



J O R I A N H I L L

DESTINATION WINE COUNTRY

So You Want to Buy a Vineyard

“As more than one observer has wryly noted, ‘to make a small fortune in the wine business, start with a big one,’ and though occasionally true, it isn’t the rule. Besides, successful vineyard owners often discover a bond with the land and congenial winemaking community that easily transcends any bean counter’s quip.

‘For many people a vineyard is a lifestyle purchase,’ said Kerry Mormann, a Santa Barbara County realtor who has specialized in vineyards and ranchland for 31 years. ‘They don’t do it to make money, but for the privacy and peaceful country life.’

‘All kinds of people buy them,’ he continued, ‘from experienced vintners to those who just like to drink wine. They’re usually sophisticated worldly people who are following a dream, and they’re always fun to work with.’

Mormann, evidently a dreamer himself, recently bought his own vineyard in the Santa Rita Hills, a region west of Buellton famed for its deliciously complex Pinot Noir.

‘We’re having a really good time,’ he laughed. ‘The more we go out to our new vineyard, the more we like it. It’s fun, you kind of get hooked!’

Santa Barbara County’s superb fruit, coupled with the success of the 2004 movie ‘Sideways,’ triggered a tidal wave of interest in owning a piece of the local wine country. As hopeful growers continue to explore the limited listings of raw land and productive vineyards, singular properties occasionally pop up on the market.

Near Gaviota, a tiny hilltop vineyard offers the gentleman farmer both prize-winning Chardonnay and spectacular ocean views, while inland, 20 acres of established vines will nicely supply a vintner who wants to run a small winery. In the Santa Ynez Valley, the Ranches at Figueroa Canyon comprise several parcels of pristine land, ranging from 187 to 1176 acres, and represent a bonanza of open space - in a proven viticultural area - just waiting for an entrepreneurial planter.

Realtor Rich Condit, an agent based in the Santa Ynez area, is careful to caution first-time buyers

about some of the harsher realities of owning a vineyard.

'You're farming, so you're at the mercy of the weather,' he warned. 'People should do their homework, especially if it's bare land. It can cost \$30,000 an acre or more to plant, set up trellising and a water system, and that doesn't include the land.'

'Existing vineyards are hard to come by,' he added, 'so there's been lots of interest in land that's historically been farmed, but not planted with vines yet.'

Condit advises prospective buyers to hire a consultant to find the best rootstock for the region and to only plant proven varieties. Access roads, soil chemistry, water quality and its availability also play critical roles in the viability of a vineyard and the success of its fruit.

Though owning a vineyard may lead to purple hands and an obsession with the weather, it can also provide a satisfying lifestyle, as well as entry into a lively circle of friends. Those who have taken the plunge often find the enterprise involves more work, and ultimately, more pleasure than they ever expected.

'This was a second career for us and it was a real life changer,' said Jeanne Newman, an entertainment lawyer who, with her husband Gary, bought a vineyard in the Santa Ynez Valley in 2005. 'Sometimes I think, 'what did we undertake?' But it's given me a retreat and the world's greatest hobby. It's amazing!'

Gary, a television executive and weekend farmer, wasn't even looking for a vineyard when the family went property hunting. It just happened to come with a house they loved, and they've found its presence offers some unexpected perks.

'I love to walk the rows with our vineyard manager and ask lots of questions,' Gary admitted. 'And I love bringing our kids and their friends here, seeing 21-year olds who are usually out clubbing sitting outside, sipping wine and enjoying quiet conversation. It's wonderful to expose them to this lifestyle.'

Though numbers crunchers may warn against it, buying a vineyard can yield rich rewards. Those who've taken the plunge often realize their dreams, not in dollars and cents, but in living a peaceful country life among verdant vines and a lively circle of friends."

-K. Reka Badger
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