

GRAPES & BERRIES

BY EVA VAN PROOYEN

Forbidden Fruit and Cebada Wine

Perched upon a hill 55 miles north of Montecito, three miles off Highway 246 up Cebada Canyon Road, past vast swaths of agriculture land, rolling hills, vineyards, horse ranches, and behind two gates, lies Forbidden Fruit Orchards – a 100-acre farm planted with a surprising trove of harvestable treasures including a six-acre field of certified organic blueberries, seven and a half acres of grapes, an acre of kiwis, half an acre of avocados, an acre of Pakistani mulberry trees, and an eye-widening assortment of fruits and vegetables.

On a warm and sunny late afternoon tour of the farm, owner, ornamental horticulturist, businesswoman, and winemaker Sandy Newman, climbs into a four-wheel utility farm vehicle to make the

orchard rounds with her two friendly dogs – Flora, a foraging, fruit-eating sweet Collie sitting shotgun and Katrina, a small Terrier/Chihuahua rescue mix, mouser, and “meat eater of the family.”

Sandy explains, “I was born on my grandparents’ little chicken farm of about 14 acres in Shrewsbury, New Jersey. It had a little lake on it, and my grandmother just loved to grow things. My mother said at two years old, I was out there with the shovel digging holes, sticking plants in the ground, and watering them. My parents stood there and said, “I think we’ve got a farmer.” They were right: I went to Ag School, and I have a BS and MS in plant



science from the University of Delaware.”

Sandy says she wanted to work in her field, but it just didn't pay. “I was offered a PhD program by Ohio State and the University of Delaware, but I didn't want to teach, and I didn't want to do research. I wanted to grow things,” she says, explaining that she also received multiple job offers from numerous agriculture-chemical companies at a time when they were under pressure to balance the workforce with women, “but I also didn't want to sell Ag chemicals in Indiana, so it was at about that time my whole family moved to California,” says Sandy. They started a flower shop in San Clemente, eventually sold it, “and then I started a business that has nothing to do with any of this,” she says, gesturing to her farm and explaining she started an SEC Edgar Filing Agent service, and that allowed her the flexibility to purchase the land in 2002.

“When I bought the property, it was full of dying apple trees, no road, no working wells, no buildings, no plants. I kept the nicest little section of apple trees, revived them, and we just grow that for us in small amounts to sell in the farmers market and to make applesauce,” she says, recalling the first things she planted were “a couple of fruit trees – one cherry tree, a pecan tree that died, and an almond that died. I still have that one cherry tree.”

Sandy explains the University of California has a farm agent in every county to help farmers choose crops, “When I first got my property, I knew to go the farm agent. I walked into his office and said, ‘I want to grow grapes and make wine,’ and he said, ‘How much money do you have?’ and I said, ‘Well not a lot,’ and he said, ‘Well, can you go in the red for eight to ten years?’ and I said, ‘No.’ ‘Well, then,’ he said, ‘I've got the crop for you!’ and handed me a stack of papers on growing off-season blueberries. I went home and read them, and came back and said, ‘If you're correct, you're actually telling me I could make money in the next two years?’ and he said, ‘Yes.’” When Sandy asked how sure he was that her property was truly situated for an off-season crop, she reports his guess was “fifty-fifty, so in 2003, I planted two acres. We went through the winter without any problems, the plants didn't go dormant, the leaves stayed evergreen and they were flowering and fruiting all winter long. I said, ‘Well, I'm off-season!’ and in 2007, I was able to leverage some of the income to plant the vineyards.”



Admitting her blueberries tend to be the main attraction, Sandy says, "it's what people are so taken by. Everything is hand-picked and hand-packed." Entering into a the six-acre net-covered blueberry field, to pick, taste, and learn, Sandy points out that they have three main varieties planted, named Jewel, Sapphire, and Emerald; introducing each, she says, "Jewels are the largest of all the plants and the juiciest. When I make my blueberry dessert wine, it is made from these. They love to grow. Sapphires we grow because it keeps flowering and because it produces so heavily all year. They are a smaller fruit with all kinds of different flavors from sweet to sour. The third main one for production is the Emerald. It produces jumbo fruit. They are huge, meaty blueberries with texture. The University of Florida is the one [which] bred and named all of these. They really do look like gems. Emeralds are our most popular one because people just go crazy about the size. They'll ask, 'Do you have Emeralds?' I feel like I'm dealing in something underground."

Sandy says people think blueberries are simply blueberries, but that is not the case as she points to a special picture-perfect row that comes in once a season: "We don't process these commercially. This is called South Moon, and this is my personal row of blueberries. I always get first dibs. These are to die for. I can't tell you how many I eat."

