

BY JANET HERRING-SHERMAN



Harvest.

It is a drama staged under the late summer sun each year throughout the grape-growing regions of California. The suspense of picking the grapes at just the right hour builds, and trucks full of just-picked cabernet, chardonnay, and sauvignon blanc

grapes hustle along the rural roads, moving from field to winery like homing pigeons.

But that's the only time of year the pace is frenzied in areas like the Napa and Sonoma Valleys, an hour north of San Francisco, and the Santa Ynez Valley, 40 minutes north of Santa Barbara. The balance of the year, they enjoy the slow, methodical pace that is so typical of farming regions. Life in these valleys actually leaves residents with enough time to stop and gaze at the splendid horizon in awe.

They are valleys seemingly painted with a master's hand. The plum-purple of ripening grapes in summer, the indigo skies on a winter afternoon, and the gold-bronze mantle the vineyards don in early fall: these are the colors that enliven the fields' rich greens and the buckskin tans of the gently sloping hills around them.

These valleys are similar in a wealth of ways, most noticeably in their Mediterranean-like climate, appearance, agricultural pursuits, and tourist appeal. The Napa-Sonoma valley area sees upwards of 3.5 million visitors a year. Most come to tour the area's scenic backroads and the multitude of wineries,

including such preeminent names as Sterling, Charles Krug, Domaine Chandon, Glen Ellen, Château St. Jean, Sebastiani, and Mondavi.

The Santa Ynez Valley hosts more than two million tourists a year. Most are initially attracted by Solvang, the Danish community by Lake Cachuma that is famous for its authentic Scandinavian cuisine and architecture, and by the restored Mission La Purisma 15 miles to the west of Buellton. But as the area's burgeoning wineries come of age, they, too, are becoming a tourist draw.

SANTA YNEZ VALLEY

Even by California's swift standards, the Santa Ynez Valley and neighboring Santa Barbara County valleys have emerged as a top-notch wine region with incredible speed. In the early 1970s, Santa Barbara County had only one winery. By 1987, there were 20 wineries and 9,253 acres of grapes.

The county now has nearly 25 wineries and more than 11,000 acres of grapes spreading out like a tropical sea. The largest wine producer is Firestone Winery on Zaca Mesa. Gainey Vineyard, located between Santa Ynez and Solvang, has been called the most beautiful winery in the world by noted wine columnist Robert Lawrence Balzer. The vineyards, planted in 1984, and the Spanish-style winery are part of the 1,800-acre Gainey Ranch, which encompasses one of the oldest and most respected Arabian horse-breeding farms in the nation.

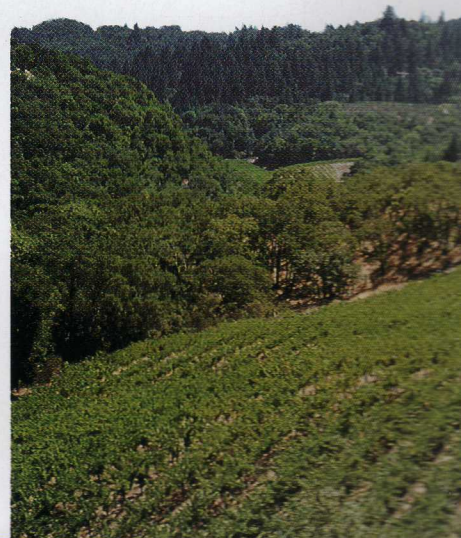
Diversification like that at Gainey Ranch is not unusual in Santa Ynez Valley, according to Randy Freed of Century 21 Brierwood Real Estate in Santa Ynez. "Most wineries have owned the land awhile before they convert or diversify," he says, explaining that the cost of land in the valley has become prohibitive to purchasing new ground for vineyard development.

