



Ted and Nancy Biagini tend to some grape vines at Biagini Vineyard in Aptos.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

For love, not money

Wine + Wine making

Small vineyard is more than just a hobby

By **CAROLYN LEAL**
SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

APTOS

Ted and Nancy Biagini found the land first about 20 years ago. It was a picturesque apple orchard in Pleasant Valley and they were captivated.

"We're going to the coast to grow apples," they told their friends.

In 1994, they bought the orchard and purchased an adjacent four-bedroom, cedar-shingled house. Originally, they planned to tend the orchard and sell the apples, but the trees were old and in poor shape.

"When we decided to take the orchard out, our neighbors were furious, because they liked looking at it," Nancy said.

Now, the neighbors and the Biaginis have a much better view. They survey a leafy 15-acre hillside vineyard, planted in tidy rows of pinot noir and chardonnay grapes.

Even though the vineyard is just a few years old, the Biaginis are harvesting 25 tons of grapes annually, which translates to 1,500 cases of wine. They sell virtually all of the crop to Clos La Chance Winery in San Martin, saving only enough grapes to make a couple of barrels of wine with their Biagini Vineyards label.

The Biaginis have latched onto a trend. Increasingly, people in Santa Cruz County are digging up their

Biagini Vineyard

Owner: Ted and Nancy Biagini

What: 15-acre vineyard of pinot noir and chardonnay grapes in Pleasant Valley.

Where: Oak Tree Lane, Aptos

Produce: Harvest 25 tons of grapes annually, which translates to 1,500 cases of wine. Most of the crop is sold to Clos La Chance Winery in San Martin.

plants and trees and turning spare acreage into vineyards.

Ted, a retired attorney, is quick to say they are not in it for profit.

"There's nothing less profitable than a small vineyard," he said. "We have to have lots of people here working all of the time."

They have a farmer and a farmer's helper, plus extra help during weeding, spraying and harvesting. It's an expensive hobby.

Why then are people motivated to spend time and money creating a vineyard?

"It's the romance," says Ted, as he takes visitors along the carefully tended rows named for he and Nancy's nine children.

"It's magical," Nancy says. "You know how you stare at the ocean for hours? I can stare at the vineyard for hours. It's very calming and serene."

Ted and Nancy have found that their hillside is ideal for the varieties they have chosen.

"It's hot during the day, and it cools off at night, so we have a longer growing season," Nancy said.

The pinot noir grapevines came

from the Mount Eden Vineyard in Saratoga.

"They can be traced back to what (famous winemaker) Paul Masson brought here originally. What we're trying to do is to grow a particular kind of grape for the high-end market."

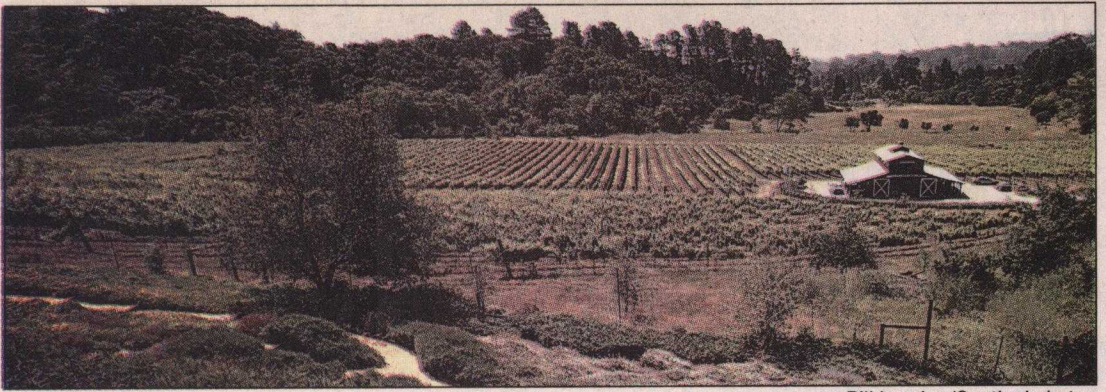
Ted, who is fond of saying that he comes from a line of Italian peasants, has found that once you subtract the romance, grape-growing is farming.

"It's a farm. You have to do what you have to do when you have to do it," he said. "You can't do things when you want to. We're constantly spraying or tending to one fungus or another. There are dozens of things that can go wrong and only one that goes right."