In praise of her workers, Sandy says, "It's a hard job I'm so grateful for them. I don't want them to be taken for granted. I'm really an advocate for the people – they make a living wage here." Sandy reports they harvest every day, six days a week. "At some point in July or August we will have no fruit and will be pruning, then it will flower and come back in October and November, and then because it's cold, we don't get a big harvest and the fruit doesn't ripen as fast, so we pick for the farmers markets."

Forbidden Fruit organic blueberries can be found up and down the West Coast. "A good third of my fruit goes up to San Francisco and is distributed as far up as Oregon and on occasion down to Hawaii," says Sandy, explaining her blueberries usually show up at Whole Foods and Gelson's; she

is in the farmers markets down south in Santa Monica and Hollywood, and locally at Montecito Village Grocery.

Encouraging the tour along, Sandy notes, "It's always hard to get people to the vineyard after playing with the blueberries." Rows, clusters, pockets, and bundles of orchards, flowers, and projects dot the dirt road up to the vineyards. Sandy smiles and says, "I have a couple fun things on the property," pointing out an area of approximately 200 bushes. She explains, "What you see in front of you is actually tea being grown. The seed came in from Turkey and we're trying to see if it is a viable crop. It's very slow-growing. It's a project I'm working on with UC Davis trials for small farms. I'm hoping at some point when I build the tasting room and the whole wine side of business that I can bring the tea in to sell."

Next along the trip is a stop to taste fruit from Pakistani mulberry trees. They are enormous and heavy with fruit. There are 100 of them. "[Mulberries] is a flavorful nice surprise? I'm selling to a lot of the big restaurant wholesalers in Los Angeles and San Diego. The chefs like them for their sauces because of the tartness," says Sandy.

The variety seems endless as Sandy points to a small portion of hops growing, the "kiwi project," avocados, an owl box, tomato plants, a vegetable garden, and her personal "citrus row" – oranges, tangerines, tangelos, lemons, and limes "for fruit juices and margaritas." Sandy adds, "I grow a little bit of everything. I have nine fig trees, four banana trees, one walnut, and some apricots, pears, nectarines, and peaches."

Then there are the bees. "The bees on the property are for pollination. I have more bees coming in every year. We lose our bees – we feed them, we do everything. It's just been too dry and not enough food. Everything you see, all my rosemary along the road, all the Ceanothus I've planted, my wildflowers, that whole big circle of lavender – that is all for the bees and it's still not enough. We usually have about five hives; we need the pollination," says Sandy.

Finally, reaching the seven and half acres of pinot noir and chardonnay grapes lined with roses, Sandy says, "This is my little vineyard. It is the most manicured spot on the

property. You can see the ocean from up top. We get that cool ocean air that comes through. I truly believe that if you have a good vineyard, the vineyard does all your work, and my job is just to not to screw it up.”

Sandy's wine label is called Cebada, and though that is the Spanish word for barley, “Cebada designates the place and location here on Cebada Canyon Road,” she says, adding that her fence line is right on the western edge of Santa Rita Hills – American Viticultural Area, with recognized neighbors including Hilliard Bruce, Pali, and Brewer-Clifton all growing grapes.

“One thing I do differently is we actually use the county mulch on the rows of the vineyard. It cuts all water needs in half because it doesn't dry out underneath. The water penetrates through and it stays wet a lot longer,” says Sandy. Her guess for harvest is that it will be early again this year: “We will probably be picking at the end of July.”

A tour of Sandy's tiny, boutique winemaking facility reveals a small batch of stacked wine barrels and a baby Scharfenberger

wine press. “I want to make really great wine – one pinot noir, one chardonnay, and one sparkling wine a year,” says Sandy, thinking aloud about the possibility of a mulberry wine and noting, “I only planted for me. I never intended to sell. I'm getting 22 tons per acre and it's delicious. Last year we sold off about five tons of fruit, and then made 800 cases of pinot noir and 230 cases of chardonnay.

“It's a big wide world out there. I don't have the recognition yet,” says Sandy. As her brand grows and people recognize the wine she makes, she hopes for a small cult following.

Cebada has a small tasting loft in La Arcada Plaza in Santa Barbara inside Isabella Gourmet Foods at 5 East Figueroa Street. Montecito Wine Grotto and Montecito Village Grocery carry Cebada wines, and Sandy reports her wine was just approved for sale at Whole Foods Markets. Guests are welcome to visit Forbidden Fruit and Cebada wines. The cost is \$45, and \$35 of that cost can go toward a wine purchase. To plan a tour of the farm, visit ww.forbiddenfruitorchard.com or call (805) 735-4648.

