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## VITICULTURE VANGUARD

At Bird Rock's LJ Crafted, the bottom of the barrel is as good as the top



Anne Jooste smiles as her husband, Lowell, assesses the bouquet of wine from a barrel at LJ Crafted in La Jolla. Paintings on the wallcovering made from staves of their barrels damaged in 2014's South Napa earthquake are by Jurij Pitrenkow and on loan from Monarch|Arredon Contemporary.

**W**ith roots in a South African winery dating back to the 17th century, Lowell Jooste leaps over prevailing 21st century viticulture — even by Napa Valley standards.

The co-owner of LJ Crafted Wines in La Jolla has eliminated one of the basic elements in wine sales today: the bottle.

We're not talking about box wines; they've been around for a half-century. We're talking about barrel wines — that is, wines poured into glasses straight from the barrels in which they are fermented and aged.

Granted, it's possible to taste wines before bottling if you take a special winery tour or know someone there who can siphon wine from a barrel. But consider

the suggested impropriety by the name given the tube used to extract the liquid: "wine thief." Lowell "legitimizes" the practice with the more welcoming "wine steward," for which he has pending U.S. and European patents.

So the bar at LJ (fortuitously Lowell's and his adopted town's initials) consists of glass over a row of wooden and stainless steel barrels tied into a system he invented to inject a mix of nitrogen and carbon dioxide that, as the wine level declines, displaces what would otherwise be wine-deteriorating air.

"We've been through more than 35 barrels, and the wine at the bottom has been as fresh as at the top," Lowell declares.

He learned about wine after his father bought the historical Klein Constantia in

Cape Town in 1979 and from his viticulture education at the University of California, Davis. From 1989 until the Jooste family sold Klein Constantia in 2011, he oversaw the South African winery.

Lowell's wife and co-owner of LJ Crafted, Anne Jooste, attended Cape Wine Academy to learn about the industry in which her husband worked. Her own background is as a pharmacist; so, she says, "the scientific understanding is natural for me."

While at UC Davis, Lowell traveled south to visit family friends living at La Jolla Shores. After his reign at Klein Constantia, he says, "I decided it was time for another adventure." He and Anne moved to La Jolla with their children.

"La Jolla has similarities to Cape Town in climate and lifestyle. My image of California



was that it's an exciting place where people have a 'go-for-it' attitude when it comes to trying to do something in a new way," Lowell says.

"I knew there was a lot of competition and wanted to do something to set us apart. I thought of the refillable growlers that are a growing trend in craft breweries."

Through a mutual contact in Napa (winemaking pioneer Zelma Long), Lowell and Anne hired Alison Green Doran to serve as LJ Crafted's winemaker. Alison's induction into the industry began with



harvesting grapes at Simi Winery, the Sonoma County institution then owned by her father. After her father brought in André Tchelistcheff to consult, she spent five months as a "cellar rat" for the icon in Alsace, France.

When Lowell told Alison he wanted to sell wine directly from barrels, she was skeptical.

"I didn't know how I was going to do it myself," he admits. "It worked in theory, but I had no proof it would work in practice."

So practice he did — with barrels of water. But conquering the engineering was just part of the equation.

"We had no idea how big the demand would be," Lowell says, adding that LJ Crafted bottled one-third to one-half of its wine production for standard sales. "What happened is that more than 80 percent of what we sell is in growlers."

A similar statistic says even more about the refillable bottle concept: Eighty percent of LJ Crafted's 450 wine club members live within a mile radius of the Bird Rock venue.

The growlers owe some of their popularity to the fact that they hold 1 liter (versus 750 milliliter bottles) and cost 20 percent less than the same wine in a

## Drinking In the Scene

Lowell and Anne Jooste lost more than half of their first vintage in the 6.0-magnitude South Napa earthquake in August 2014. Following the "when life gives you lemons" philosophy, they used the ends and staves from damaged barrels for wall treatments at their LJ Crafted wine bar and the hoops for custom light pendants.

Anne designed the space to fit their unique business model, beginning with a stainless steel-framed bar topped by glass to showcase the barrels and give customers a view of the gas-injection apparatus that protects the wine from air.

"The idea was to make customers feel they are in a winery rather than a wine bar," Anne says. That's also why she chose glass-topped barrels for tables along the wall opposite the bar.

Under one glass top, Anne created a beach vignette with sand, shells, colored glass and pewter flip-flops (repurposed serving dishes). She also referenced the nearby ocean with a surfboard "counter" under the roll-up window that provides an open view of Bird Rock's main street. ("Lowell used to surf a lot in his youth," Anne notes.)

Hanging on the wine-staves wall are paintings on loan from La Jolla's Monarch/Arredon Contemporary gallery. The artwork not only brings color into the space, but also engages people during scheduled "art chats" with the gallery curator.

**Above: The glass-topped bar was designed to give customers a clear view of the barrels below with the "wine steward" apparatus (shown above left) that Lowell invented to inject a mixture of nitrogen and carbon dioxide to keep the wine fresh. Anne designed the La Jolla Boulevard space.**

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CHEERS



bottle “because we don’t have to pay for bottling services or packaging,” Lowell explains.

LJ Crafted purchases grapes from a half-dozen vineyards in Napa and Sonoma counties, literally covering a range of varieties from A to Z: Albariño to Zinfandel. Ten varietals are available at the wine bar.

Now on its third vintage, LJ Crafted is producing 40 to 50 barrels of wine a year. Unless it’s the wine club selection of the month, a barrel typically will last six weeks. Replacements are shipped overnight from Napa on a refrigerated truck.

Although LJ Crafted concentrates its winemaking, aging and bottling in Napa Valley, it needs a winemaking license to fill bottles on-site. And its urban winery license requires the production of some wine in La Jolla.

“We made one barrel here with Petite Sirah grapes from the Dry Creek Valley AVA in Sonoma County,” Lowell says.

He and Alison believe the barrel-to-glass experience is less intimidating than the bottle-to-glass method and, simultaneously, more interactive and educational.

“People talk about doing this,” Alison says. “But not everyone can do it. It takes a combination of perseverance, engineering and chemistry.” ❖