

the ritz-carlton®

celebrating travel, life and leisure

lucy liu

america's most glamorous angel talks about living the dream, wherever the world takes her

asia major

as its mysteries gradually reveal themselves, china gives way to a new cultural revolution

a piece of the vine

In California's Napa Valley, you don't have to own a winery to make your own killer cabernet. From adopting a single vine to buying a share in a cooperative super-premium winery, living out your winemaking fantasies is easier than ever

At breakfast on your balcony, you gaze down on the Napa Valley vineyards where you took your walk yesterday afternoon—before indulging in a wine-drenched feast with fellow vintners. These vines produced the wine you'll finish making today, when you craft your final blend from the best blocks of the best vineyard sites. It will be the culmination of a memorable weekend, and you shift your gaze to the winery, which also lies down below on the verdant, sun-splashed valley floor. Everything is so peaceful at this moment, but hours from now, you'll be making history.

Sounds dreamy, doesn't it? In fact, given the cost of land and development restrictions in Napa today, such a scenario really is a dream for all but the wealthiest would-be vintners. Yet

you can still spend an unforgettable weekend blending your own killer cabernet sauvignon, courtesy of Cliff Lede and his eponymous Stags Leap District winery (clifflede.com).

Twice a year, five couples participate in Lede's Blend Your Own Barrel program, dining with him, hanging out with his winemakers and staying in his luxurious Poetry Inn above the vineyards. Each couple also gets 10 cases of wine, and here's the kicker: Participants blend that wine to their own taste, from the same hand-picked lots of wine Lede uses to create his ultra-premium flagship wine, Poetry.

The program costs \$15,000 per couple, roughly equivalent to the price of 10 cases of Poetry (if you could get your hands on any). With everything else the weekend includes, it's an astounding value. "I'm not doing this to make money," Lede says with a laugh. "Before I came to Napa, I had

SIPS



blended to perfection

Even The Ritz-Carlton has joined the custom-blending wine fray, collaborating with The Steve Kent Winery for a decade to produce a pair of wines. The creations, a chardonnay and a cabernet, are the product of special blending sessions hosted at The Steve Kent Winery in Livermore, Calif., where Ritz-Carlton food and beverage staff divide into groups to craft their own distinct blends for inclusion into the Ritz-Carlton Cuvée.

Once finished, the group's creations are judged and the winning blends are then duplicated on a larger scale and sent to individual Ritz-Carlton properties, offering guests the perfect wine blend to complement the distinct flavors of The Ritz-Carlton's culinary experience.

no idea what happened at the blending table. Now I want to share that experience with others."

As it happens, there is no shortage of others eager to share it, too. The ranks of home winemakers are rising worldwide along with consumption of wine itself, driven by easy access to quality grapes combined with a wealth of winemaking instruction available on the Internet. The most adventurous would-be winemakers are now looking for ways to try their hand at the real thing.

RESERVE A SLICE OF PARADISE

That's why real estate mogul and superstar vintner Bill Harlan created Napa Valley Reserve, an 80-acre winery estate whose members can work in their own vineyard and winery without purchasing land or buildings. When initial memberships were offered at \$100,000 a few years ago, some people snickered. Scores of others snapped them up, which silenced the doubters.

The membership deposit (which is refundable, country-club style) has since moved up toward \$150,000. This spring the Reserve will start counting down its final hundred members for a total of approximately 375. While some members choose to be involved in every stage of their wine's creation, others just collect

their allotment of up to three barrels (75 cases) of finished cabernet sauvignon each year without breaking a sweat.

Given Harlan's penchant for perfectionism and deep feeling for authenticity, the Reserve's facilities are both state-of-the-art and redolent of Napa history. The winemaking team is headed by Bob Levy, who has been making Harlan's wines for years. The culinary classes are taught by iconic food author Patricia Wells, and the raw ingredients come from the estate's own gardens.

"We seem to draw intellectually curious people," says Reserve Director Philip Norfleet, who previously worked for another demanding empire-builder, golfer Jack Nicklaus. "Some of our members are under 30, some are over 70. They all come with different backgrounds, but they all share the same love of wine and how it's created."

ROLL UP YOUR SLEEVES

If you want to test your affection for the winemaking process before investing your kids' college education, you might want to start with one of Napa Valley's wine fantasy camps costing \$1,000 or less. These weekend-long events, usually held at harvest time, get you up close and personal with vintners and their raw materials.

Diageo Chateau & Estate Wines, the wine wing of the global drinks conglomerate, offers a "Crush Camp for Weekend Winemakers" that brings together winemakers from half a dozen of its northern California wineries, including Beaulieu and Sterling (diageowines.com). Part of the fun of this camp is the physical side: getting up early, picking grapes in the lovely light (and chilly temperatures) of an autumn sunrise, and then sorting, shoveling, raking and punching down the grapes in the winery. The more sybaritic side includes lavish meals and cushy accommodations (though you'll probably be too busy—or too bushed—to enjoy them much).

