

RANCH & COAST

SAN DIEGO'S ULTIMATE LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

RANCHANDCOAST.COM

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La Jolla*

\$3.95
May 2017



Craftwork

Urban winery in La Jolla tastefully delivers BY JACKIE BRYANT



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URBAN WINERIES ARE A BIT of a gamble. Sometimes, there's scant information about where the grapes are sourced, or it's unclear how much the owner really knows about winemaking. Many times it just seems like a pet project. Thankfully, none of that is true when it comes to LJ Crafted Wines in Bird Rock.

Owners Lowell and Anne Jooste both come from South Africa, where Lowell was a fourth-generation winemaker. Together, they once owned Cape Town's Klein Constantia and Stellenbosch's Anwilka vineyards, partnering with two French winemakers. After moving with their four children to La Jolla in 2012, they decided to get back into winemaking. That put them in search of the highest quality grapes from the Napa Valley and Russian River regions. Those grapes and others result in a series of wines sold exclusively from their tasting room on La Jolla Boulevard, albeit with a special twist.

Unsatisfied with current bottling and corking standards that expose wine to oxygen multiple times in the process of transferring the wine from barrel to bottle, Lowell developed a proprietary tap apparatus. This patent-pending pump system, named the "Wine Steward," allows bottling directly from the barrel — no additional oxygen involved. The wines require minimal sulfites and are intended to be drunk within a week of opening their special container. For the

Joosteses, the preferred vessel is something known well by San Diego's craft beer enthusiasts: the glass growler. LJ's branded, reusable one-liter growlers are also environmentally friendly, eliminating the need for individual bottles and corks.

LJ wines are high quality and made in concert with winemaker Alison Greene-Doran. Lowell calls her "an intuitive guide" in both the winemaking and grape selection process. They produce fine examples of Napa Valley Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. The 2015 Russian River Valley Pinot Noir also stands out. Made from grapes from the Patient Terrier Vineyard, the pinot is light-yet-earthly, with spice, cherries, and balanced acidity. The 2016 Albariño is a more tropical example of the classic Galician staple white wine; peach and lime tastes complement a bright, floral nose. Partial to wines with high minerality and varietals favored in Spanish winemaking, I was drawn to the 2013 Grenache from Lake County's Fore Family Vineyard — a full-bodied, tannic wine with cranberry, white pepper, and cinnamon notes.

Visiting the tasting room, which opened in 2016, is a warm and friendly experience. Guests have the freedom to choose to just hang out or dive into wine education. The former is possible, especially with a charcuterie and cheese plate, but you may be missing out. My recommendation is to sip and learn, letting LJ's knowledgeable staff take you through one of their well-crafted tastings. ljcraftedwines.com 