Ranching is still the heart of this truly

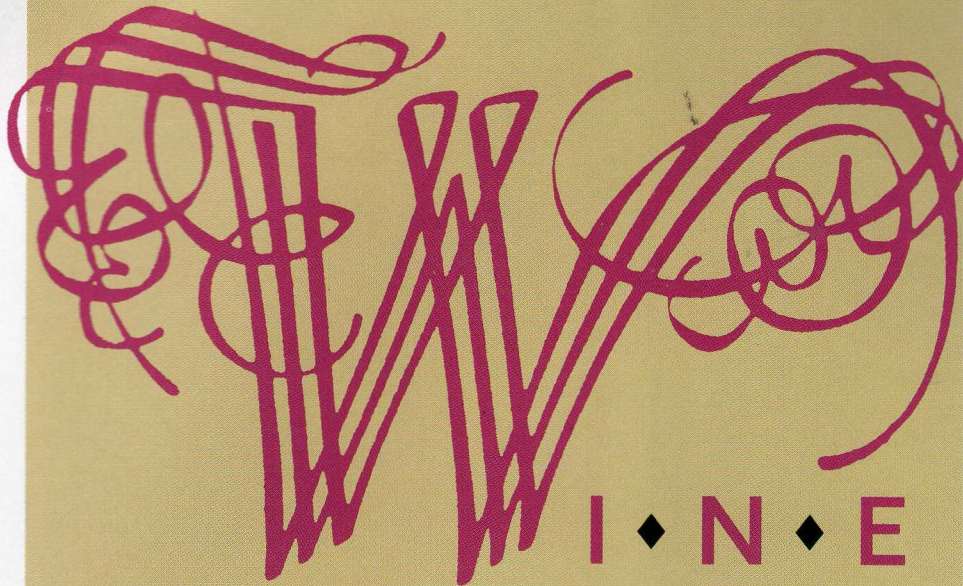


rural region, as it has been since the valley's discovery in 1769. In late fall, when the vines begin to go bare, the surrounding slopes come alive with newborn calves. Indeed, some of the finest cattle and horse ranches anywhere are tucked away like hidden treasures in these hills.

Residents of the valley's five main communities—Santa Ynez, Buellton, Ballard, Los Olivos, and Solvang—revere these ranches, because they are what preserves the delightfully western flavor of the area. The town of Santa Ynez, with its handful of 1882 buildings, in fact resembles the set of a western movie. The locals love the look, and



A TASTE OF



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COUNTRY

California's Napa,
Sonoma and
Santa Ynez Valleys



an architectural review committee ensures that any new structures adhere to the rustic frontier appearance.

The other communities have wonderful attributes as well. Los Olivos is a cache of art galleries, Ballard boasts two historical landmarks—a chapel and a schoolhouse—and Buellton is said to have the largest supply of lower-priced homes. The Victorian, Spanish, and Cape Cod architecture found in these towns blends well with the predominance of custom ranch-style residences generally found in the valley.

The Santa Ynez Valley, with its peaceful-sounding name and laid-back life-

style, is becoming a haven to people anxious for a better quality of life. Randy Freed points out that a lot of people are moving to the valley from Los Angeles, which is two-and-a-half hours away. "They're able to buy a house here on one, two, or twenty acres at a much better price," he explains.

Richard Condit of Santa Ynez Valley Real Estate sees an increasing number of executives working four days in Los Angeles and spending the balance of the week at homes in Santa Ynez. Typically, he says, they buy estate homes with enough acreage for a few pleasure horses and a great deal of solitude;



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compounds like the \$2.5 million Spanish colonial estate on 15 acres Condit's company presently has for sale. Many Santa Barbarans also are heading north to Santa Ynez, happy to make the 40-minute drive to jobs in Santa Barbara, commuting by way of the uncrowded coast highway or little-traveled San Marcos Pass.

Citing a new trend, Condit reports, "Many retirees are moving here, buying five to ten acres and plunging into grapes or apples, and doing very well." The absence of large grape growers locally means top-quality grapes are in high demand by area wineries, even those grapes produced on small plots.

Celebrities, too, are taking refuge in this relaxed and friendly valley. It is the site of actress Bo Derek's 30-acre-plus property and pop star Michael Jackson's 2,500-acre Neverland Ranch.

While the climate is good for new agricultural endeavors, the Santa Ynez Valley is not very active with new development. Foresighted zoning laws are geared toward maintaining the "land, lots o' land" aura and the tranquility so prized by valley residents.

