

A dream lifestyle ripens on the vine ; Many people want to run a winery, and some bottle the secret

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YOUNTVILLE, Calif. -- As the morning sun paints the Mayacamas Mountains yellow and a faint breeze rustles 20 acres of changing grape leaves, Louis Kapcsandy soaks it all up with a glass of wine in his hand. He sips, and smiles.

But he's not among the army of tourists who descend on Napa Valley wineries each fall to watch the harvest and sample fermented fare.

This is the Kapcsandy Family Winery, and the man with the vino owns the joint lock, stock and 200-plus French oak barrels.

"You could say we've bet it all in order to follow this dream," says Kapcsandy (pronounced Cop-SHAN-dee), 70, who retired five years ago as CEO of Baugh Enterprises in Seattle and proceeded to pour his nest egg -- untold millions -- into this fantasy endeavor.

"There's nothing I'd rather do," he says. "In my last job, I saw some smiles, but mostly lots of frowns. In this one, you just make people smile."

Then he points to a handsome Italianate home that adjoins the winery. "Besides, there are no traffic jams on the way to work."

That sort of testimonial will reverberate with anyone who has ever imagined slapping his own label on a bottle of wine. As boomers head into retirement, the old model of buying a bed-and-breakfast seems to have taken a backseat to the vineyard dream. The stakes are high; even a successful label can take years to return a profit. But the rewards go beyond the financial.

"We get people all the time who vacation with a winemaker then go shopping for vineyards," says Brian Kurth, founder of Portland, Ore.- based Vocation-Vacations. "It's still a top fantasy career, right up there with fashion designer."

This trend is "only accelerating," says Vic Motto, CEO of Global Wine Partners, an investment bank focusing on the wine business. The reasons are simple: "There aren't many wine countries that aren't appealing to live in. People love trading the craziness of urban life for the country. And if you actually get good at this, there's a certain cachet that isn't unlike what movie or rock stars experience."

Motto says the dollars involved to dive in on a commercial scale usually hover in the low eight figures, particularly in legendary Napa and Sonoma counties, where land alone can run in the millions.

But that doesn't mean you have to be Midas to give this lifestyle a shot.

Some aficionados set up shop in their garage, paying growers for grapes and investing in a modest array of equipment necessary to produce perhaps a hundred bottles of wine for friends and family.

"It's clear people want to have a hand in that journey from grape to glass," says publisher Brad Ring of WineMaker magazine, whose circulation has doubled in the past five years.

'Going in on a barrel'

Another increasingly popular option involves renting winemaking facilities such those available at San Francisco's Crushpad, where you contribute your labor and the cost of the main ingredient. "We get a lot of friends going in on a barrel," says Crushpad's Dave Gifford.

For an average of \$6,000 a barrel (300 bottles), experts at 2-year-old Crushpad involve customers in the winemaking process, from selecting grapes to designing a custom label. Some 1,600 folks have signed on, some out of curiosity, others to produce and commercially distribute thousands of bottles. Says Gifford: "We allow you to make wine, and keep your day job."

If you really hanker for the complete package -- owning the land and working the winery -- start small.

A few years back, lawyer Eric Gretenhart and his wife, Melissa Jeltema, a consumer products researcher, decided to plant grapes on their quarter-acre backyard plot in Midlothian, Va. When the resulting wine proved a hit with locals, they invested around \$100,000 in tractors, fermentation tanks and a small bottling operation.

Today, still-small Woodland Vineyard produces 2,400 bottles a year, priced in the teens.

"We hoped it would pay for itself as a retirement hobby, and right now, that's just what it does," says Gretenhart. "Maybe one day, we'll make a modest sum, but for now, this is fine."

While vineyards dot almost every state, most of the action is indeed in California, which provides the USA with two-thirds of its wine. Across the Golden State, the number of small wineries "is in the hundreds and growing," says Gladys Horiuchi of the San Francisco-based Wine Institute, a public policy group. "Who these folks are runs the gamut."

A Wine Institute list of small growers by former professions includes firefighters, physicists, entertainment executives and money managers.

A few years back, Geoff and Alison Rusack packed in their jobs as aviation attorney and international publishing manager for Disney, respectively, to take a risk on 48 acres near the California central coast town of Solvang. While today their efforts have been repaid with sold-out orders for Rusack wines, priced from \$17 to \$38, the going wasn't easy.

"I remember cleaning barrels at 3 a.m. thinking, 'Why did I do this? It'd be so much easier to just go buy a nice bottle of wine,'" says Geoff. "The reward was that first winemaker dinner, where we had friends and family and uncorked our wine. Nothing like it."

