



# ROBERT LAVINE'S VINEYARD QUEST

Establishing a new environmental ethic at California's  
historic Santa Margarita Ranch BY LYNN ALLEY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VERNON WILLIAMS

From small acorns do mighty vineyard projects grow. At least that's what Robert LaVine hopes to accomplish in his corner of California. • On a warm afternoon this past summer, the aptly named LaVine, who oversees Robert Mondavi's vineyard operations in the Central Coast region, presided over an unusual assembly to realize his ambition. Children, parents and a few teachers

had come out to join the Mondavi crew and local environmentalists in the planting of four different varieties of oaks. It took place on the huge Santa Margarita Ranch, about 8 miles northeast of San Luis Obispo, where Mondavi has planted 1,000 acres of vineyards. • The tree planting is part of a unique master plan for sustainable agriculture on the 13,800-acre ranch. Santa

“Oak trees are iconic on the Central Coast,” says LaVine. “It’s a big issue for landowners, who often rip ‘em out when planting new vineyards. We think they’re beautiful, so we’re planting more of them.”

Margarita is a place where history and modernity have coexisted uneasily in the past: Grapegrowing on the property dates to Mission times and development issues have more than once embroiled the land’s owners, neighbors and the local political establishment. Even grapes are not above suspicion. The vineyard-planting boom that has swept California and especially the Central Coast region (which includes Monterey, San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties) has often come at the expense of native stands of huge, stately oaks. Those oaks in turn have become powerful symbols in local preservation battles.

“Oak trees are iconic on the Central Coast,” says LaVine, who looks boyish at 47. “People here love ‘em. Environmentalist or not. It’s a big issue for landowners, who often rip ‘em out when planting new vineyards. We think they’re beautiful, so today we’re planting more of them.” Indeed, not only are they adding more oak trees, but not one was destroyed in the planting of the Santa Margarita vineyards, thanks to LaVine. Also fittingly, these small sprouted oaks came from acorns gathered on the ranch and planted last summer.

Several other measures, such as the minimal use of pesticides and fungicides (although eco-friendly), cutting-edge drip irrigation systems and low-impact cultivation techniques, put the Mondavi vineyard development at the vanguard of sustainable agriculture in the region if not the state.

Then there are the leaky fences and the goats.

When first surveying the property for areas to plant vineyards in 1999, LaVine hired a pair of local biologists to identify populations of animals that migrate through the property. Corridors that the wildlife use were identified, while measures were put in place to keep out deer and wild boar, which feed on the tender shoots of young grapevines.

“We put in what we call a ‘leaky fence,’ that allows smaller animals with minimal impact on the vineyards to go through. We left gaps where foxes, raccoons, bobcats and coyotes can get underneath the fence. The fence is 6 feet tall, with no barbed wire on top, so that if a deer is being chased by a predator it can get across without hurting itself,” LaVine explains enthusiastically.

Some animals play an important role on the Santa Margarita team. “Star thistle is a problem here in the Central Coast. It’s a

non-native, highly invasive plant species, so we’ve currently got a herd of goats munching away on the property,” says LaVine. Other cutting-edge environmental measures include perches for hawks from which they can hunt rodents, nesting sites for bats that eat insects, and a full-time biologist to monitor the health of creeks on the property.

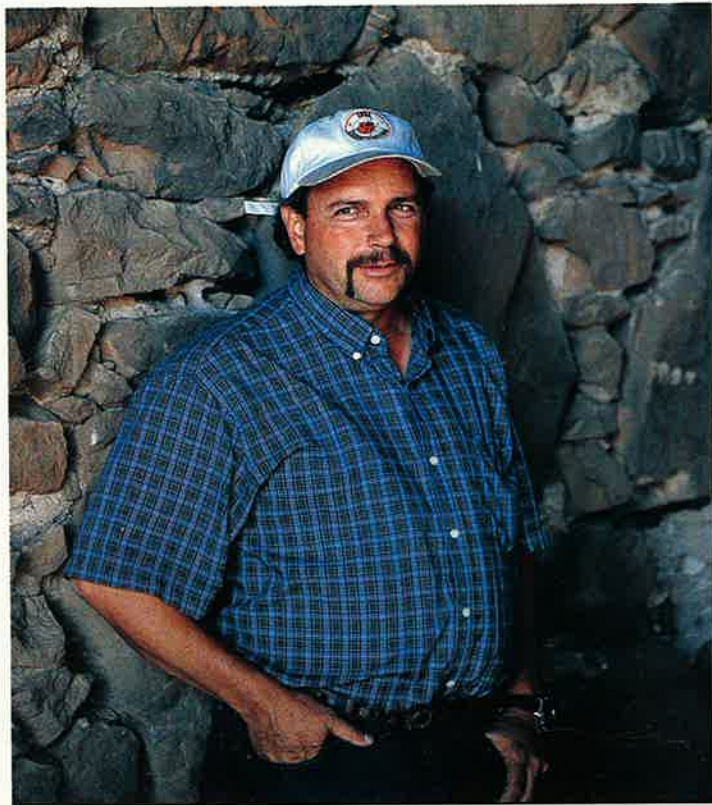
The Mondavi enterprise is the latest chapter in the long saga of the Santa Margarita Ranch, a mammoth and strategic slice of California’s heritage. The ranch occupies a bucolic valley bordered on three sides by the rugged Santa Lucia Mountains, an area that is mostly protected as national forest. Spreading oak trees and tawny grasslands are common in the lowlands; the hillsides are covered with chaparral and woods. In many respects, and despite long odds, this is a land little changed since the first Franciscan missionaries arrived more than 200 years ago.

