

A WINE COUNTRY EXPERIENCE

In LA's backyard

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Tucked in the Santa Monica Mountains...

CORNELL SECRETS

BY LILIAN LEE

"You'll see when you get here – it's a pretty unique place," Tim Skogstrom said about his winery on the phone. Yet despite Skogstrom's declaration, what I had imagined wasn't as much as what I saw. After visiting the new Cornell Winery, I could tell this was the real deal.

Located on Mulholland Highway, in the heart of the Three Magical Miles district in Agoura Hills, **Cornell Winery** is clearly a place that wants to give Valley residents a wine country destination at their back door. What visitors will get is an experience steeped in history, and not necessarily that of wine. That is because as savvy as Skogstrom is about wine, it's clear that he has fallen in love with old Cornell, the tiny town that has opened its doors to him in a way that small towns don't often do with newcomers.

Skogstrom came to Cornell with no plans to open a business and no plans to quit his job in the corporate wine world. Because his friend's father owned the land that's now Cornell Winery, Skogstrom and his friend went there simply for a place where they could make wine together without paying rent. "But immediately when I saw this building my mind started working, and I said, you know what, something more can happen here."

Then he read Brian Rooney's self-published book, *Three Magical Miles: An Appreciation of the Past and Present of Malibu Lake and Vicinity*, cover to cover. From it, he learned that Paramount and 20th Century Fox built ranches here, so that blockbusters such as *Planet of the Apes* and *Frankenstein* were filmed just around the corner from the winery, and that the neighborhood dates back to the mid-1800s.

In Skogstrom's touching, eye-

opening experiences with the locals this past year, he found that though Cornell does not have its own municipal government or its own zip code, and is, in the general scheme of things, an unincorporated pocket neighborhood, Cornell still exists: "It exists in a sense that it's historical. It's recognized by all the locals. Cornell doesn't have its own governing board, but a majority of the people in this area use Cornell in their addresses."

Skogstrom's enchantment with his adopted town is understandable once you hear stories of the area's past and get to know the winery's neighbors. On one side is the **Old Place** restaurant, run by local legends Tom and Barbara Runyon and serving only steak and clams. 89-year-old Tom and his wife don't care too much for publicity. But they do maintain a stream of regulars, and according to Skogstrom, the Old Place has become more a club for regulars than a business looking to make money. It's a small ramshackle outpost that was, 55 years ago, Cornell's general store and post office.

Just two doors down, on Cornell Winery's other side, is a place that holds a different kind of charm, with an owner who is as gregarious as the Runyons are brusque. Frenchman Jacques Marque operates **Charme D'Antan** (which means "charm from the past") on an inviting one-acre lot, with French antiques for sale inside and architectural decor pieces on display outside.

Marque is another spirit who loves this old Cornell, this historical

neighborhood of old movie lots and famous motorcyclist haunts. He discovered the property while riding his motorcycle down Mulholland Highway and found a *charme incroyable* here: "It had ambience, atmosphere and character," Marque remembers. "I was looking more than five years to find a place like this."

His beautiful architectural wares, which he imports from Provence on a monthly basis, range from limestone fountains to wrought-iron gates and railings to wishing wells and statues. There are also historical items (spanning the 18th century to the Art Deco era), such as hand-carved fireplaces sourced from centuries-old European estates and chandeliers, lanterns and sconces suitable for a

time talking about the history of this place before I even talk about what I'm doing here."

But what he hopes, and what might very well happen, is that Cornell Winery will become another legendary destination and part of that rich history. Everyone from novices to connoisseurs who want to discover small, artisan wine producers is welcome here. When you do come, however, be prepared for one-on-one interaction with Skogstrom and his staff. He makes sure to clarify that his new place will not be "a wine bar in the sense that you're just going to buy a glass of wine and sit down and drink." In the tradition of small-town businesses, Cornell Winery aims to become a place where

“The opening of Cornell Winery represents the rebirth of Cornell, which was established 100 years ago with the opening of the one-room Cornell Schoolhouse.**”**

Douglas E. Tharalson,
Artist, Cornell

home's interior or exterior.

Truly a unique retail space, particularly for the highly urbanized L.A. region, **Charme D'Antan** evokes the casual, rustic luxury that's so identified with southern France's countryside. It's a place you can go to find items in materials that will infuse character and uniqueness to your home.

Marque, Tom Runyon, and Skogstrom are good friends and good neighbors. Though their vocations differ, their common denominator is the connection they share with the land and this community. But as the newest of the three to find his place in old Cornell, Skogstrom's relatively newfound excitement over the vicinity's history is the most contagious. His first words when I met him were, "I'm going to spend so much more

people gather not only to make purchases but to build relationships.

For a man who only one year ago left a high position in the corporate wine world after 25 years, Skogstrom seems at ease in his life. "If anything, I've become more calm because of my setting. The natural setting around here has done wonders to my own stress levels. I even came to a point during this process where I was like, 'I don't care if I don't even open.' I'm fulfilled just with the friendships and experiences. The overall fear and anxiety has dissipated, and it's mainly because I have this guttural instinct that this place is gonna happen. It needs to be here." ♦

Lilian Lee is a Los Angeles-based writer. She has written for WNWV magazine, Vogue Taiwan and Pocketchangeglobal.com.

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