Kapcsandy also is living this American dream. His second, actually.

The first was his rise from lonely, penniless refugee -- 50 years ago this month, he arrived in New York without any family from revolution-racked Budapest -- to successful businessman with an expertise in chemical engineering.

The second is unfolding now with the help of his wife, Bobbie, and son, Louis Jr. Together, the trio, along with a small cadre of employees, produced a 2004 Cabernet-Merlot blend (a \$90 treat) that recently won praise in Food & Wine magazine. No one would doubt the appeal of living in one of the world's most temperate climates, enjoying the fruit of acres of vineyards from a chaise longue bordering a swimming pool. Kapcsandy does that.

There's a lot of work involved, too

But operating a winery also entails lesser-known delights.

They include rising at 5 a.m. to guide pickers to the best bunches -- the hotter the sun, the greater the chance of premature fermentation. Also expect to log time washing used barrels with cold water until your hands go numb; residual bacteria can spell ruin. And there's also time spent hanging out in refrigerated warehouses ensuring that each cask is fermenting at the proper rate. Without course corrections -- notably aerating the juice at the proper intervals -- nature's elixir would turn to vinegar.

Kapcsandy does all that, too.

"I reverted 30 years in my professional life," he says as he drives a truck around his vineyard, a former Beringer Estates property that -- thanks to friendships in the wine world -- wound up in his hands.

A longtime oenophile, he started collecting fine wine in 1964 and over the decades amassed a collection so vast -- 20,000 bottles -- that his current vineyard home was designed around his climate- controlled, main-floor "cellar."

Kapcsandy knew he wanted to retire to wine country with a few acres to produce wine for himself and friends, but when this parcel presented itself, his modest ambitions mushroomed into a commercial venture. His family eagerly signed on. Bobbie handles bookkeeping, while Louis Jr. quit his job with a Los Angeles company that makes movie trailers to apprentice with winemakers in Bordeaux.

"There's no substitute for being personally involved," says the younger Kapcsandy. "We're here seven days a week, watching what's going on. And I also get to hang out with my dad and do something that is such a passion for him. How great is that?"

The two make an easy team as they walk slowly down a row of vines packed with ripe grapes. Every so often, one of them will cut off a bunch that looks even vaguely imperfect and let it drop to the cork- brown soil. At times, they'll both pop grapes in their mouths, chew, then spit, a way of getting a preview of the wines that will emerge years later.

Later, father and son tour the vineyard by truck, looking for leaky irrigation hoses or damage to barn owl habitats set up to control the rodent population.

Before heading in, the two peek in on some of the 150 barrels (priced at \$1,000 a container) whose contents are slowly becoming bottle-ready. Louis Jr. hands his father a plastic cup. Lou Sr. uses a turkey-baster-looking device to drop in a few ounces of juice.

And so it goes. Outside, a soft light filters through the vines. Overhead, a hawk pinwheels through a powder-blue sky. There are no phones ringing. Clock-kept time is but a memory.

Inside the family's wine cellar, the patriarch pours a glass of 2004 vintage and pats his son on the knee.

"To make something like this," he says, holding up the glass, "and to do it not only with my family, but to leave it to my son as a perpetuation of our name, that is a dream."

He stabs a finger at his bottle's label, dominated by the Kapcsandy family crest from the old country, and grins.

"I'm working harder than I have in years," he says. "But I am a happy man."

Vintners wear many labels

Making wine may seem like a fantasy job. But what's the reality? Regardless of the profession you just left, you'll need to embrace a few new ones to pull off this metamorphosis, says Dan Berger, publisher of the newsletter Vintage Experiences.

*Geologist. Understanding the minerals in your soil is key to producing great grapes. "It might need special treatment before you plant," says Berger.

*Agronomist. Before laying a vine in the ground, "become acquainted with various growing methods." Courses on viticulture will steer you to the right varieties.

*Hydrologist. Beyond lacing drip-emitters on each stalk and overhead sprinklers to deal with frost, "there is wastewater engineering, since most counties put strict controls on wineries."

*Microbiologist. Expertise in the natural process of fermentation -- the conversion of sugar to alcohol -- is a must. "It's a simple process, but lots of things can go wrong."

*Laborer. You'll need to be adept at driving far more than the family car. "Lifting grape bins into the crusher requires a forklift and the ability to operate one."

*Contractor. Wineries require a range of permits and a penchant for detail. Alcohol "is more tightly regulated than many other consumer products, and strict record-keeping is essential."

*Artist. "Once the fruit of all these labors is ready to share with the world, you'll need to come up with a label." Judging from the eye-catching array found in stores today, it's not a job to take lightly.