Santa Margarita was originally an *asistencia*, or outlying farm, for nearby Mission San Luis Obispo; wheat, grapes and vegetable crops were grown and cattle raised to support the mission community in the late 18th century. Through several sets of owners since then, the integrity and rural nature of the property has miraculously been maintained.

In 1999, the Santa Margarita Ranch was purchased by a group that includes Rob Rossi, a local developer known for his passion for preserving the beauty of the Central Coast. The purchase came after years

of contentious debate on how best to develop the property. In 1998, San Luis Obispo County officials reached an agreement with the former owners of the ranch that would allow for the future construction of 550 homes, a large resort and equestrian and hiking trails. However, Rossi and his partners are intent on scaling back those plans and limiting development to a tiny sliver of the property.

Projects that are currently under consideration are a guest retreat or ranch, a museum at the old mission *asistencia* and possibly up to 50 affordable homes next to the tiny town of Santa Margarita. To that end, Rossi and his partners have worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (with whom they recently signed an agreement protecting the property and three endangered species for which it is a natural habitat), the Trust for Public Lands, California Rangeland Trust, the Army Corps of



Neil Roberts, a Robert Mondavi viticulturist, works with LaVine to help keep vineyard land more sustainable, specifically by stemming erosion.



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Engineers and the local Chumash Tribal Council to put together an environmentally balanced development plan.

In order to defray a portion of the purchase price, and at the same time retain a sense of the working-ranch heritage of the property, the Santa Margarita Ranch, LLC, leased 1,000 acres of gently rolling hills to Mondavi in 2000. With its sheltered location, good water supply and Mediterranean climate, the ranch offers nearly ideal conditions for growing grapes.

Having Robert LaVine oversee this land, with his commitment to sustainable farming, was an important part of the deal for both sides. The 6-foot-tall LaVine supervises 7,500 acres of Mondavi-owned Central Coast vineyards, and brokers 60 independent grower contracts. He plays a key role in environmentally balanced viticulture in the Central Coast, Mondavi-owned land or not.

LaVine says his concern for the environment stems partly from his childhood in California's Central Valley. His father, Paul, worked for a time as the Stanislaus County Farm Advisor, helping local ranchers access the latest academic research on agricultural practices. "There were five kids in my family. We'd

sit around the dinner table and argue with my dad about the environment and chemicals. That was during the '50s, when the goal in every farmer's life was to have an all-electric kitchen and plenty of chemicals in the field," explains LaVine.

**W**hen LaVine told his father he wanted to become a farmer, his father's reply was, "Are you crazy?" LaVine says. "He had lived around Italian and Portuguese farmers who had worked themselves into their graves growing grapes for large Central Valley concerns. But I was 20, and I knew I was smarter than that."

LaVine, who holds a degree in biology from the University of California, Davis, one of the world's leading institutions for viticultural research, began working for Mondavi in 1985. His mentor was Phil Freese, then vice president of viticulture at Robert Mondavi in the Napa Valley.

"Once I entered Mondavi world, the whole issue of environmentally responsible farming came to the fore," says LaVine. "Phil Freese is a great guy, one of my all-time heroes, and he had



Robert Mondavi had to work with the U.S. government, various trusts and an Indian tribe to gain permission to plant 1,000 acres to grapes on Santa Margarita Ranch.

a profound influence upon my life. Phil coined the phrase 'wine-growing.' He was a pioneer in recognizing the connection between the vineyard and the winery, and I just happened to be there when his 'aha' was happening."

