

DAN BERGER | On Wine

**CK Vines small idea pays off**

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Wineries desiring to make top quality wines know they need one key thing: a consistent source of top-quality grapes.

But buying grapes on the open market can occasionally be dicey. Prices and quality can vary. The best scenario is for the winemaker and grape grower to both work for the winery and have control over all viticultural practices.

Clos LaChance winery in San Martin, south of San Francisco, began in 1987 when Bill and Brenda Murphy planted chardonnay vines in the backyard of their Saratoga home, and the first homemade wines were impressive.

In 1992, they went commercial, and some of the other wines they made were from purchased grapes. The wines were good but varied from vintage to vintage. Murphy knew he needed a more consistent source of fruit.

Then, he hit on an idea: He had already experienced installing a small family vineyard adjacent to a home, and he thought others in the rugged Santa Cruz Mountains, one of the finest places in the world to grow wine grapes, might like to have such "landscaping."

After all, he reasoned, many Silicon Valley entrepreneurs had large acreage there, some of it barren, rock-strewn and needing maintenance. Moreover, many of these homeowners had the financial wherewithal to tackle expensive projects, especially when it could eventually turn a profit.

So as a subsidiary of Clos LaChance, Murphy founded CK Vines in 1996. The firm installs and maintains small, private vineyards at homes with enough acreage to provide a commercial crop. Some of these ventures are as small as a half acre.

"Most vineyard development companies are not set up to handle such small projects," said Murphy, "but we love them."

The key reason CK Vines works is that, in addition to acting as a general vineyard contractor (which has its own profits), it also provides Clos LaChance with a source of fruit, since one of the benefits for homeowners is that CK Vines agrees not only to install and farm the vineyard but also to buy the grapes at market prices once it is established and yielding a crop.

Those grapes go only to Clos LaChance.

Besides that, says Murphy, homeowners gain visually: A well-tended vineyard is a lot nicer to look at than a bunch of rocks and weeds, which need to be sprayed or pulled for fire control anyway.

Many of the 25 projects that CK Vines has installed are for former high-tech executives. At least one is a celebrity: former Olympic gold medal skater Peggy Fleming and her husband, Dr. Greg Jenkins, a dermatologist and wine collector. They have a 2-acre vineyard at their home.

Some of the tiny-vineyard owners love being a part of a world-class wine. Others don't take all the cash for their grapes, preferring instead to have Clos LaChance turn some of their grapes into a literal "house wine," with a home-crafted label, a wine that will never be sold.

It can cost \$30,000 per acre or more to install a vineyard, depending on the complications. Such as, do boulders need to be cleared? Are trees in the way? How steep is the land? Homeowners also pay about \$4,500 or so per year for maintenance.

But an acre of chardonnay grapes can yield about 4 tons of fruit, and at \$2,500 per ton, a homeowner can expect a gross of about \$10,000 per year after the third year. So in theory, even a vineyard that cost \$30,000 to install plus \$4,500 for annual maintenance will be entirely paid off by the 10th year, barring a disaster.

"It'll never be a big moneymaker," said Murphy, "but it's an attractive way to landscape a property, and people get a real sense of what the wine business is all about."

Last week, Clos LaChance moved one more step in the direction of making a quality statement when it hired a new winemaker, Stephen Tebb from Artesa Winery in Napa. Tebb has long worked with Don Von Staavren, first at Chateau St. Jean and for the last five years at Artesa.

Moreover, within the last year, Clos LaChance completed construction of a state-of-the-art winery and 20,000-square-foot, Provincial-style visitors center, located adjacent to CordeValle, a resort 20 miles south of San Jose.

The winery now has 170 acres of grapes, about 40 of them from tiny developments CK Vines installed and farms.

**WINE TIP OF THE WEEK:** The 2002 vintage in Germany's wine districts may have been even better than the excellent 2001 vintage, but because prices for the new wines are coming off a surge in value of the euro, many of these wines are 20 percent more than comparable 2001s. The best bet is to scour local shops for the remaining 2001s, which were bought when the dollar was stronger vs. the euro than today, and snap them up. Great wines at bargain prices.

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