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YOU CAN CRUSH AT MY PAD

Fully serviced vineyard schemes allow oenophiles to produce their own wine – and be as hands-on or hands-off as they choose. Some vintages are even scoring high Parker points, says John Stimpfig. Illustration by Chris Burke.

My boat sank, so I bought a vineyard” might sound like an improbably tall tale told at the end of a wine-addled dinner party. But in the case of Michelle Paris, it’s the truth. It all began in 2007 when the Toronto-based investment dealer discovered that her planned Antarctic trip had been cancelled after the ship she was due to go on unfortunately sank. “So, with a few weeks’ vacation suddenly unaccounted for, I found myself trekking in Patagonia before spending some time in Argentina’s wine capital, Mendoza.”

As an avid wine collector, she was particularly keen to take a couple of winery tours to the highly acclaimed Uco Valley, set in the foothills of the Andes. “The epic beauty of the place just blew me away,” recalls Paris. But the real turning point was two days later, when she fell into conversation with an Australian couple who were considering the idea of buying a vineyard. “Suddenly, the more we talked about it, the more attractive and economically feasible it became. Up to that moment, it hadn’t even been on the radar. And now I was thinking – why not?”

But hang on a minute – even in happier financial times, it was always the case that making wine was almost as draining financially as purchasing a Premier League football club.

Hence the old wine trade adage: “How do you make a small fortune in the wine trade? You start with a large one.”

Having bought a vineyard in South Africa, the late opera singer Deon van der Walt subsequently admitted he probably wouldn’t have done so had he known what the final bill was going to look like. Even Sir Peter Michael was surprised by the mounting costs of his Californian winery. It set him back \$1m a year for the first two decades – and that was on top of the first \$1m to purchase the vineyards. So how on earth was Paris planning to do it for less than \$200,000?

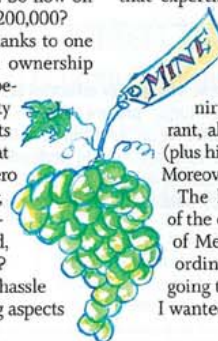
The answer was, with remarkable ease – thanks to one of a growing number of managed vineyard ownership schemes currently being offered by various specialist international developers. And the beauty of these relatively new “vanity vineyards” projects doesn’t just relate to the cost. It also means that any novice, wannabe vintner can do it with zero knowledge and experience. Just as importantly, they can do it remotely, without having to sacrifice huge swathes of time – not to mention blood, sweat and tears. So how do these schemes work?

“Essentially, what we do is cut out all the hassle and let people get on with the more rewarding aspects

of crafting great wine,” says Vines of Mendoza’s CEO, Michael Evans. “The most important thing is that all our Private Vineyard Estates are sold on a proprietary, turnkey basis, with owners determining their respective levels of input and involvement.” As a result, owners get to produce their very own wine with the guidance, help and expertise of a dedicated, professional team of viticulturalists, agronomists and oenologists. In the case of Vines of Mendoza, that expertise comes from none other than Santiago Achával, Argentina’s most acclaimed and award-winning winemaker.

For many wine lovers, this high-altitude, hands-on experience is little short of vinous nirvana. It’s a bit like buying your own restaurant, all kitted out, and then having Gordon Ramsay (plus his brigade) help you cook a Michelin-star meal. Moreover, nobody’s allowed to swear at you.

The level of professional involvement was one of the clinchers for Paris, who signed up with Vines of Mendoza. “Firstly, I didn’t want to produce an ordinary wine; it has to be something that I’m going to enjoy and be proud of,” she says. “Secondly, I wanted to learn about winemaking at the hands of





a master. Being able to work with someone as talented as Santiago certainly helped seal the deal."

Clearly, this kind of co-operative concept requires a certain economy of scale for it to work. But nobody could accuse Evans and his Argentine business partner, Pablo Giménez Rijli, of not thinking big. During the past two years, they have begun to acquire over 900 acres of vineyards in the relatively virginal and highly sought-after Uco Valley. The first of its fully serviced vineyards has already been planted – 50 per cent with Malbec, but also with 12 other varieties including Syrah, Grenache, Chardonnay, Tempranillo and Cabernet Sauvignon. This year will see the scheme's very first harvest, while 2010 will witness the unveiling of a state-of-the-art micro-vinification bodega, designed by the architects Bormida & Yanzon along with Achával.

The plan was to sell parcels of vineyards in plots of three to 10 acres to a total of 150 buyers. But Vines of Mendoza has already landed more than 50 clients, made up of individuals and group syndicates. "This puts us bang on schedule: we're hitting all of this year's targets," Evans points out. "So far, the global downturn hasn't affected us at all."

"Invariably, every client has a slightly different reason for wanting to do something like this," he adds. "Most are

pure hobbyists who come from a variety of backgrounds – international bankers, lawyers and entrepreneurs, who live mostly in Europe and the US and will probably come and stay here two or three weeks in the year. But what all of them want to do is have some fun by getting involved in making their own wine – and, of course, drinking it."

