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Wine Country Status: Silicon Valley Rich Have Home Vineyards

Keeping Up With the Joneses
Requires It; Bill Murphy
Will Put Your Crop in Bottles

By ANN GRIMES

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

SARATOGA, Calif.—Bill Murphy, a retired Internet marketing executive at Hewlett-Packard Co., scoffs as he drives by a small front yard full of leafy plants. "A toy vineyard," he sniffs, wending his way through the foothills of the Santa Cruz mountains, home to many of Silicon Valley's high-tech titans.

Here in the world's epicenter of new money, vines have replaced manicured lawns in a race to show off a hot new home accessory. After planting two acres three years ago, for about \$50,000, Bill Krause, former chief executive of 3Com Corp. just harvested his first crop of chardonnay. He and his wife replaced apricot orchards with vines at his multimillion-dollar 10-acre Los Altos Hills home.



Bill Murphy

"We saw friends of ours doing vineyards, and they kind of looked nice," he says. Then one thing led to another. "If you have a vineyard, you've got to have a vineyard house. So we built a vineyard house, plus a wine cellar," he says. Now, he says, he has "a main house, guest house, caretaker's house—a sort of French village, all around this vineyard."

Inktomi Inc. CEO David C. Peterschmidt took "baby pictures" of his burgeoning cabernet crop last year, Mr. Murphy reports. His grapes are young—just four years old. His first crop—enough for about 50 cases of wine—will go into Mr. Murphy's neighborhood blend, which retails for about \$28 a bottle.

Heidi Roizen, a Softbank Venture Capital managing director and Silicon Valley socialite, calls herself "vintner challenged." Even so, she and her husband planted 130 cabernet vines four years ago in the front yard of their Tuscan-style home in nearby Atherton. "They're very shabby looking," Ms. Roizen says of her crop this year—especially when compared with her neighbors. "One owns a hair salon," she says, "his look so good." At her house there are signs of a gopher invasion. And her dog has eaten his way through the quarter-acre plot. "Good thing we plant forgiving varieties," she says.

Peggy Fleming, the ice skater, has a vineyard in the area. So do priests at the Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church. "We must have hundreds of them," says Saratoga city planner Eric Pearson.

Saratoga attorney Mark Pierce squeezes one or two barrels of wine from a quarter acre of cabernet vines. Now into his sixth harvest, he has watched the vineyard trend become popular with the tech crowd. "With all due respect, I was ahead of a lot of these people," he says. "It takes a while to get into it."

Mr. Murphy has made a postretirement career out of planting and maintaining home vineyards. His own back yard is neatly lined with a quarter-acre of vines. Nearly 400 of them turned a bright wave of yellow this fall, rising up behind a hedge of roses around his swimming pool. Down the street, a quarter acre of newly picked cabernet vines cascade down a neighbor's front yard, a blanket of mottled orange. And across town, a friend has buffered his back deck with dozens of rows of cabernet grapes that are now losing their leaves.

When grapes are good—like those that grow on property owned by Leo Ware, a longtime partner with the tech-heavy Palo Alto law firm Gray Cary Ware & Freidenrich—Mr. Murphy develops labels for them. He has done that for Mr. Ware's Vanu-manutagi chardonnay. That's the name of his country estate once owned by Fanny Stevenson, the widow of writer Robert Louis Stevenson. The appellation means "Vale of the Singing Birds" in Samoan, the language of the island where the Scottish writer retreated to fight tuberculosis.

"He's very happy with his hooch," said Mr. Murphy as he joined Mr. Ware and a small crew of workers this year to snip a truckful of chardonnay grapes.

More Modest Approach

Though the home vineyard may have taken off among Silicon Valley millionaires for whom costs are a small consideration, the grapeyard trend is trickling down.

Paul Conrado has made a name for himself in these parts by building custom-designed homes with vineyards as an option. "Vineyards are way cheaper" than other landscaping. It can cost between \$300,000 and \$800,000 to design a couple of acres here, he says. Common plants run between \$2.50 and \$5 per square foot. Grapes cost just 50 cents.

Residents of towns like Saratoga favor vineyards because the cool coastal climate is so conducive to grape growing that the region is home to several well-known wineries, including Ridge Vineyards and Mount

Eden Vineyards.

Across San Francisco Bay, Tom Powers runs a small company in Martinez, that attends to home vineyards in Contra Costa County. Many of his clients don't know all that much about wine, he says, and couldn't care less about necessities like spraying, mold and bug control. They appreciate it that grapes are easy to maintain and that birds eat the leftovers. But he concedes: "You know when you have to cut your grass, you don't know when you're going to cut your grapes."

Serving Purposes

In the East Bay town of Livermore, and in flat open space south of San Jose, more housing developments are springing up with ready-made vineyards in place. Some are developers' concessions to county officials concerned about the loss of agricultural lands and Los Angeles-style suburban sprawl. Others are designed as amenities to boost the sale of houses.

At CordeValle, a new development in the San Martin foothills south of San Jose, and not far from a planned Cisco Systems Inc. campus, which is to employ 20,000 people, three-acre "vineyard estates" are going up next to a golf resort and a winery Mr. Murphy is going to run. Each house is surrounded by vines. "They're serene, upscale and romantic," developer Steve Zales, says of the vineyard plots.

Even more important, he says, they are consistent. With developers hoping to price the houses at more than \$1 million, Mr. Zales points out: "You don't run into the issue of investing a lot in your house and surrounding landscape, then having the guy next-door go cheap on you."

The Allure of the Home Vineyard