

# EAT & DRINK SPECIAL SECTION

# WINNING WINES

LAGUNA BEACH TASTING ROOMS AND RESTAURANTS PRESENT AN ARRAY OF VIBRANT VARIETALS ALL OVER TOWN.

By ASHLEY RYAN

Montage  
Laguna Beach's  
wine collection



Clockwise from top left: the McClain Cellars tasting room in Laguna Canyon; north Laguna's Bianchi tasting room; a red wine crafted by Bianchi in Paso Robles; a party taking place in the Laguna Canyon Winery tasting room; a bottle of cabernet Franc made by Laguna Canyon Winery

From beloved classics like chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon to more unique varietals like tempranillo and petite sirah—as well as inventive blends—there is something for everyone to sip in Laguna Beach.

The local wine scene is definitely having a moment, with a number of new tasting rooms opening their doors in recent years. And with some offering things like charcuterie boards, special labels, live music or even crafting to go along with tastings, they've become some of the most popular spots in town to unwind.

Local restaurants have embraced the trend, too, presenting winning wine lists to accompany the luxurious dishes on their menus. Whether you're hoping to sample a number of varietals or sip on one vino in particular, you'll find plenty of options here in town.

## BLISSFUL BOTTLES

Laguna Canyon Winery, the oldest tasting room and only true winery in Laguna Beach, celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. These wines are the only ones actually made in town, solidifying the winery as an important fixture in the local scene, with crushing, fermentation, pressing, barrel aging and bottling all taking place on-site in Laguna Canyon.

Founder and winemaker J.J. Huber grew up in Canada, where he opened two wineries before venturing to Southern California. "My wife selected this location in 2003, as one can get the sense that there are vineyards amongst the rolling hills of the canyon," Huber says.

Between studying under an Italian winemaker and learning from a professor at the University of California, Davis, Huber has an immense knowledge of the process, doing

the majority of it himself—even picking grapes and trucking them down from vineyards in Napa and Sonoma counties.

The winery currently offers three whites, two roses and 11 red wines. "Our reds are unfiltered," he adds, "so grapey, earthy, natural and more pungent flavors." Stop by for wine tastings, cheese and charcuterie boards, and special events with live music; these wines can only be purchased directly from the winery, either at the tasting room or online.

Also situated in Laguna Canyon is McClain Cellars, which is located near Laguna Beach Brewing Co. at The Hive. This small but mighty tasting room, which opened its doors in 2019, is anything but ordinary, specializing in wine blends that tell a story, from their flavor to their name to the colorful, artistic labels on the bottles.

TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF MCCLAIN CELLARS; BOTTOM LEFT AND MIDDLE: COURTESY OF LAGUNA CANYON WINERY; OPPOSITE PAGE: COURTESY OF MONTAGE LAGUNA BEACH





Wine at Montage Laguna Beach



At Wine Craft, guests can create a DIY project while sampling wines.

Made with grapes grown in the Santa Ynez Valley near Santa Barbara, you'll see just how many options there are to choose from when you step inside the lounge, as bottles adorn the bar area. Sit on the patio to enjoy a flight and taste a number of their famous blends while listening to live music on the weekends.

Owners Jason and Sofia McClain are especially passionate about sharing the wealth when it comes to their sales. "We are really focused on giving back to charities that make a difference," Jason explains. New labels that will soon be released include Helton's Heroes, named for two of the brand's wine club members in support of frontline workers; Jam Fest, which will benefit musicians in need; and Miracle Maker, a fruit-forward blend crafted to raise funds for Miracles for Kids.

The brand opened a second tasting room during the COVID-19 pandemic in Solvang, then, last year, launched another Laguna venture: a downtown wine library exclusively

for wine club members. With more than 500 bottles from McClain Cellars' collection, this venue holds legacy vintages and sold-out wines that can't be found elsewhere.

Paso Robles-based Bianchi, which opened its north Laguna wine tasting and event space in 2021, has a storied history, with founder Joseph Bianchi launching the business in the 1970s. But then, in 1982, the Bianchi family settled in Laguna Beach. Now, Joseph's son, Glenn, and grandson, Beau, run the company—and both live in town. With such a lengthy background here, they aimed to bring the magic of Paso to Laguna.

All about the vibe, this intimate venue features glass windows with views of the Pacific Ocean and seating at a bar top or at low tables; the building doubles as the brand's new corporate office. Wine tastings, which are offered with three or five pours, explore the catalog of fruit-forward reds, crisp whites, bold blends as well as both sparkling and rose wines.



Laguna Sunrise wine from McClain Cellars

At Bianchi, one of their goals is taking the stuffiness out of winemaking. Because the town deals in more casual luxury, the tasting room was created to match, designed to feel like you're at home with friends or family.

#### CRAFT & CELLAR

The most recent space to join Laguna's lineup is Wine Craft, a unique venture that marries—you guessed it—wine tasting and crafting. "It really fits Laguna," says Doug Vogel, who founded the business with his wife, Angelica. "... Something that tourists can do, something that's artistic and also kind of mixing with the great culinary presence that we have in town."

As the only wine tasting room in town not associated with a winery, they are free to change up their offerings. Vogel says they carry around 30 wines at once—very low production wines and types people may not have heard of before from places like Mexico, Napa Valley, South America and Europe.

As far as crafting goes, there are a few dozen projects to choose from—just step up to the shelves and find one that's perfect for you. Supplies and any necessary assistance are included. Pair your craft with tastings, wine by the glass or bottle, or a cheese plate.