Evans also estimates that about 20 per cent are looking to turn it into a commercial business by selling wine or grapes. A couple of clients are even professional winemakers

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from California, including Rob Lawson, who is both a consultant winemaker and owner of Pavi Wines in Napa Valley. One wonders what drew him to Argentina. "An unmatched combination that winemakers dream of: terroir, climate and culture," he replies. "To me, its limitless potential is reminiscent of the Napa Valley 30 years ago."

Another attraction is land prices. Today, a high-quality vineyard acre in Mendoza would set you back about \$35,000 compared to \$250,000-\$350,000 in the

Napa for the same kind of quality. But bear in mind that you can expect to pay Vines of Mendoza more like \$55,000 per acre for the added-value infrastructure that goes with it, which includes two years' operating costs.

Clearly, punters such as Paris think the "peace of mind" premium is well worth paying. "I want this to be fun and cool, rather than finding myself worrying about it," she enthuses. "I can come down here whenever I want and get involved in picking grapes and blending. And I can still continue the day

job in Toronto. For me, it's perfect. I love the place, the project and the people – and, of course, the product."

Of course, Vines of Mendoza is by no means the only one-stop shop for novice vintners. It's not even the only one in the wine-making mecca of Mendoza. Not far away is Santa María de Los Andes in the equally bucolic Luján de Cuyo region, where the winemaking director is the highly rated Italian consultant oenologist, Alberto Antonini. Or how about the Villa Dolce Vita estate, laid



Above: L'And Vineyards in the Alentejo region of Portugal has 136 properties in large private grounds with its own winery.

out on 200 acres in the golden triangle of Mendoza, Tupungato and Tunuyan? Here, you can choose from 12 river-fronted vineyard plots and build your own customised, Mediterranean-style home. The project's agent, Nadia Binesh, already reports plenty of interest, particularly from the US, UK, France, Switzerland, Holland and Belgium. "We are being firm on prices but flexible on the finance," she says. "If anything, interest has gone up since the financial meltdown – mainly because prices are so affordable."

If Mendoza isn't to your liking, why not try Argentina's northern province of Salta, where the exclusive La Estancia de Cafayate provides a ready-made vinous haven set against another awesome mountain backdrop. The 1,500-acre development offers almost 350 "home sites" and a variety of leisure pursuits such as golf, its own equestrian centre, tennis, swimming and trekking – not to mention a spa, fitness centre, clubhouse and concierge service.

"Owners can enjoy the vineyard lifestyle without the maintenance and cost hassles of owning your own vineyard," says sales and marketing manager Diane Romero. She also points out that every owner has bragging rights and receives an annual allocation of 100 bottles of estate wine. At an extra cost, La Estancia also offers the option and the staff for clients to create their own wine label, should they so wish. Clearly, wine is the leitmotif, but lifestyle and long-term investment opportunities are also high on many buyers' agendas. Already, home sites have been selling fast. Last year, 100 were sold in the first phase. At the start of the second phase, 15 more were sold in March alone.

There are other enjoyable and cost-efficient ways of making your own wine beyond the *el dorado* of Argentina. One scheme has been pioneered in the Napa Valley by property developer and vintner H William Harlan. In 2004, he created The Napa Valley Reserve – an exclusive wine club with its own 80-hectare vineyard. Since then, Harlan has poured north of \$50m into its cleverly designed winery – complete with every conceivable piece of 21st-century technology and 40,000sq ft of cellar space, most of which is underground. The result is an oasis of rural charm complete with stunning interiors and vinous artefacts, including rare Roman amphorae. It even has its own wine library and in-house historian. Outside, an army of vineyard workers and gardeners keep its borders and vines in tip-top condition.

On top of all this pampering, members can also receive and enjoy their own hand-crafted wine (between six and 75 cases), which they can create each year under the expert tutelage of Harlan Estate's oenologist, Bob Levy. "Winemaking interest *per se* can vary," admits director Philip Norfleet. "Some members are quite active in the

winemaking process, including vineyard management, harvest, blending. Others may personalise their wines through label design. Many simply enjoy the wonderful experience of sharing it with friends."

Nonetheless, wine is taken extremely seriously. For example, The Napa Valley Reserve organises technical wine seminars with luminaries such as Michel Rolland, Piero Antinori and the FT's own Jancis Robinson. And there's no lack of cultural and gastronomic activities: the violinist Itzhak Perlman was a recent guest, as were chefs Patricia Wells and Anne Willan. Equally, members use it for private parties and entertaining, particularly as it is adjacent to Harlan's Relais & Châteaux Meadowood Estate, where guests and members can bunk up. As a result, the Reserve's ranks have quickly swelled to 400, who are happy to pay the \$2,000 annual membership along with the (refundable)

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\$165,000 deposit. Most are from the US, but the club also boasts members from Europe and South-East Asia.

But what if you just want to bottle a barrel of wine, without having to join an exclusive club or buy a vineyard – what do you do then? For quite a few Californian aficionados, the answer is to drive down to the no-nonsense Crushpad facility in San Francisco's industrial Dog Patch district.