Even though he loves the vineyard, it's turned out to be more work than he anticipated. Just before harvest, the entire vineyard has to be covered in nets to keep the Pajaro Valley birds away.

The Biaginis have planted 1,000 grapevines per acre, with about 8 feet

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

An overview of the Biagini Vineyard in Aptos.

Vineyards

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between the neat rows. They started planting the vineyard in 1998 and ended in 2000. Estimated cost: \$12,000 to \$15,000 an acre.

The vines appear hardy, full of bright, green leaves at this stage. The grapes will be ready for harvest in October.

The soil is well-drained but otherwise not exceptional, Ted said.

"A lot of people say the poorer the soil, the better the grapes."

They have planted a small plot of San Giovese grapes from the region of Italy where Ted's family lived. Ted and his brother, Emo, make a few barrels of prized red wine from these grapes.

The centerpiece of the vineyard is a bright red barn, constructed by son-in-law Tony Lee.

"We both agreed we wanted a barn, and we wanted it barn red," Ted said, "but do you know how many shades of red there are? It took us all day to pick out the right color of red."

Prudy Foxx of Felton is their vineyard consultant. Foxx, who operates Foxx Viticulture, started growing wine grapes in 1982 in Washington state. She has helped several other vineyards get started in Pleasant Valley, including one owned by Dan and Pat Lester and a 30-acre vineyard installed by bread baker Richard Alfaro.

"When you get into 10 or 12 acres, it's more than a backyard vineyard. It's a bigger investment in time and a much greater financial commitment," she said, referring to the Biagini vineyard as an estate vineyard.

"Ted and Nancy have a true commitment to wine growing, and they wanted to use the land in a positive way. They also had a large enough parcel of land. To let it go fallow would be a tragedy," she said.

It turned out they picked the right place.

"Pleasant Valley is a region with a long history of agriculture. Wine grapes are the latest expression of that," Foxx said.

Pleasant Valley is renowned for pinot noir production, she said.

"What makes it so great is you get fog, which cools it off, yet enough sun to develop flavor," Foxx said.

"It's a perfect microclimate that has all of the right conditions to produce high-end pinot noir grapes. The Central Valley has too much heat and the Central Coast has too much wind."

Foxx studied agriculture in college and her first job was at Mount Baker Vineyard in Washington. After six years there, she went back to school and took a number of viticulture classes. She worked for the UC Cooperative Extension in Salinas in viticulture and at the UC Cooperative Extension in Watsonville as an agricultural biologist.

grapes and some do home wine-making, she said.

The Santa Cruz Mountain appellation is unique, said Larry Bettiga, viticulture advisor with the UC Cooperative Extension in Salinas.

"I get a lot of calls from people thinking about planting a vineyard. It takes a fair amount of work and money."

Bettiga estimates that it can cost \$15,000 to \$20,000 an acre to install a new vineyard.

"If there are slope and drainage problems, it can be higher," he said.

But some vineyards can make a profit, he said.

"If the vineyard produces quality within the Santa Cruz Mountain appellation, it can be done for profit," he said.

John Hibble, co-director of the Santa Cruz Mountains Wine-

growers Association, says there are 549 acres of grapes in the 101 vineyards in the county. The average vineyard is 5.4 acres.

People who plant vineyards are simply following the path of their ancestors, Hibble said.

"When the redwoods were chopped down 100 years ago, most of the land was converted into vineyards or orchards. This place was famous 100 years ago for the wines," Hibble said.

"It's a fabulous place to grow grapes. The slower the grapes grow, the more intense their flavor. Hot climates tend to produce grapes that grow big and fat, but with not much character. More time on the vine gives the acids and sugars a chance to balance out."

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Ted and Nancy Biagini take a walk through their vineyard. Among their grapes, they planted a small plot of San Giovese grapes from the region of Italy where Ted's family lived.

sonville as an agricultural biologist.

"After my children, I needed more time so I concentrated on consulting. It was about the time everyone wanted a vineyard," she said.

People are drawn to grape growing because they have a love of wine, she said.

"They have developed a deeper interest in wine than the casual consumer," she said. "And they see a beautiful landscape. They have a tremendous amount of pride in a vineyard. A lot of people have a large yard, 1 or 2 acres, and they want something more than a lawn."

But creating a vineyard requires a lot of thought and planning, she said. "A lot of times I counsel people against it.

"There is a misnomer that vines grow themselves. In reality, the first five years take a tremendous amount of energy and effort, including financial effort."

Most of her clients sell their