



CALIFORNIA | NAPA VALLEY

DIY wine makes dream a reality

BY NIA HEINERLY

WITH PRIME NAPA vineyard land going for \$200,000 per acre, until recently only the wealthiest newcomers could play. Now, an innovative concept is attracting international aficionados who hanker to make wine.

At harvest time at the Napa Valley Reserve in St Helena, affluent oenophiles join farm hands in the fields. The private winemaking club, at the gates of five-star resort Meadowood, is the brainchild of Bill Harlan, the man whose dream to create a 'first growth vineyard', has seen his Harlan Estate Bordeaux blends fetching up to \$1,050 a bottle.

For a mostly refundable initiation fee of \$150,000 (20% is retained by the club when a member resigns), plus \$80 a month, and purchase of an annual wine

allocation of at least 12 cases at \$55 a bottle, members of the club are assigned several rows of vines. 'We provide all the amenities that we would enjoy in a great estate,' Napa Valley Reserve's director Philip Norfleet says. That includes 60 acres of reserve-quality vineyards, 37,000 square feet of cellars, a state-of-the-art winery with the capacity to produce 20,000 cases – and access to Harlan's inner circle of consultants.

The average age of all members is less than 50 and 'vine-touching' is a big draw. David and Tammy Meese from the San Francisco area attended last year's harvest. 'We gathered at 5am. After

breakfast, we grabbed our lamps, bins and clippers and made our way down the rows. By 7am we were finished. Most of us wished we had worked harder.'

During other seasons, members can prune their own fruit, choose their own barrels and design their own labels. The Reserve's first vintage is currently ageing, but resident winemaker Fred Ammons says the day is fast approaching for the Reserve's members to blend their own wines. Even then, all the Reserve's resources will be at hand. 'There's no way we will let them make bad wine.'

Along with the pleasures of vine tending, members enjoy the Reserve's guest seminars, which draw on luminaries such as Robert and Margrit Mondavi and global consultant Michel Rolland. Cooperage and blending tutorials are also offered, and a recent tasting with wine

PHOTOGRAPH: GARY KUIST

After some hands-on work (left), Napa Valley Reserve members can enjoy the comforts of the club (below) - at a price

author Karen McNeil drew 50 members and spouses. Served at the five-course dinner that followed were such high-end wines as Araujo Eisele Vineyard NV Sauvignon Blanc 2002, Bill Harlan's Bond Vecina 2001 and Colgin Cellar's Cariad NV 2000.

Ann Colgin of Colgin Cellars, consultant for Sotheby's Wine Department, is part of a small group of members who Harlan invited to add diversity. Although the difference between such experts and weekend winemakers is marked, Colgin enjoys the experience. 'We always meet interesting people,' she says.

The rub for some members may be the club's 'non-equity' structure: members do not own their vines. And, due to government restrictions on winery ownership, they cannot sell their wine. Their allocation is strictly for personal use and gifts.

For Bill Huck of Chicago, the club is a chance to indulge his love of viticulture. He looked into acquiring a vineyard and felt discouraged by Napa's prices. 'Now we have 90 vines, we will have our own wine label and can participate in blending under the tutelage of the resident winemaker.'

'I can't over-emphasize how unique it is,' says fellow member Gary Lessing. 'We work with the icons of winemaking in an intimate setting.'

The pre-weathered barn complex designed by famed Napa architect Howard Backen is another draw. The Great Room, with chef's kitchen, fireplace and seating for 60, can be reserved by members for private events. A courtyard is used in summer and overlooking the vineyards is the library of wine books.

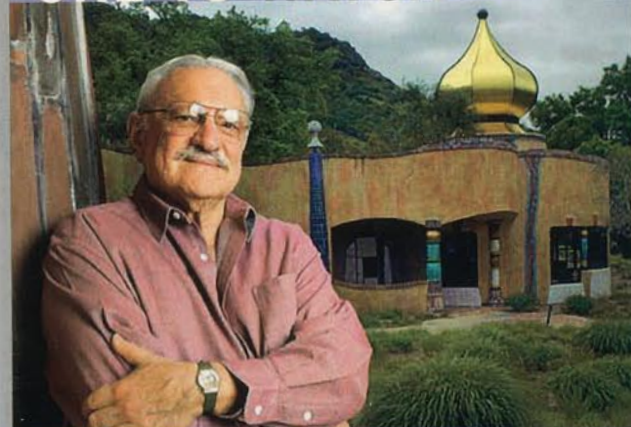
'I couldn't get Harlan wines in London,' says LK Durham, whose business took him to England. When I finally tasted it, it got my attention. The Reserve is a wonderful concept. Bill Harlan attracts excellence.'

After investing \$60 million to develop the Reserve, what's in it for Harlan? 'Other than having a family, my experience in wine has been the most rewarding,' he says. 'The synergy of the agricultural experience, educational exploration and social interaction is very exciting. The Reserve is not merely about a return on investment, but a return on life.'

With the release in 2007 of its first vintage (2004) and the completion this year of 12 wine libraries and cellar amenities, the Reserve is rapidly achieving Harlan's dream. It has already enrolled 287 members from seven countries and Harlan expects to cap membership at 400.

The initiation fee is, as one member put it, 'not inexpensive.' But, for those seeking the pleasure of grape stains under their nails, when you compare it to the price of an acre in Napa, it almost counts as good value.

ONE TO WATCH



QUIXOTE

Like *Don Quixote*, the shining knight who once was the guardian of a king, Carl Doumani has been a guardian of the Napa Valley, a vintner who helped build its reputation in the past 30 years and who, along the way, tilted at a few windmills of his own.

When he owned Napa's Stags Leap Winery, he restored a century-old estate slated for condemnation, and brought back its Petite Sirah vineyards. He sold the winery, but kept a sliver of land between it and Shafer Vineyards. Grapes from this 27-acre organic vineyard go into Quixote and its second label, Panza, named for Don Quixote's sidekick, Sancho Panza.

Doumani longs to do things in a hands-on way and Quixote is his opportunity. Since the 2000 vintage, he has produced small amounts of elegant Cabernet and Petite Sirah. The whimsical winery, which will open in February 2007, was designed by the late architect Friedensreich Hundertwasser, renowned for his playful designs and grass roofs. This is Hundertwasser's only building in the US and one of his paintings comprises the Quixote label.

Doumani has kept a low profile so production could catch up with demand. Winemaker Mario Monticelli's first wines are flavourful and smooth. The 2003 Petite Sirah has supple, smooth tannins and the decadent flavour of chocolate-covered berries. The \$40 and \$60 wines sport screwcaps.

■ Quixote Cabernet Sauvignon 2001 ★★★★★

Layered, complex and smooth. This intense wine from the Stag's Leap district boasts mocha, plum and black cherry aromas. It is rich but restrained and balanced, with flavours of subtle spice and a depth of red and black fruit. Accessible now, but should drink well to 2012. **\$60; US markets**

