

*Ripening Zinfandel
at Santa Catalina
Island Vineyards,
August 2016.*

THE RUNAWAY VINE

RUSACK REMAKES HISTORY WITH A LOST ZINFANDEL CLONE
FROM SANTA CRUZ ISLAND

story and photos by Randy Caparoso



Rusack Santa Catalina Island and Ballard Canyon Estate Zinfandels.

LUCK, FATE, HAPPENSTANCE—CALL IT

what you will, but some of the most intriguing wine “discoveries” made in the New World have transpired under serendipitous circumstances.

Take the Santa Catalina Island Vineyards project, planted in 2007 by Geoffrey and Alison Rusack, heirs of the storied and bejeweled Santa Catalina Island—once owned by chewing gum magnate William Wrigley Jr.—26 miles off the coast of Southern California. The Rusacks, who also own the more conventionally ensconced Rusack Vineyards in Santa Barbara’s Ballard Canyon AVA, planted wine grapes on this monumentally challenging site (salt-encrusted sand and schist, daily gale-force winds and Region I/II chill) out in the Pacific Ocean because, well, they could.

As it turns out, since its inaugural vintage in 2009, the Rusack Santa Catalina Islands Chardonnay has emerged as one of the world’s most unique expressions of the grape: super-charged with both lemon drop acidity and orange blossom notes tinged with a distinct, briny, palate-slaking minerality. Subsequent vintages of Santa Catalina Island—grown Pinot Noirs have been equally transparent: rhubarb- and pomegranate-like red fruit perfumes riding on the acid, sinew and pervasive brininess induced by that oceanic air.

But the real kicker, as it turns out, has been the Rusack family’s Santa Catalina Island Vineyards Zinfandel, showing, from the first vintage (2009) and through all five bottlings since, the most pungent expression of the aromatic terpene identified as rotundone



Winemaker Steven Gerbac takes field sample of Zinfandel.

(i.e., black peppery spice)—along with the chiseled, acid-driven island typicity—to be found anywhere . . . at least in comparison to any other contemporary rendition of this classic California varietal.

When tasting the current vintage of the Santa Catalina Island-grown Zinfandel—a 2013 combining cracked pepper and rapier acidity with silken rose petal delicacy—with Rusack winemaker Steven Gerbac this past August, Gerbac mused: “How much of the peppery character is due to the terroir or to the clonal material, I am not sure, especially since we planted the exact same material on our Ballard Canyon estate, where we’re not getting quite as much peppercorn spiciness.”

The story behind Rusack’s Zinfandel clone is where our plot thickens: In 2005 Geoff Rusack was told, through associates in The Nature Conservancy—which now

owns over three-quarters of both Santa Catalina Island and the nearby Santa Cruz Island—that a single stray grape vine had been discovered on Santa Cruz Island, hidden on a hill among a dense thicket of lemonade berry shrubs, willows and toyon trees. The beckoning nature of this finding was that this island, the largest of California’s Channel Islands (96.53 square miles), was once owned entirely by an Italian-Swiss entrepreneur named Justinian Caire, who established the long forgotten Santa Cruz Island Wine Company in the early 1880s.

