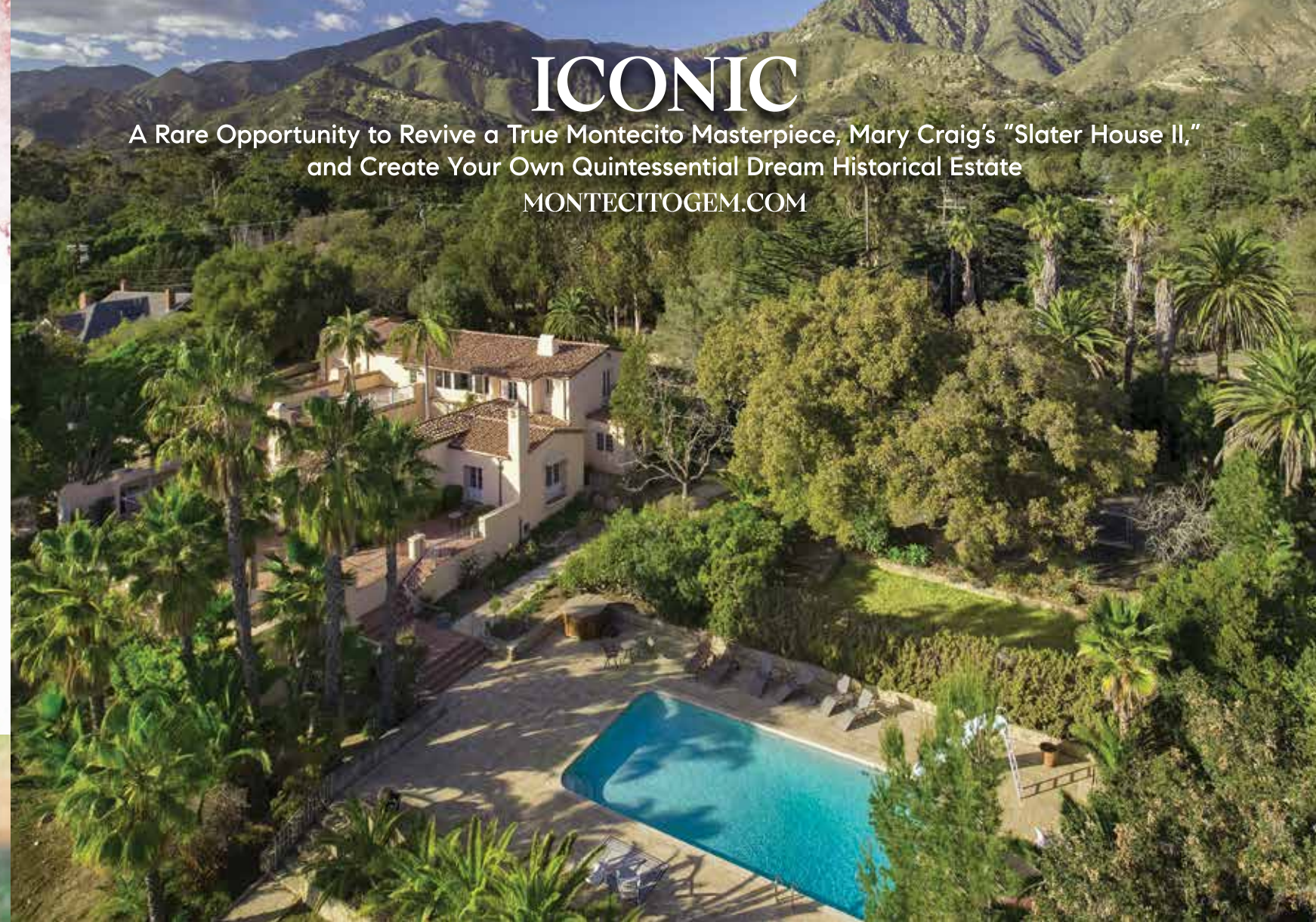


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