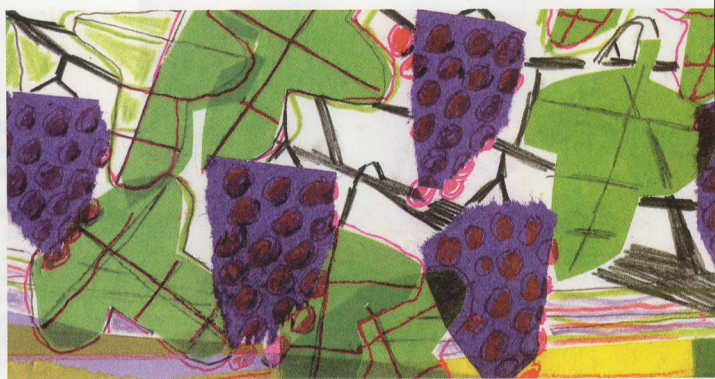
If sparkling wine is your thing, there's the six-year-old "Harvest Camp" at Schramsberg Vineyards, one of Napa's oldest and most atmospheric wine estates (schramsberg.com). The draw here is quality time with Hugh Davies, son of late founder Jack Davies, and chef Holly Peterson Mondavi, a member of one of Napa's most august winemaking families. The late-August event has proven so popular that the winery plans to add a "Spring Blending Camp" in March 2007 to teach would-be winemakers the subtle art of blending sparkling wine.

With all these options available, you needn't stop dreaming your Napa Valley dreams. Just start living them out in pieces, a weekend at a time. At the very least, you'll learn from the inside out how Napa Valley vintners really live—and whether you want to join them permanently. ● BY THOM ELKJER



bespoke-wine experiences

Napa Valley's not the only place to try your hand at the vintner's life. In New York, you can sign up for a four-day **Wine Camp** on Long Island. You'll work in the vineyards and winery, hang out with winemakers and vineyard owners, and eat and drink like them, too (longislandwinecountrybandb.com).



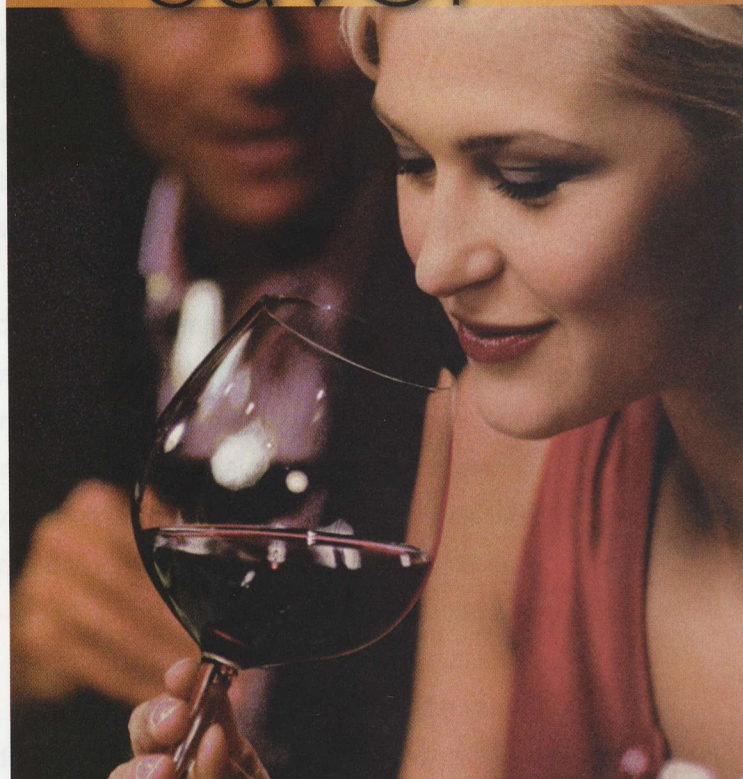
In Germany, you can own your little piece of history by **becoming a stockholder** in MW-Mosel-Weinberg AG, an enterprising group that's buying up heritage Riesling vineyards near the village of Zell and farming them sustainably. Each \$150 share includes ownership of a specific grapevine and other shareholder rights (mw-ag.com).

If you want to give others a taste of the winemaking life, an **"Adopt a Vine"** program costing \$50 to \$150 per year makes a great gift. The better programs entitle members to take care of their vine(s) through the year, harvest the fruit and make wine. Others simply put member names on the vine (usually by hanging a plaque) and offer discounts on wine purchases. Good options in the U.S. include St. Helena Winery in Napa (sthelenawinery.com), Faire Le Pont (fairelepont.com) in Washington state, Blue Mountain Vineyards (bluemountainwine.com) in Pennsylvania and Taylor Brooke Winery (taylorbrookewinery.com) in Connecticut. Whispering Hills (whisperinghills.com.au) in Australia is also an option.

If your interest in wine runs more to farming than fining, look southeast of San Francisco to CordeValle Vineyard Estates, where you can **buy one of 36 parcels** in this 1,700-acre Tuscan-style development. Parcels are priced from \$1 million and include two acres of vines per property. You'll have to build a house, but your future grapes are already under contract to Clos LaChance Winery in the up-and-coming Santa Cruz Mountains appellation (www.obriengroup.com). The Ruby Hill Vineyard Estates development near Livermore, in the San Francisco Bay appellation, offers **20-acre sites from \$1.5 million**. Each "estate" is already carpeted with a dozen or more acres of vines under professional management (rubyhillrealty.com). ● BY T.E.

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