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THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 2015



John Wright has opened a tasting room for his Standing Sun wines in what was once a wine cellar inside Casa de la Guerra.

History served by the glass

Local winemaker opens tasting room at Casa de la Guerra

By GABE SAGLIE

NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

Santa Barbara's newest wine tasting room is, in fact, a link to its past. "I love this space," winemaker John Wright tells the News-Press in an exclusive interview. "It's original, and it's rustic in an organic and natural way."

Mr. Wright, 46, has transformed a small room inside Casa de la Guerra into a wine venue. He calls it The Bodega, which is Spanish for "winery." For years, this quaint, 400-square-foot space, with undulating adobe walls and waning patches of paint, was used as a storage room. But Mr. Wright's goal is to return it to its 19th century roots, when Jose de la Guerra, the fifth comandante of the Presidio, used it as a wine cellar.

Casa de la Guerra was built between 1818 and 1828. It became the social epicenter

of Santa Barbara at the time, and Mr. de la Guerra's descendants actually used it as a residence all the way into the 1940s. Today, it's part of the picturesque El Paseo complex, just off State Street, and is under the auspices of the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation, which runs it as a museum.

The trust tasked Mr. Wright with the modern-day use of the former wine cellar as much for his knack as a winemaker as for his expertise as a preservation architect. The group's goal was to find a creative and deferential way to increase visitor foot traffic to the historic Casa.

"I spent many years restoring farmhouses and barns on the East Coast, throughout New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania," says Mr. Wright, who earned myriad degrees in historic preservation from the University of Maryland and now lives in Santa Ynez. "I



CARMEN SMYTH / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

The 2013 Syrah Rosé

have an understanding of a structure like this, and (a respect) and excitement about how to use this space."

Mr. Wright's approach is hands-off.

"This is not a renovation," he insists. "I'm working with what's already here and just adding pieces that are freestanding."

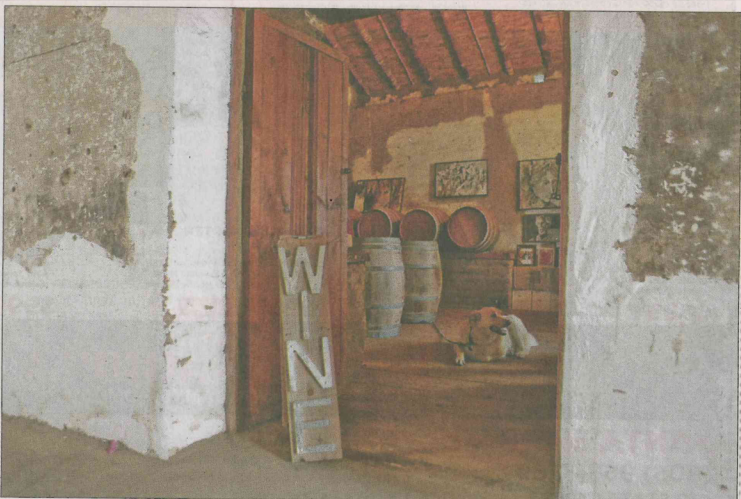
A couple of bar stools, a few barrels-turned-tables and a leather couch adorn the room. Comfy white cushions line bench-like seating built into the walls. And the paintings throughout the room hang from holes that

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IF YOU GO

Standing Sun's The Bodega is located at Casa de la Guerra, 15 E. De la Guerra St. Hours are noon to 5 p.m. Thursday through Sunday.

For more information, call 904-8072 or go to www.standingsunwines.com.



The Bodega tasting room was added as a creative way to increase visitor foot traffic to historic Casa de la Guerra.

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Mr. Wright's hands-off approach to the use of this former wine cellar means adding freestanding elements, like a leather couch and half-barrel tables, and hanging original paintings using already-existing holes in the walls.



CARMEN SMYTH / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

The Standing Sun label, with a focus on Rhone wines, is offered via a tasting flight or by the glass.

From architecture to winemaking

■ CASA

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already exist. They are original works by Ojai artist Gino Hollander — pop art-inspired pieces whose brown, gray and white tones, curiously, match perfectly the muted, fractured hues that have been gracing these walls for decades. Mr. Hollander passed away at the age of 92 last week.

Mr. Wright is pouring his Standing Sun wines here. He founded the label in 2007 with his wife, Emmy-winning soap opera actress Laura Wright, after the couple's move to California. Mr. Wright shifted careers from architect to winemaker under the tutelage of well-known local vintner Joey Tensley and, with a focus on Rhone wines like syrah, grenache and viognier, has grown the brand to more than 2,000 cases a year.

For his Casa de la Guerra location specifically, John Wright plans to introduce a second label sometime in 2016. He's also working on intimate seating in the open-air courtyard that overlooks both The Bodega and De la Guerra Plaza across the street.

Standing Sun operates a tasting room in Buellton that doubles as both a concert venue for various high-profile groups and an art gallery.

For his Casa de la Guerra location specifically, Mr. Wright plans to introduce a second label sometime in 2016. He's also working on intimate seating in the open-air courtyard that overlooks both The Bodega and De la Guerra Plaza across the street. For now, Mr. Wright is offering a tasting of six

wines for \$15, and he's selling wines by the glass.

"We'll have wines by the carafe soon, as well as food components, like cheese and charcuterie plates," he says. "I'm trying to create a cool, laid-back place for locals to walk in, kick back and just enjoy some wine."

And get a little taste of Santa Barbara history, too.

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RAFAEL MALDONADO / NEWS-PRESS

John Wright was an ideal fit for opening the new wine tasting room at Casa de la Guerra because of his experience as a preservation architect.