

Point

# So what's it like to start a vineyard?

By Scott Elliff

People often ask vineyard and winery owners how they got involved in growing grapes and making wine. The answers are always the same: “It’s a hobby gone wild.... It was a complete accident.... That’s a good question.... I don’t really know how this happened.” And similarly amusing and unenlightening responses.

I concur. With all of the above.

For I too am a wine grower – that’s what we like to call ourselves. You could call us farmers, but that doesn’t have nearly as much panache.

My particular story starts with the cabin — my family’s Blue Ridge foothills getaway from the stresses of work and big-city Washington life. Fresh air, mountain views, solitude, life as a country gentleman (part time, at least). Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about it, too.

We had owned it only about a year when an adjoining property became available. Once you have land in the country you always want more – in our case to help ensure that our beautiful vistas stayed that way. A neighbor on the other side had just built his own cabin – right in the middle of our own (personal!) mountain views, and we didn’t want to have that happen again. Who cares that it was an old, dead-on-its-feet apple orchard – we bought it. And then the real fun began.

I invited some local experts out to have a look and see whether there was anything that could be done to rehabilitate the old trees. Nope, they’re gone. Pause.



Spit. Scratch of dirt with boot. But old apple orchards usually make pretty good sites for vineyards.

Cut to visions of country gentleman overlooking his vineyard from his cabin porch, glass of his very own wine in hand. No matter that I knew nothing about farming — a suburban kid with a very white-collar business career. Hey, how hard could it be? I’d read up on it and learn as I went along.

Let’s do it!

Here I am seven years later – older and wiser, of course. We harvested 20

tons last year, sold to a winery that has included them in some top award-winning wines. For the first time we have bottled some under our own boutique label – yes, to drink on the front porch but also to sell to friends and colleagues eager to share in the dream.

But in the first three years the vines are just getting established and produce no harvestable grapes (not a real good “return on investment” for you financial types out there). One year it was so wet that our grapes were almost worthless. Another year we had crippling disease outbreaks that affected not only the harvest quality but also endangered the long-term health of the vines. Every year we battle mildews, Japanese beetles, and other and all sorts of natural events — hmmm, I wonder what this year’s hurricane season will be like.

No, we don’t make a profit and no, it’s not a big tax write-off (actually just the opposite). When you hear that someone is involved in something “just as a hobby” you can bet that means, “I don’t make any money doing it.”

It’s been interesting, frustrating, and rewarding – all at the same time. I’ve been fortunate enough to have outstanding people involved in the vineyard operations. I learn new things constantly. I’m in touch with nature in a way that is impossible working in an office. And every day I look up at the glorious beauty of the Piedmont all around me.

I am one lucky guy. But don’t even think about starting your own vineyard without talking to me first.