NAPA AND SONOMA VALLEYS

Often referred to as "the Fort Knox of wine grapes," the Napa Valley has a long history as a grape-growing region. Last year, in fact, marked the 150th anniversary of the first planting of wine grapes there.

As early as the 1800s, area wines were winning international competitions and selling respectably well in Europe. Sadly, many of the original wineries became ghosts, hit hard over a brief period by an epidemic blight, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, and Prohibition. But some vintners regrouped, and their labors have paid off a hundred-fold in recent years. Since the 1970s, the Napa Valley has become one of the world's premium grape-growing areas. (In an interesting turn of the tables, many French winemakers now travel to Napa in search of the perfect grape.)

The Napa and Sonoma Valleys now

boast well over 53,000 acres of wine grapes. There are 206 wineries in the Napa Valley and, to the west in the Sonoma Valley—also known as the Valley of the Moon—another 32.

Just as many residents of the Santa Ynez Valley are "escaping" from Los Angeles, an increasing number of people here are ending their exoduses from bustling San Francisco and the East Bay. In order to reside in a town where there's less crime and congestion, they move to Napa or Sonoma and think little of commuting to jobs in San Francisco. It may be more miles to work, explains Carolyn Roberts, owner of Coldwell Banker Classical Properties in Napa, but the commute time is shorter because there's less traffic.

California Department of Commerce figures indicate that Napa County is the fourth fastest-growing Bay Area county. "People want to escape the traffic and gridlock," says Roberts. "Areas that used to have a country feel don't anymore. They're a sea of rooftops. But Napa is still perceived as being the type of town that will continue pretty much as it is today." That's more than just wishful thinking, she adds: A large percentage of the county's unincorporated land is protected by agricultural preserve and watershed zoning laws, which prohibit subdivision of less than 20 acres.

A tremendous number of people are purchasing second homes near Napa and in the secluded hillside niches





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around Calistoga, St. Helena, Rutherford, and Angwin, according to Roberts. Priced from \$500,000 to \$2 million, these second homes nearly always include enough acreage to guarantee privacy. Roberts, who has been in the business for 12 years, says the biggest change she's seen in the market recently is the lack of inventory. "We have more buyers than properties to fit them to," she points out.

As for Sonoma Valley, Martin Levy, a senior sales executive with Merrill Lynch Realty in Santa Rosa, believes a higher quality of lifestyle is the driving force behind the rapidly appreciating property values in the valley and the rest of Sonoma County (which is the Bay Area's fastest-growing county). "Nine times out of ten, it's the lifestyle that first attracts these buyers to the area, not the lower property values," he suggests. Like Roberts, Levy sees a large number of executives and entrepreneurs buying second homes in the Sonoma Valley, including many from out of state and overseas. He cites figures that show 600,000 people moved into California last year alone.

Levy, who currently has six bed-and-breakfast inns listed for sale, points to an increasing demand for inns by Southern California property buyers. "Industrious individuals who want a total change of lifestyle view running an inn as a pleasant alternative to life in the fast lane," he says.

An easy land to love, the Napa and Sonoma Valleys are home to many accomplished and famous persons such as authors M.F.K. Fisher and Arthur Hailey, and former Russian prima ballerina Natalia Makarova. Many of these resident celebrities, including the Walt Disney family and noted director Francis Ford Coppola, have taken advantage of their location and branched into the wine business.

What do residents here do besides make wine? Well, both Napa and Sonoma Valleys have an outstanding collection of art galleries, as well as local theater groups and a myriad of wine

and food festivals each year. Like fine wine, fine food is an important facet of the Wine Country lifestyle. There is a preponderance of world-renowned chefs living here, many of whom share responsibility for the evolution of "California cuisine."

Even with all they have to offer, life in these fertile vintner's valleys is not for everyone. Some may find the pace too slow; others may feel that, even with all that open space, they're still too crowded. If one has a true yearning for the serenity of life among the vineyards, though, it will not let up. It's an almost indescribable sensation that creeps into one's consciousness and, sooner or later, demands action. As one Santa Ynez realtor says: "One day they're looking around and they see all these skyscrapers. Then they come up here for the weekend and just decide they don't want to go back. Can't say I blame them." □

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