

# STARRY, STARRY NIGHT

## Sunshine Summit Offers Secluded Spot to Toast Local History

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY JOHN ALONGÉ

Hidden in a remote part of north-central San Diego County lies a magical mountain kingdom that is home to one of the most interesting grape growing and wine making enclaves in the country. Four wineries and a number of working vineyards have sprung up around the tiny hamlet of Sunshine Summit, home to some 200 full-time residents.

The area is bounded to the west by the large mass of Palomar Mountain with its world-famous observatory. To the east lies Hot Springs Mountain, the little-known high point of San Diego County. Situated at more than 3,000 feet, this isolated alpine realm is subject to four seasons of weather patterns far wilder than what most of people experience here in Southern California. Last year, for example, while San Diego continued to suffer through a drought cycle, Sunshine Summit was awash with over 50 inches of snow and rain. The rules are decidedly different in this wild retreat.

The history of this out-of-the-way expanse of rugged terrain is intimately related to that of the short-lived Butterfield Overland Stage. From 1857 to 1861, the stage was a conduit for U.S. mail and adventurous travelers from St. Louis, Missouri, through Arkansas, Indian Territory, New Mexico, Arizona and California, ending its route in San Francisco. The one-way western fare was \$200 and the trip required about 22 days from end to end. Of the 139 relay stations along the route, the only surviving station building is to be found in tiny Oak Grove, a few miles north of Sunshine Summit. Highway 79, the one and only road that traverses the area, closely follows the original Butterfield stage route.

To the south, another relay station was established at the site of hot springs known to the indigenous Indian inhabitants for centuries and visited by a Spanish expedition led by Fray Juan Mariner in 1795. A trading post and ranch had been established there in 1844 by John Warner. At the time, it was the only inhabited stopping place between New Mexico and Los Angeles for gold seekers, soldiers and other travelers. In 1851, Warner and two adopted Indian boys stood off an attack at the post by 100 Cahuilla Indians. Although the three defenders survived, all the buildings were burned in the attack. War-

ner was ruined and the site was abandoned until a relay station was built there to service the Butterfield stage line.

A particularly intriguing chapter in the area's history involves the tale of Dead Man's Hole. Sunshine Summit was originally called Holcomb Village after an early settler. Between Holcomb Village and Oak Grove to the north, there was a then-nameless watering hole along the stage route where both men and horses found refreshment. One morning in the spring of 1858, the driver of a northbound stage discovered a dead man bobbing in the water—the first of many corpses to be found at what became known as Dead Man's Hole. Visitors claimed to see a strange human-like creature covered with long black hair wandering the surrounding woods. In March 1888, two hunters were dispatched into a steep canyon behind the spring in search of the beast. Ultimately, they tracked the creature back to its lair and killed it, discovering a collection of human skulls in the process. Stories vary regarding what was done with the remains of this southern Sasquatch, but the details remain clouded in the mists of time.

The first vineyard was established near Sunshine Summit in 1944 by Italian immigrants Augusto and Helen Mase. "Old Gus" had an



itinerant blade sharpening business. He had outfitted a 1943 Ford school bus with his sharpening equipment and made the rounds of San Diego hotels and restaurants sharpening knives for the chefs.

Like many Italian immigrants at that time, Old Gus grew grapes and made wine for his family and friends. On his 40-acre property just south of Sunshine Summit, he established extensive plantings of Chenin Blanc, Zinfandel, Petite Sirah, Barbera, Grenache, French Colombard and Muscat Canelli. He and his children continued cultivating the grapes and making wine in the ensuing decades.

In 1990, the property was purchased by current owners Pam and Alex McGeary. They named their operation Shadow Mountain Vineyards and Winery and quickly set up a tasting room that is now open to the public Wednesday–Saturday and most holidays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. They also rent out two charming guest cottages for those wishing to spend some time in the area.

Alex has become the *de facto* dean of this isolated wine haven in the hills. He has mentored other wine makers, established home vineyards for many of his high country neighbors and served two terms as the president of the San Diego County Vintners Association. He is one of the staunchest proponents of San Diego County wines made exclusively from fruit that is produced here.

“The goal is to grow good grapes,” says Alex. “You have to find out, through trial and error, exactly which grape varieties should be planted up here in these very unique conditions that we have. It wouldn’t make any sense to be planting Pinot Noir or Chardonnay here just because there is a market demand for them.”

