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Naggiar Vineyards: A 'piece of heaven' in Nevada County

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Every once in a while, out of the chatter of what is going on in wine country Nevada County, something will grab me out of my daydreaming and demand to be noticed.

These experiences are what dreamers live for. The hole in one. A bottle of wine you bought for \$5 and it turns out to be fantastic, and you kick yourself for not buying a case or two. That special song you hum happily day after day without giving it much thought. They surprise and delight because you didn't pay attention to what was in front of you in the first place. And this is what happened to me, as I stared in admiration for the first time ... at the vineyard in the sky.

I'd heard some distant rumbling about a large vineyard at the southern end of the county, supposedly located not far from where I live in Lake of the Pines. Asking, "Where is it?" and "What's the exact location?" I was told it's out on Wolf Mountain or out in the Wolf Road area - somewhere. Twice, I headed my old pickup in that direction, leaving Combie Road, crossing Highway 49 to Wolf Road, and left on Garden Bar. And so, I began the back-road wandering ... an adventure of discovery ... searching for the second-largest vineyard in the county. It wasn't easy, but finding it became an obsession, and the discovery was well worth the search.

I thought I knew the back roads of the county, but the beauty of discovery is always thrilling when you enter a valley for the first time - so beautiful, pristine from the beginning of time, untarnished by modern-day civilization, and I thought at the time that this beats the hell out of anything the Napa Valley has to offer. This "piece of heaven" cheerfully showcases its peace with nature, and all the surrounding slopes, as the county's prime land for grape farming.

Wolf Creek flows gently through the valley, and at times deer caught my attention as I drove along, observing the landscape before me. What really snatched me was a ranch with a herd of buffalo grazing to my left as I made a right turn, entering graveled Rosemary Lane.

Driving slowly for about a quarter of a mile, vineyards began to come into view on a ridge faraway in the distance, reaching toward the heavens. Continuing on a half mile and entering through an open gate, the full

spectrum of the vineyard came into view. This was no little operation. This was a rare attainment, which money alone could not buy and could not have been achieved without a lifetime of dreams that add up to this ideal vineyard domain.

The first indication of care and dedication for the vineyards came as I came upon posted signs: "Please slow down - vines at work" and "5 MPH Vines don't like dust!"

Several months later, when invited to a picnic at the home of this vineyard estate with its breathtaking panoramic view of Wolf Creek Valley, I met the owners, Mike and Diane Naggiar, for the first time. I needed to know more, much more; so, when the opportunity presented itself, I gladly went for a sit-down visit at their fabulous home overlooking the vineyards and valley below.

Chatting on the terrace with Diane, we walked to the edge of the patio to take in the grandeur of the vineyards, the surrounding hills and the valley floors, which become shamrock green and beautiful in spring and summer dry, but mellow under winter rains. Long ago, this place witnessed the daily rhythm of native life. Could it become the center of some of the world's finest vineyards and wineries? Mike Naggiar thinks so And so do I.

The Naggiar family originally came to the county from Saratoga, where the first agriculture focus was a one-acre plot of vines. It was here that Mike tested his feeling for Mother Earth. He loved grape farming, and upon retiring from the computer world, the die was cast He wanted to become a full-fledged gentleman farmer. For three long years the search went on, from the Napa Valley, Sonoma Valley and the foothills, seeking the best growing sites for grapes. He wanted land that would take advantage of the traditional European wine grapes and had to consider the generous days of summer heat, a dependable supply of irrigation water and soils that serve vineyards well.

Diane said, "As soon as I saw the property, I told Mike - this is it!" He came right back, "Are you sure?" They were so sure they purchased 160 acres, of which 50 acres are now producing high-quality wine grapes. They took into consideration that the vineyard's location, soil and weather conditions were determining factors as to what root stocks would be planted at different locations on the site. Fifty percent are Rhone varieties, 30 percent are Bordeaux and 20 percent are Italian varieties.

Both Diane and Mike Naggiar are animal and nature lovers and place special emphasis on the environment. From the beginning, every effort was made to be as environmentally friendly as possible and it shows, as many old oak trees on the property were kept for wildlife habitat and esthetic reasons. In evidence are a number of barn owl boxes installed throughout the vineyard to help with gopher and other rodent damage.

I asked Mike: "What are your hopes and dreams for the future?" Settling into a confident groove, I could see this was a man with great tenacity, no matter what the obstacle.

"Our goal is simply to be the top grower of wine grapes in the Sierra foothills and to exceed the quality and business expectations of the wineries we do business with."

"Is there to be a winery on the property in the future?"

A slow smile came with the answer. "Possible - perhaps, sometime in the future. We are giving this careful thought."

Before leaving, Mike stressed the point that if you have an interest, browse the Web site at www.naggiarvineyards.com to learn more about their operation.

Just as I was saying farewell, thanking both Diane and Mike for their hospitality, a plane slowly circled overhead. Mike's humor came forth. Pointing upward, he said, "That's a spy plane from the Napa Valley, up here to see what's going on in grape-growing Nevada County."