The company, which specialises in small-lot luxury wine from high-class West Coast vineyards, was founded in 2004 by Michael Brill, a former software executive who teamed up with a group of wine industry veterans. "From the start, the concept of Crushpad was to liberate winemaking from its stereotype of unimaginable wealth, fifth-generation-owned châteaux and golden retrievers," says Brill.

Yet again, the concept is simple, affordable and fun. Prior to each harvest, clients choose which varieties and high-quality vineyards they want to source their grapes from. Once they are picked, Crushpad's full-time team carries out the fermentation and bottling with as much or as little stylistic direction and input from each enthusiast.

"Our goal was to make world-class wine, not just something to have around the house," says a former client, David Dain, who now sells his wines commercially. Equally, he wanted to create wines that would gain the respect of top critics and wine enthusiasts. Various vintages have since garnered a number of 90+ scores from Parker, *The Wine Advocate*, Stephen Tanzer and *Burghound's* Allen Meadows.

There's little doubt that Crushpad has struck a chord and created a growing niche market. Five years ago it had just

100 clients; now it has over 5,000, making over 40,000 cases of small-lot, high-end wine costing up to \$15,000 per barrel – to make, that is. Buying it would cost a whole lot more. Moreover, clients don't just come from the US; some are from as far away as Brazil, China and France. Many remote winemakers simply use Crushpad's virtual winery system, which streams live webcam footage and winemaking data to keep them informed and involved.

But some intrepid clients still make the journey. "Although I really rely on the guys at Crushpad, I always go a couple of times a year, usually to taste from barrel and then again for blending," says Asko Kässinen, a global sales manager with Hewlett-Packard in Finland. He is now in his fifth vintage at Crushpad. "Part of the thrill is having that kind of personal, physical and technical involvement. For me, it's a little bit addictive now."

In Europe, similar schemes to those in Argentina and the US have been much slower to take root. But now, several are starting to flower. Last year came the announcement of the imminent arrival of the new 490-acre La Melonera estate near Ronda in southern Spain. According to Jorge Viladomiu, one of its seven Anglo-Spanish investors, the property will provide 30 individual estates, each with a luxury hacienda set in its own grounds. Naturally, vineyards also come as standard, as does the opportunity to work with the technical team of Spanish winemaker José Luis Pérez Verdún.

In Portugal, L'And Vineyards is building an exclusive community of 136 villas and apartments in the Alentejo wine region. All the properties will be clustered around a central resort with its own winery. CEO José Cunhal Sendim is so confident of the project's long-term success that he plans to roll out three or four similar schemes over the next decade.

Nevertheless, one of the most exclusive European developments comes from Timbers Resorts, which has just launched its five-star Vintners Club at Castello di Casole in Tuscany. Set amid 4,200 acres of this historic property are 13 separate vineyard plots, to which just 24 members will have access. Not only that, members will also be able to work with the world-famous oenologist Hans Vinding-Diers and Piero Incisa della Rochetta of Sassicaia.

Meanwhile, in Provence, Dutchman Eric Kurver is transforming a 90-hectare domaine into 20 individual boutique wineries called The Private Winery. The blueprint also incorporates luxury winemaker suites, a high-spec, microvinification winery and careful selection of the estate's best vineyard parcels. Arguably, though, the most exciting

opportunity in Europe comes from Crushpad, which has just launched its latest consumer operation in Bordeaux. As a result, clients worldwide will make their own micro-cru claret, beginning with the 2009 harvest at the highly rated boutique Château Teysier, under the supervision of owner and winemaker Jonathan Maltus. Two of Bordeaux's star winemaking consultants, Eric Boissenot and Stéphane Derenoncourt, have also come on board, as have a number of growers who will supply fruit from some of the most coveted appellations including Margaux and St Emilion.

"Bordeaux is the big one because it is a much more international brand than California," says marketing director Noah Dorrance. "So we think that this will particularly appeal to Brits, Europeans and Asians. Moreover, if the model works in Bordeaux there are a lot of other prestigious places we can go to, including Spain, Italy and Burgundy." That really would be rolling out the barrel. ♦

WHAT GRAPE TASTE THEY HAVE

L'And Vineyards, www.l-andvineyards.com. **Castello di Casole**, +1866-963 5005; www.castellodicasole.com. **Crushpad Bordeaux**, +339-6051 8683; www.crushpadwine.fr. **Crushpad San Francisco**, +1877-946 3404; www.crushpadwine.com. **La Estancia de Cafayate**, +54387-422 3146; www.laestanciadecafayate.com. **La Melonera**, www.lamelonera.com. **The Napa Valley Reserve**, www.thenapavalleyreserve.com. **Pavi Wines**, www.paviwines.com. **The Private Winery**, www.theprivatewinery.com. **Villa Dolce Vita**, www.villadolcevita.com.ar. **Vines of Mendoza**, +1877-638 8502; www.vinesofmendoza.com.