



J O R I A N H I L L

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How a Hollywood Couple Goes Country

“If Mondavi or Rothschild were your last name, winemaking would probably be your destiny. But when a couple from the Hollywood entertainment world, Gary and Jeanne Newman, inherited a vineyard with their purchase of a second home in the Santa Ynez Valley, they lacked this inherent advantage.

Mr. Newman, the chairman of 20th Century Fox Television studio, which produces television series for broadcast and cable networks, said his upbringing was virtually wine-free except when his father opened a bottle of Manischewitz during the Jewish holidays. Ms. Newman, a television business lawyer who grew up in Cleveland, described being raised in a ‘milk culture.’

There were many lessons to learn. Like the one about maneuvering a forklift.

On a hot, late-October afternoon, the Newmans sought cool respite under a majestic old oak tree at Jorian Hill, their vineyard and family weekend retreat just outside Solvang, Calif., where the movie ‘Sideways’ was filmed. With a sheepish grin, Mr. Newman recounted his first (and only) experience operating farm machinery. It was three years ago, and harvest was in full swing.

He climbed onto a tractor to transport grapes from a hillside vineyard to the barn and recalls thinking, ‘I can do this!’ Then he shifted into the wrong gear. The tractor lurched forward, and a bin loaded with half a ton of grapes slid off the fork. Fruit flew in free fall, scattering to the dusty road below.

‘I tell people that if our vintage is a little crunchy, it’s our gravel that gives it character,’ Mr. Newman quipped.

The Newmans, both 54, never intended to buy a vineyard. They’re busy enough at their day jobs. Mr. Newman’s studio supplies ‘Boston Legal’ to ABC, ‘How I Met Your Mother’ to CBS and ‘24’ and ‘Family Guy’ to Fox. Ms. Newman is a partner at Hansen, Jacobson, Teller, Hoberman, Newman, Warren & Richman, an entertainment law firm in Beverly Hills.

But at their second home, they run the Jorian Hill winery — the name is an amalgam of the names of their son Jordan and daughter, Hillary, 22-year-old twins, and their son Reed, 14 — making small-lot, boutique-style wines that have earned respect from critics. And working in the vineyard is not as glamorous as one might think, Ms. Newman was quick to point out: ‘It’s very hot, very hard work — and so much of nature is out of your control.’

What the Newmans had wanted was a weekend retreat in the scenic country amid the foothills surrounding

Santa Barbara. They began house-hunting in March 2005 with two criteria: 'We wanted a property that was at least 20 acres, and we didn't want to see our neighbors,' Ms. Newman said.

With Reed, they spent every Sunday for six months driving 100 or more miles north from their home in the Brentwood section of Los Angeles to look at properties, including walnut and lavender farms. Nothing felt quite right.

By August, when Ms. Newman stumbled across a 'Vineyard for Sale by Owner' real estate lead on the Internet and scheduled a house tour, the thrill of weekend house-hunting had faded for her husband and son. After the family had seen two other properties on a warm Sunday, Ms. Newman encountered resistance to seeing a third house in Ballard Canyon, a mile outside Solvang. 'Gary was hot and irritable, and Reed wanted lunch,' she recalled. 'But I had told the owner we'd come.'

They drove up to a rambling three-story house with a white wood exterior and a wraparound porch. During the walk-through, Ms. Newman's eyes began to well. 'This feels like home,' she said, prompting Mr. Newman, who felt the same, to wave a credit card and proclaim: 'Let's buy it.'

'It was the most emotional decision we've ever made,' Ms. Newman said.

They bought the house, which was built in 1991 and has four bedrooms and five bathrooms, and its accompanying 20 acres for 'about \$3 million,' Mr. Newman said, declining to be more specific about the price. The vineyard was 7.5 acres, planted with syrah and sangiovese grapes.

After the initial euphoria came the sobering task of managing the property. 'It was completely overgrown, and we spent the first year just clearing brush because it was a fire hazard,' Ms. Newman said.

They also found that continuing the former owners' sustainable, chemical-free approach to farming the vineyard would not be the 'turnkey operation' they had expected. There were vines to prune; a harvest to oversee; wine consultants, winemakers and a vineyard manager to hire; and viticulture techniques to learn. The Newmans traveled to France with an interpreter, visiting small, family-owned vineyards, to learn more about Rhône varieties. The twins served as their tasters because 'we were so busy taking notes and asking questions,' Ms. Newman said.

