

Forbes

5 Surprising Tips To Buying Land In Napa

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CALISTOGA, California — Let's say you want to own vineyard property in Napa.

You know it'll be expensive. That's pretty much a given.

Yet the desire and the ability to write a big check doesn't necessarily translate into a deed with your name on it.

The reality of buying property in the Napa Valley is that it's never that easy.

Not finding the land.

Not negotiating the price.

And definitely not convincing the current owner to sell to you, which can be a surprisingly difficult obstacle to overcome.

What's even less easy is transforming that real estate purchase into something profitable.

Today we look at one winery here in Calistoga, and the woman behind it, who not only overcame the obstacles to ownership, but has made her Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon wines into some of the hottest and in-demand labels coming out of Napa today.

Transitioning from a highly successful sales and marketing career in technology and aeronautics, Suzanne Phifer Pavitt discusses five surprising tips to buying land in Napa.



Suzanne Phifer Pavitt pours her “Date Night” label Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon.
Photo Credit: Cathy Huyghe

Look Off the Beaten Path. Even When It’s On the Beaten Path.

There was a simple sign near an old cattle gate along the Silverado Trail, about midway between Calistoga and St. Helena. The sign said For Sale By Owner, Phifer Pavitt remembers, with just a phone number to call. There were no roads through the property, no power, and no water. Yet it was “right in the thick of it,” in Napa Valley.

Direct Questions Won’t Necessarily Get Direct Answers

Phifer Pavitt called the number and an elderly man of Italian descent answered. The property had been in his family for 100 years, he said, and had changed ownership only three times since 1890 when it was part of a tract established by the original settlers to the area. Phifer Pavitt said she was interested in how large the piece of property was, and how much it costs. Rather than answer those questions, the man said that it’s a special piece of property, and that she’d have to come and walk it.

23 Acres of Potential

The current owner was wary: he'd turned down numerous offers in the past, suggesting that he wouldn't sell to buyers who were interested only in denuding the forest for its real estate value. Yet it was that preserve of nature — what Phifer Pavitt called “23 acres of potential” — that was so alluring as the site to realize the couple's vision for a small boutique winery, a vegetable garden (Phifer Pavitt is an avid gardener and canner), and olive trees for oil.

There's Money. And Then There's More Than Money.

The dinner conversation that night, between Phifer Pavitt and her husband Shane Pavitt after they hiked the property, went something like this:

Her: I think we should make an offer on the property.

Him: What are you *thinking*? That would be crazy.

Her: I just have this feeling.

Him: That's a pretty big feeling.

Knowing she'd need to convince him with numbers — Shane Pavitt had worked in the financial markets his whole life — Phifer Pavitt asked for a menu she could take away so that she could write up what, for them, would be the perfect offer, starting with the current finance rate.

“If the owner accepts this,” she said, “then it was meant to be.”

It Takes Longer than You'd Think. A Lot Longer.

Five days later, they owned the land. Yet the purchase was only the first step in a very long process. Ultimately it took six years to get the permits to plant vines, and six years for the permits to build their home. In the meantime, while still working their dual careers in San Francisco, the couple car camped for two years at the top of the property out of the back of their Chevy Tahoe.

“We hung a sun shower, and I got a good cast iron skillet and seasoned it,” Phifer Pavitt said. “We created a fire ring. We had our two little lawn chairs. We cleared out a little visual break, so at the top of the hill we could see the whole valley. We'd drink a great bottle of wine, sleep under the stars, and dream about this adventure.”

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