In addition, Wine Craft hosts interactive



Vito Pasquale, wine director and sommelier at Selanne Steak Tavern

workshops, wine pairing dinners, winemaker events and more. The business is philanthropically minded, too, with proceeds from some of the crafts benefiting various charities and large-scale donations ensuring that children, like those at the Boys & Girls Club of Laguna Beach, have access to artful crafts.

#### SIP AND SAVOR

A number of local restaurants are big players in the wine game too, especially Selanne Steak Tavern, which has earned a Best of Award of Excellence from Wine Spectator magazine for its vintage curation for six consecutive years.

"We taste and collaborate as a team to find the best quality wines available and the selections that pair best with our hearty cuisine," says Vito Pasquale, Selanne's wine director and sommelier. "Since we are a steakhouse, big bold cabernets usually take center stage."

Pasquale recommends trying the dry-aged, bone-in rib-eye steak with a savory red, like a syrah or a bottle from Rioja, Spain, as well as the Pacific diver scallop appetizer paired with a German riesling.

"When our guests find a wine they love, that absolutely adds another layer of beauty to their experience with us and that's the ultimate goal," Pasquale adds.

Another local spot, Wine Gallery, serves

as a combination wine bar and eatery, with a menu designed around its wood-fired oven. More than half of the wines sold come from California while the rest are from popular European regions like Italy, Spain and France.

"I do bimonthly wine tastings, and I pour five wines from a specific supplier or importer or winery, and then I pick one or two and put them on the list," says owner Chris Olsen. "I taste probably 50 to 60 wines a week."

With about 25 by-the-glass options and an additional secret, off-the-menu list, Wine Gallery is a great place to try a sampling of varietals while enjoying tasty snacks. For wine tasting, Olsen recommends the charcuterie and cheese board, which come with three meats, three cheeses and other goodies, or the sweet-and-savory fig and date bruschetta, topped with whipped goat cheese, fig jam, dates and a balsamic reduction. But he says you can't go wrong with any of the menu items, noting, "There's a wine for every dish we have on our menu."

In addition to the wine tastings, stop by for wine dinners, sommelier events and more. "We try to be a little different. We have some of the mainstream stuff and then some unique, eclectic varietals that no one else is pouring," Olsen says.

You'll also find specialized vino offerings

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF MONTAGE LAGUNA BEACH; COURTESY OF WINE CRAFT  
FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF MCCLAIN CELLARS; COURTESY OF SELANNE STEAK TAVERN





Mile 216, a vino created by the Wine Gallery

at resorts like Montage Laguna Beach, where sommeliers Joshua Dryer and Gary Sullivan select classic wines from classic regions as well as more adventurous options.

“Our goal is to offer something for everyone, from the guest who collects rare bottles while visiting far away regions to the diner who wants to quench their thirst with a wine from somewhere closer to home, like Santa Barbara,” Sullivan explains.

Some of Montage’s most popular varietals include French wines like sauvignon blanc from Sancerre, pinot noir from Burgundy and cabernet sauvignon from Bordeaux in addition to California pinots and cabernets.

Wines at the resort are available by the glass or the bottle at The Loft, the poolside Mosaic Bar & Grille, The Lobby Lounge and through in-room dining. Some of Sullivan’s favorite pairings include the Japanese kampachi with the 2013 Austrian Alzinger riesling and the Baja fish tacos, paired with the 2021 Finca Jakue txakolin rose from Spain. Or, for something heartier, try a California zinfandel from Williams Selyem with the coffee-crusted prime New York steak.

However, he adds, “Some would argue that the best pairing to wine isn’t food, but the scenery.” And that’s one thing Montage definitely has covered.

No matter where you choose to sip, Laguna Beach has become a playground for wine lovers looking to experiment with new flavors. ■

## LOCAL PICKS



**BART ZANDBERGEN**, founder of The Zandbergen Group and longtime Lagunan, spent many moments at local venues while studying to become a sommelier and now enjoys supporting a variety of businesses in town, including these eateries with stellar wine lists.

**THE DRAKE:** “With live entertainment and a speak-easy vibe, this is an iconic spot to enjoy a casual meal or celebrate a special milestone. ... [Try the] tuna tartare starter with gruner veltliner by Weixelbaum [from] Austria, the baby

gem Caesar salad with chablis [from] Domaine de la Meuliere [in] Burgundy, and the chile-lime-crusted steelhead salmon with Belle Glos’ Clark & Telephone [pinot noir from] Santa Barbara County—not many restaurants offer Belle Glos by the glass.”

**NIRVANA GRILLE:** “This wine country-inspired menu features many fresh, sustainable, local and free range items. ... It is my casual go-to for healthy dining. ... [I recommend the] Herbs de Provence organic chicken ... with Honoro Vera merlot [from] Spain.”



Laguna resident **TROY SMITH**, an advanced sommelier, has more than 25 years of experience managing award-winning wine lists, having previously worked at a number of five-star resorts and restaurants. Here are some of his favorite local wines.

**ALESSA BY CHEF PIROZZI AND SALERNO BY CHEF PIROZZI:** “What sets these apart from the pack is the sheer volume of by-the-glass selections. [There are] tons to choose from here—everything from Paso Robles cabernet to obscure Italian whites. It’s not often you see Greco di Tufo on a list at all, let alone offered by the glass.”

**BROADWAY BY AMAR SANTANA:** “Domestic, imported, familiar, daring, affordable and trophy-worthy—this list has something for every taste and is a great reflection of the style of the food menu. Bonus points for being presented on an interactive tablet.”

**OLIVER’S OSTERIA:** “As you’d expect, there’s a nice selection of Italian whites and reds here, but there’s also a bit of California wines, even featuring some by the glass. There’s a nice mix of price points and styles, and some decidedly fun things to try from lesser-known appellations for those willing to venture out a bit.”