McGeary continues to make wine from the original vines established by Old Gus and has added his own plantings of Nebbiolo, Syrah, Merlot and Sauvignon Blanc. He now has 25 acres under cultivation and produces anywhere from 1,500 to 2,200 cases of wine a year, depending on harvest conditions. Interestingly enough, he also grows some Mission grapes, the original variety established in the San Diego area beginning in the 1770s at the Mission San Diego de Alcalá. McGeary came by the cuttings for these vines through his work on an archeological project at the San Juan Capistrano and San Luis Rey missions, attempting to restore vineyards in these historic sites. His may well be the only Mission vines to be found in at a commercial winery anywhere in Southern California, a little bit of living history.

The vineyard called La Serenissima is just a couple of miles up the road from the Shadow Mountain winery. Owner John Tiso established the operation in 1998 with Alex McGeary as wine maker. Tiso, a retired businessman originally from Venice, Italy, dreamed of making sophisticated European-style wines on his property



Alex McGeary Shadow Mountain Vineyards and Winery

near Sunshine Summit. Under McGeary’s direction, he planted 30 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Syrah and Tempranillo, as well as a little-known Italian grape variety called Arneis. His wines, particularly the Bordeaux-style blends, are aged in high-quality French and American oak barrels and exhibit extraordinary depth and complexity. These are decidedly not the kind of bland, generic wines one finds on the grocery store shelves.

“When people taste these wines for the first time,” says Tiso, “they cannot believe that such wines can be produced in San Diego County.” La Serenissima’s total production was 500 cases in 2007 and approached 800 cases in 2008, their seventh year of harvest. Clearly, great things are in store for this incredible project. Currently, the wines are available at the Shadow Mountain tasting room.

Adjacent to John Tiso’s property is the nascent Orrin Winery, owned by retired chiropractor Bud Wiederrich and operated by his son Von. The 20-acre estate grows Syrah, Merlot, Zinfandel and Viognier, from which it produces small lots of hand-crafted wines. They currently have no tasting room, but one can arrange a visit by calling them.

Another neighbor, the Hawk Watch Winery, is the brainchild of Mike and Lisa Schnell. Mike is no newcomer to the wine business; he also works in the wine lab of Leonesse Cellars in Temecula. They opened to the public in April 2008 and have planted Sauvignon Blanc, Syrah and Orange Muscat on their property on Chihuahua Valley Road. Their cheery, bright red winery building dominates the vineyards. Their tasting room is open on Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. By the way, for one of the most surprising discoveries in the county, continue along Chihuahua Valley Road a few miles past the winery and you’ll come upon the Lieu Quan Meditation Center and its out-



John Tiso of La Serenissima



door collection of some of the largest Buddha statues in the world. The Reclining Buddha (Nirvana) Statues is 46 feet long and 10 feet tall! The center is open to the public for visitation.

Along with its four bonded wineries, the Sunshine Summit area is home to a number of private vineyards, most of them planted under the direction of Alex McGeary. These include a 3.5-acre tract in Oak Grove owned by husband-and-wife doctors from Orange County and planted to Cabernet Sauvignon and Malvasia Bianca, as well as a 40-acre Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec vineyard in nearby Anza, which is the property of an MIT graduate from Madison, Wisconsin. There's even a private vineyard attached to a chateau-like dwelling for whose owner Alex planted Tinta Cão grapes, a traditional red variety from the Douro region in Portugal.

For remote, independent wine-producing areas like the one around Sunshine Summit to succeed, a number of factors are needed to lure the necessary visitors. "We need to reach critical mass by creating a wine-tasting experience here," states McGeary. "This kind of agrotourism can only be successful if we create zones of interest by having ancillary economies such as restaurants as well as bed-and-breakfast accommodations to allow people to spend time in the area."

McGeary is actively working with the wineries in the area to market themselves as a group, called Backcountry Wineries, in order to increase their exposure. He's also pushing for a local American Viticultural Area (AVA) designation to help establish more recognition for the local wine producers.

Sitting with Alex and his wife, Pam, on their patio after dinner on a cool fall night, I sip some Old Gus, the red wine the McGearys produce from Zinfandel, Petite Syrah and Barbera grapes planted here by Augusto Mase more than 63 years ago. I'm filled with a deep sense of the land and its history. Above, a tapestry of stars twinkles, undiminished in this remote place by invading urban light. The Milky Way cuts a luminous swath across the night sky. I hear the autumn-tinged leaves of Gus' vines flutter invisibly in the night breeze. There is no place I would rather be.

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