

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?

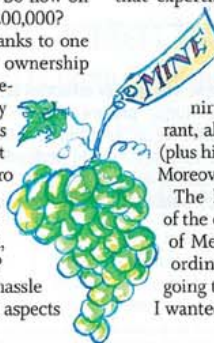
The answer was, with remarkable ease – thanks to one of a growing number of managed vineyard ownership schemes currently being offered by various specialist international developers. And the beauty of these relatively new “vanity vineyards” projects doesn’t just relate to the cost. It also means that 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

"Most clients are pure hobbyists – bankers, lawyers, entrepreneurs – but all of them want to have some fun making their own wine – and drinking it."

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

