

The Ojai Wine Festival and its Humble Beginnings

When the Rotary Club of Ojai-West was formed in 1985 it got straight to work raising money to support its many community and international projects. They started with a golf tournament and community BBQs but soon their desire to do greater, more impactful community service required the club to create a bigger, better fundraiser. Several members attended the very first Paso Robles Wine Festival the year before and thought a similar event would be a great fit in our area. With some advice from Paso Robles, a lot of hard work and enormous enthusiasm, the first annual Ojai Wine Festival was born. The event was held on June 14, 1987 at the Montessori school of Ojai on Old Baldwin Rd. The following year it was moved to Ojai's Soule Park. By 1990 due to some large publicity in the Ojai Valley News, the Ojai Wine Festival blossomed into a huge event that outgrew Soule Park and every other venue near downtown Ojai.

In a thorough local search for a larger venue the Rotary Club of Ojai-West decided to approach Lake Casitas to use their 1984 Olympic Rowing Site as an event area. An agreement was reached with the lake and the event was held on a dusty piece of lake shore. Again the event was a great success and between 1991 and 1992 the Rotary Club of Ojai-West realizing the lake's event site potential decided to beautify and improve this perfect location by planting grass and trees, installing a phone line, an electrical system and watering system. Because of these improvements, many groups have used the lake's event site for everything from camp outs to concerts to wonderful cultural events and remains today, our area's best large event venue.

From its humble beginnings, the Annual Ojai Wine Festival has grown into a leading regional event attracting nearly 5,000 people from throughout the Central Coast and Southern California. In the last few years the number of attending wineries has doubled to over sixty. We have a fantastic variety of breweries as well. Each year we have a wonderful selection of local restaurants selling delicious culinary delights. Arts and crafts vendors, a steady stream of musical entertainment, a dance floor, and free boat rides on the Rotary Floating Classroom add fun and excitement to the event. Two years ago, we added a silent wine auction which has become a popular attraction featuring fine wines, private tasting parties, VIP winery tours and other wine related items. This year we are adding a VIP area where VIP ticket holders can enjoy early entry and access to our VIP Lounge with wines and beers by the glass, hors d'oeuvres and premium shaded seating along the beautiful lakefront. General admission includes unlimited tastes of wine and beer and an elegant crystal souvenir wine glass.

Now in its twenty-fifth year, the Ojai Wine Festival has become the area's premier culinary event where thousands flock to Lake Casitas to enjoy its natural beauty. Always falling on the second Sunday in June, the Ojai Wine Festival gives attendees a great combination of all things Ojai. Spread along the lakeshore, the event is an opportunity for people to relax out of doors in a peaceful, natural setting, while enjoying excellent wine, food, beer, music, arts and crafts and perfect weather. *Sunset Magazine* named Ojai one of the top five food and wine havens in the west for 2009 and many believe the festival has played a role by introducing people from throughout Southern California and the Central Coast to the bounty of Ojai.

In the past twenty-five years the Ojai Wine Festival has raised over \$615,000.00. All the funds raised from the Ojai Wine Festival go to aid many important causes, in particular our hard hit public schools, international clean drinking water projects as well as eradicating polio worldwide. For a complete list of the Rotary Club of Ojai-West's projects please see <http://www.rotaryojaiwest.org>.

This article is a collaboration written by Les Gardner, David May and Angela May