

By Ivor Davis

Photos by Brent Winebrenner

When I was growing up in London my parents insisted on kosher wine for holiday celebrations like Passover. The wines we consumed bore about as much relationship to anything Californians would recognize as the fruit of the grape as I do to Arnold Schwarzenegger. They were sickly sweet, heavy, pruny—for a youngster the only good thing was that a thimbleful could give you a buzz to last all evening. The downside—a mighty hangover the next day. Believe me, it was not much fun.

Now, wonder of wonders, kosher wines have come into their own. Napa and Sonoma (and Israel, of course) have their own niche in the kosher wine marketplace, producing top quality wines bearing the kosher stamp, yet are titillating oenophile tastebuds. Today, you don't have to be Jewish to enjoy kosher wines.

Nowhere can this wine revolution be experienced more obviously than in the unlikeliest locale possible: Oxnard, California.

Deep in the heart of an industrial section of the town (not far from the strawberry and vegetable fields) they're making some of the best wine in the world—kosher or not.

Herzog Wine Cellars is nestled not in a bucolic valley of California grape vines, but just down the road from the busy Rice Road/101 Freeway intersection.

Here in a 77,000 square foot, high-tech warehouse sits a state of the art winery, an elegant tasting and gift room and the top of the line Tierra Sur restaurant.

In the gleaming new headquarters Peter Stern and Joe Hurliman are making wines that consistently collect top prizes at major wine tastings against the best in the world. And critics are lining up to praise them. The Wine Enthusiast gave the 2000 Herzog Special Edition Cabernet Sauvignon from the Warnecke Vineyard, Chalkhill 93 points, noting: "As good as Herzog's Special Reserve Cab is, this one is better. It has the same ripely fruity currant and cassis flavors, with the fine tannins and a luxurious coating of oak

that has been judiciously applied. But it goes the extra mile in finesse and balance, and is simply superb. Right up there with the best..."

Herzog has won gold medals at County Fairs from Los Angeles to San Francisco for their Syrahs, their 2002 Late Harvest Riesling and Chenin Blanc.

The front of the winery houses the spacious, elegant tasting room and gift shop featuring high end table wear, glass and food and wine related gifts appropriate to the sophistication of the entire operation.

The Tierra Sur restaurant is a high ceilinged dining room flanked by tall windows draped in heavy silks. Soft leather chairs are pulled up to intimate sized tables, with white linens and Reidel crystal stemware. The lighting is subdued and the color scheme a restful blend of soft earth tones of olive, gold and brown befitting the restaurant's name.

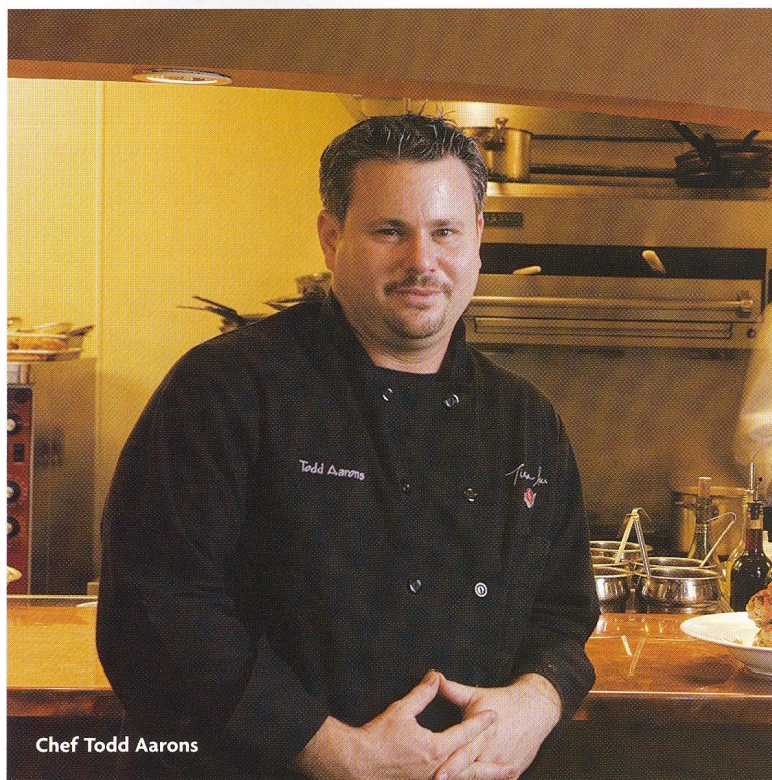
The menu concentrates on the flavors of the Southern Mediterranean under the careful eye of New Jersey-born/California-raised Chef Todd Aarons, who trained at the California Culinary Academy and cut his chef's teeth at San Francisco's Zuni Café and then at Savoy in New York. However, his taste for the cooking of the sun was formed during a sabbatical in Tuscany, working at four different restaurants and imbibing through his pores the culture of the Mediterranean table.

Before coming to Oxnard, he ran his own upscale Kosher French-Mediterranean restaurant Mosaica in New Jersey, but the opportunity to create a restaurant from scratch with the kind of financial support Herzog gives him was impossible to resist.

The menu is strictly kosher—but if your vision of kosher food runs to matzoh ball soup and corned beef on rye, forget-about-it. At Tierra Sur expect to find changes not just with the seasons but every evening according to the chef's wishes and the availability of the finest and freshest ingredients.

The Mediterranean influence is most visible in the appetizers, many of which could have come directly from the Spanish tapas or Greek mezes so beloved of the countries bordering that sea: *Platillos*, small plates of delicate salt

cod beignets; mushrooms a la Grecque cooked in truffle oil (one of the many instances where the absence of butter in the kitchen as decreed by the Kosher law does nothing but improve the flavors); a baba ghanoush, fire-roasted in the mesquite oven outside on the patio; a boudin blanc (a house made veal and



Chef Todd Aarons



chicken sausage with roasted pink lady apples and turnips). The salt cod chowder was a welcoming warm starter on a recent foggy Oxnard evening which began our dinner in fine style.

Dinner entrees range from a farm-raised venison imported from Musicon Farms in Goshen, New York, to a delicate, pan-seared wild Pacific King salmon with braised leeks, root vegetable Spanish tortillas and tarragon

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