Now the vineyard has a manager and two winemakers in place. Mr. Newman proudly pointed to a south-west-facing hillside planted with over four acres of syrah; to its west are one and a half acres of viognier, and one and a half acres of grenache are planted on various lots throughout the vineyard. 'It finally feels like ours,' he said.

As the couple entered the house, two tiny white dogs — Flaubert, a Coton de Tulear, and Vlade, a Maltipoo — skittered toward them. The dogs are the most domesticated members of a beloved menagerie that includes a brood of Araucana chickens, a pair of babydoll sheep and a pair of pygmy goats. Ms. Newman scooped the dogs up as we headed into the basement.

'We had been so focused on the vineyard that we didn't have a remodeling plan,' she said. Eventually, the couple hired Bill Smith, a local contractor whom the actor Noah Wyle had recommended; Thierry Marchand, a Beverly Hills interior designer; and Puck Erickson of Arcadia Studio in Santa Barbara, who had done landscape design for Michael Jackson, Quincy Jones and the film producer Charles Roven.

The property had also been an ostrich farm, and the first major renovation was to convert the bottom floor of the house, a series of small cinderblock rooms that had once served as an ostrich nursery — and which Ms. Newman described as 'uninhabitable' and 'creepy' — into a guest suite and a 2,500-bottle wine cellar.

At the cellar entrance, various wine-themed paraphernalia are on display, including a collection of corkscrews and an aerial photograph of the vineyard. A photograph of a crudely penned Writers Guild of America sign declaring 'Gary Newman's Wine Is Tannic' is a memento that Mr. Newman kept after the

Hollywood writers' strike last winter.

In the rest of the house, windows abound, creating a natural light-filled interior. Explaining the airy rooms, pine floors, eclectic furnishings and color scheme featuring white, red and blue, Ms. Newman said, 'We wanted casual and comfortable, an updated country look with Americana accents.'

In the recently renovated kitchen, Ms. Newman's Mediterranean-inspired tapas drew Gary, Hillary and Reed to the center island in anticipation of lunch. Purple basil, tarragon and sage had been clipped from their herb garden; the lettuces plucked from their terraced vegetable garden; blue eggs gathered, warm, from their hens; and sun-ripened figs picked from their orchard. On Sundays, they transport fresh fruit and produce back to Brentwood for the week. 'It's an unbelievable luxury to eat off your own land,' Mr. Newman said, relishing an egg salad and parsley-topped bruschetta.

The Newmans entertain frequently. Has Rupert Murdoch, whose empire includes 20th Century Fox Television, dropped in? 'No bosses!' Mr. Newman said with a chuckle. Though Ms. Newman acknowledges hosting her law firm's retreat at Jorian Hill, their weekend house is not for show. 'We have such busy lives in L.A.,' she said, 'that we're committed to spending time here with our children and our close friends.'

Creating outdoor space for entertaining was also a priority. The Newmans had an outdoor kitchen built beneath their deck, where large appliances are tucked within a sleek black soapstone counter fitted over knotty alder cabinets. A modern hillside hearth features a gas grill and pizza oven on one side and on the other a raised grill designed for Santa Maria-style barbecue popular on the Central Coast of California.

Ms. Erickson, known for creating sustainable landscapes, replanted what had been a more formal lawn and garden with drought-tolerant plants and grasses, like chaparral and Muhlenbergia rigens. She sculptured the grounds to emphasize stellar views of Ballard Canyon and to fit recreational features into the natural topography: a solar-panel-heated pool, a whirlpool, an archery range and a bocce court — a gift to Ms. Newman from a grateful client.

Mr. Newman, the son of a lawyer and a homemaker turned real estate agent, was raised in Beverly Hills. He met Ms. Newman in law school at the University of Southern California Law Center. After graduating, they married in 1980 and settled in West Los Angeles.

Growing up, neither had a connection to agriculture, but Jorian Hill has given the couple and their children a taste of farm life. Hillary enjoys gardening; she and Jordan have developed an interest in wine. As for Reed, Ms. Newman said, 'Instead of becoming an obnoxious spoiled city kid, he knows how to drive a tractor, how to prune vines, and he wanted power tools and livestock for his bar mitzvah.'

Winemaking has expanded the couple's world, connecting them with 'amazing, quirky and creative people' they would otherwise not have met. And there is this revelation: 'Working with the land to create something that others consume and enjoy,' Mr. Newman said, 'is incredibly satisfying.'

-Kathryn Matthews
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