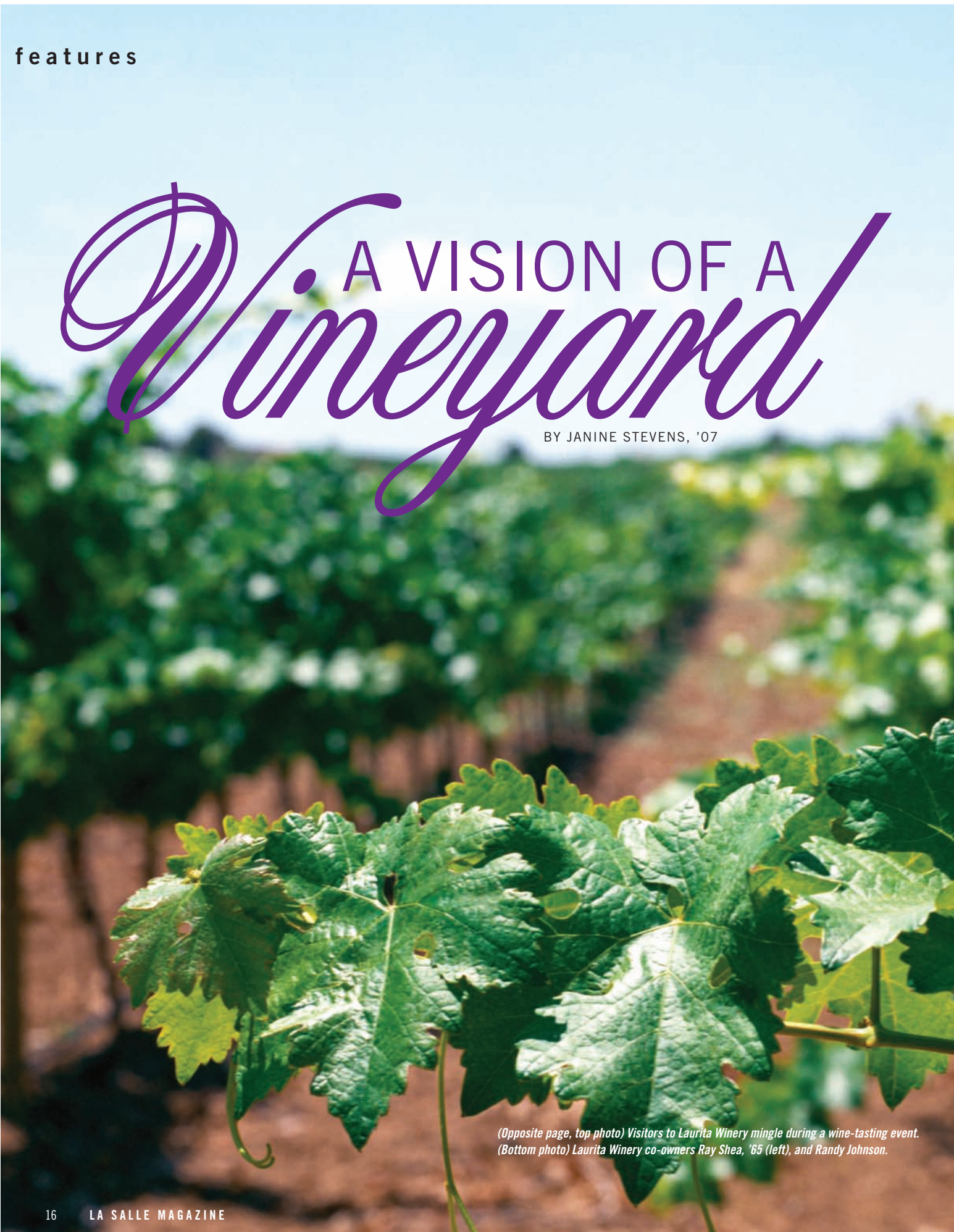


A VISION OF A Vineyard

BY JANINE STEVENS, '07



(Opposite page, top photo) Visitors to Laurita Winery mingle during a wine-tasting event. (Bottom photo) Laurita Winery co-owners Ray Shea, '65 (left), and Randy Johnson.



CALL IT A HUNCH—A HUNCH THAT LED TO AN EDUCATED guess, which then led to research and planning. After a housing development plan fell through, Ray Shea, '65, began to ponder the potential uses for his 400 acres of land in Ocean County, N.J. “Between the contour of the land, its exposure to the sun, plus the circulation of the wind,” Shea thought, “the land just might be appropriate for a vineyard.” In May of 1998, Laurita Winery began to take shape.

Wanting to learn more about his hunch, Shea attended seminar after seminar at Rutgers University, read 50 books on the subject, and hired a geologist. “I convinced myself that everything that was necessary to bring about a successful vineyard was right in front of me,” Shea said. “This was the first piece of land I never wanted to sell.”

“We spent 10 years developing the vineyard in such a way that it would support our vision of the destination winery, wanting visitors to come just to enjoy the view,” Shea said. “Even if you don’t drink wine, you’ll love the vision of the linear rows.” Ninety vines per acre were stretched vertically by laser to ensure straight precision. “We are very proud and pleased with the end result,” he said.

Shea visited vineyards in Italy, California, New York, and Virginia and incorporated what he felt were the best features of each. He and his partner, Randy Johnson, succeeded at transforming the landscape by respecting its natural contours. “I don’t want people to marvel at the landscape in terms of what we’ve planted,” Shea said. “Instead, I want to emphasize the natural features of the land as it stands.”

Over several weeks, a crew of eight men hand-pruned and retied the 360,000 vines. Grapes start out as pin dots emerging from the flowers, and, from late

spring to early summer, they grow. Sugars reach their peak in early September, and, in early October, harvest begins. “Mother Nature dictates when we start to take down the grapes, as the birds are our first customers,” Shea said.

Since 2008, Laurita Winery has served as a bed and breakfast, boasting 10 rooms and a dining room to encourage visitors to take an extended vacation in order to enjoy all that the winery has to offer. Laurita Winery hosts entertainment events as well, such as country line dancing and jazz entertainment on Sunday afternoons. Guests are also welcome to visit for a traditional Italian candlelit dinner served in the tasting room, accompanied by an Italian accordion player. The winery has also become a popular destination for corporate events for both parties as well as presentations.

The architecture of Laurita Winery makes it unlike any other, as it was constructed using recycled materials. “We want guests to feel that they were visiting a place with ancient tradition,” Shea said. Several walls feature bricks taken from an elementary school in Trenton, N.J. Lumber from two separate barns in two different towns was merged to construct areas such as the winery’s bars. Marble from the Garden State Race Track was used in the construction of the bathrooms at Laurita Winery.

The atmosphere is relaxed, and the environment is low-tech. There are no televisions at Laurita Winery, as the emphasis is placed on enjoying the company of your friends and other guests and relaxing by the serene landscape.

Having studied pre-law at La Salle, Shea became an attorney and spent the last 40 years developing land, both with clients and as an investor. “I’ve had a love affair with land for a long time,” he said.

