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## Backyard vineyards a labor of love in Lamorinda

By Sora O'Doherty



Michele and David Ledesma in front of their Orinda vineyard. Photo Sora O'Doherty

Tucked away, high on a sunny hill but minutes from downtown Orinda, Michele Smith-Ledesma and her husband David Ledesma are growing luscious Cabernet and Merlot red wine grapes in a small but prolific vineyard. The vineyard is about 20 years old. The Ledesma's have been nurturing it for about 11 years, having bought the property from Robert Snook. On a sunny afternoon in September the eight rows containing about 150 vines were bursting with fruit. But Michele said that the Brix, the level of sugar in the grapes, was just a tad short of what they want at harvest. At 23 degrees Brix, the grapes were probably about a week shy of harvest, when the desired Brix would be 24-25 degrees.

fashion credentials working at I. Magnin in San Francisco while attending San Francisco State and UC Berkeley. David supported her career, moving with her to New York when she had the opportunity to work for Barney's, and later to London.

California natives, the couple has traveled the world for their jobs. He specialized in mainframe computers, and she worked in fashion, including a long stint at British luxury line Burberry in London. Michele acquired her

When they decided to return to California, David found their home in the Orinda Hills, which Michele says has been perfect for the pandemic. They love the spacious modern house and keep busy with the vineyard. Before the pandemic, Michele says, she never really had time in one place to watch the entire cycle as she has now, and she really appreciates the experience. She now works as a consultant for fashion brands and skin care lines, which requires less travel, and none during the pandemic.

In the past the Ledesma's grapes were used in blends, such as the 2014 Ava Isabelle Blend by Captain Vineyards, but when the Captains decided to focus on their winery and other distractions, such as grandchildren in Connecticut and Carmel, they recommended wine-maker Tony Inzerillo. Now Inzerillo is on hand for the Ledesma harvest, and he takes the grapes from there and uses them in blended wines. The amount of wine produced varies, depending on the year's conditions. In 2014, for example, the Ledesmas produced about 48-50 bottles of wine.

According to Michele, the vineyard is carefully managed. Selvin Alvarado, who has managed the Ledesma's vineyard for the past three years, was trained by Sal Captain after Captain and his wife, Susan, decided that they could no longer manage the vineyard. The grapes are protected from critters that would love to gorge on them, from moles and gophers to racoons. Close to harvest the grapes are enclosed in netting to protect them. Sal Captain introduced the Ledesmas to deep watering, which improves water use efficiency, and everything used on the grapes is natural. Captain came from a background as an engineer in medical devices. When he decided to go into winemaking, he applied business techniques to the process.

Captain views the process like a business project, requiring research, planning, development and risk management. Both Captain and his wife have taken classes at UC Davis, which he says is one of the most prestigious agricultural universities in the world. Now she grows the grapes and he makes the wine.

In developing his style of vineyard management, Captain says, "I noticed how many things people could do better, such as focusing on vineyard organization and orientation, planting in harmony with where the sun rises and sets, and maintenance of what they plant." He added, "During maintenance of a vineyard, if the plants are healthy, if the lanes are properly aligned, if that is all done right, your job is to make sure the plants get adequate water and nutrients." A key factor is keeping an eye out for diseases, such as powdery mildew.

The growing season begins at the end of January or the beginning of February with bud break and ends with harvest in late September or October. Captain talks about the many books written about the journey toward giving you the fruit at the end of the year. He has strived to apply all these principals, and to simplify many processes.

Alvarado comes twice a week and works on everything from pruning to irrigation to netting up the vines when the grapes require protection.

However, Michele Ledesma is still out in the vineyard every day to see how every vine is doing.

For more about wine making in Lamorinda, see

[www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue1001/Lamorinda-Now-a-Name-of-Viticultural-Significance.html](http://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue1001/Lamorinda-Now-a-Name-of-Viticultural-Significance.html)



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