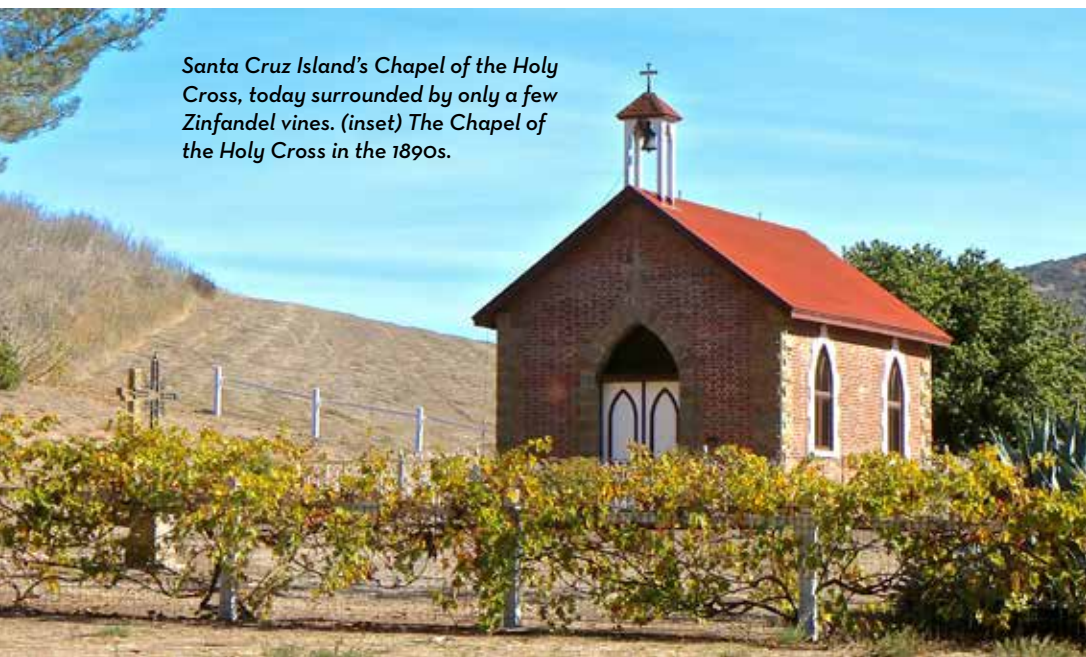
According to official documents, at one point in the early 1900s the Caire family was cultivating more than 150 acres of grapes on Santa Cruz Island for table wine production, primarily Zinfandel (original source unknown), but also some Grenache, a black-skinned grape identified as “Burgundy,” Mataro, Trousseau, Burger, Grey Riesling, Muscat of Alexandria and smaller amounts of others. A large, gravity-flow winery was built from bricks forged on the island; the wines primarily shipped off in barrels to merchants on the mainland for blending or bottling. Prohibition, however, permanently crippled the operation. In 1939, remaining barrels of unsold wine were poured down a drain by the property’s new owner (Edwin Stanton) and all the vines ripped out from the hillsides, which were rededicated to cattle and sheep ranching.

The question in 2005, when Rusack climbed into that thicket on Santa Cruz Island in search of the hidden vine, was: Which variety had survived? Leafed cuttings were clipped and sent to U.C. Davis,

where DNA identification came back as Zinfandel. In tribute to the vine’s historic lineage, in 2007 Rusack planted an acre of the newly discovered material on Santa Catalina Island on a rootstock selection (to counter salt and boron content in the soil), and in 2010, 3.5 acres of the same Zinfandel clone was planted on its own rootstock in the warmer-climate (Region III) gravelly loam hillside site of Rusack’s Ballard Canyon estate.

The day before visiting Santa Cruz Island with Gerbac in November to look at this single runaway vine—still thriving under lemonade berry brush—we sat down to a vertical tasting at Rusack Vineyards: a comparison of all six of Rusack’s vintages of Santa Catalina Island Zinfandel (2009–2014) with three vintages of their Ballard Canyon Estate Zinfandel (2012–2014). The differences were primarily the Santa Catalina Island wines’ lean, grippy, acid-driven structure, contrasting with the fuller-bodied, rounder, plumper, ripe cranberry/pomegranate/cola fruit qualities of the Ballard Canyon Zinfandels. The commonality, contrary to the skepticism expressed by Gerbac three months before, definitely seemed to be the pronounced cracked peppercorn spiciness—particularly strong in the soon-to-be-released 2014s from both Santa Catalina Island and Ballard Canyon.

Considering the contrasting terroirs, the spiced character of this unique Zinfandel clone is making its mark—both as an original project and one of history in the remaking, an exciting contribution to American wine mythology. *sj*



Santa Cruz Island’s Chapel of the Holy Cross, today surrounded by only a few Zinfandel vines. (inset) The Chapel of the Holy Cross in the 1890s.