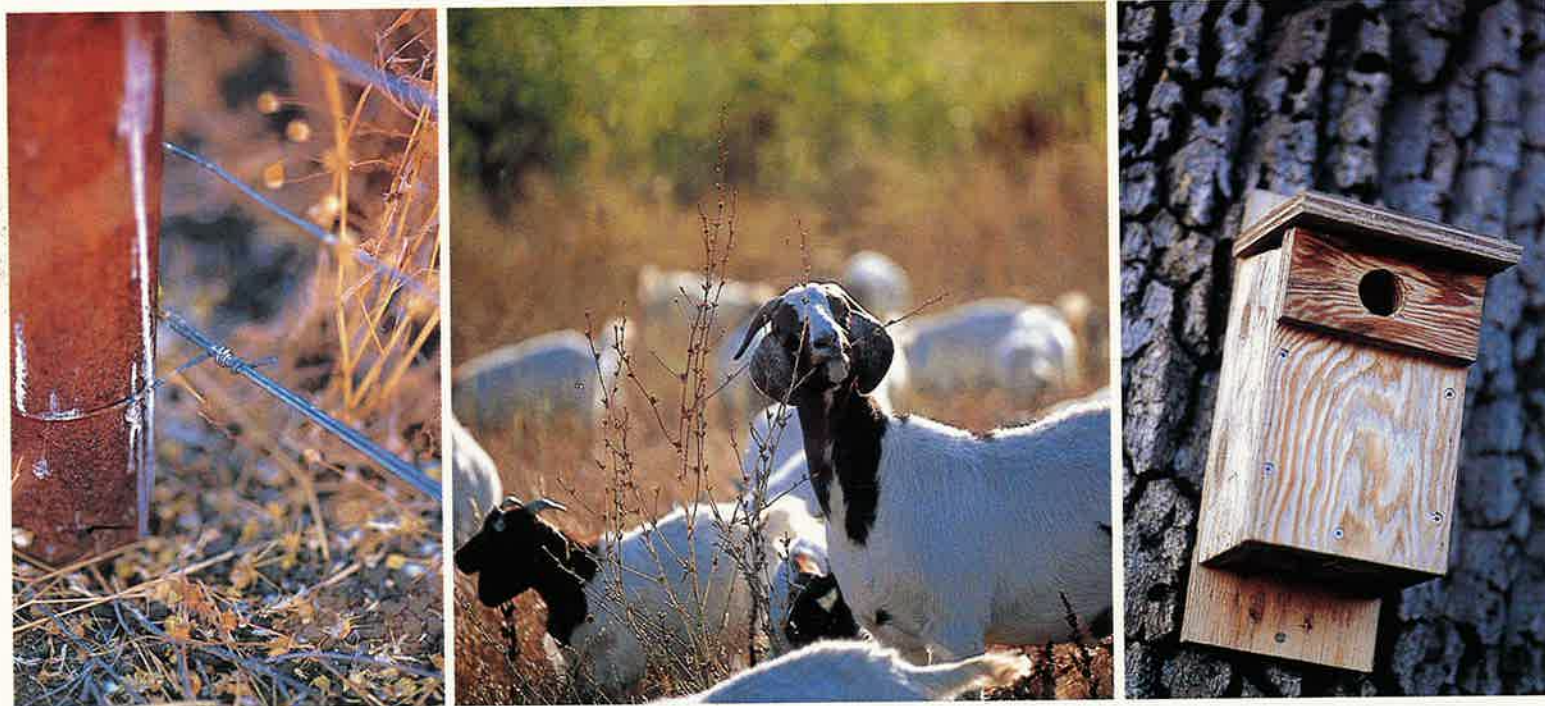
In 1988, Mondavi bought vineyards in Santa Maria and put LaVine in charge of the operation. In 1995, under LaVine's leadership, Mondavi was instrumental in introducing the region's grape-growers to environmentally sustainable practices through the Central Coast Vineyard Team (CCVT). This group sought to bring together growers, university researchers, farm advisors and winery officials in informal settings to talk about sustainable practices. Eventually, the organization developed a positive-points system to gauge grower's progress in adopting the group's goals. It was a key step in getting the growers to change their ways: Rather than emphasizing penalties, it reinforced their efforts toward more eco-friendly practices. Today the CCVT is an independent grower's organization supported by wineries such as Fetzer, Kendall-

ernet Franc." The leading varieties at the ranch are Cabernet Sauvignon (52 percent) and Merlot (25 percent).

"Santa Margarita Ranch cranked sustainability up a notch because it was such a public forum," says LaVine. "From an environmental standpoint, the ranch was 'where the rubber meets the road,' so to speak."

Besides environmental concerns, there were also cultural issues to address. The Santa Margarita Ranch property appears to have been first inhabited up to 9,000 years ago by indigenous peoples. Findings on the Santa Margarita Ranch date the property as one of the oldest archeological sites in San Luis Obispo County.

"Cultural resources were a new issue for me," said LaVine. "The Native Americans on the Central Coast are trying to save what they see as their heritage. They actually sued the former property owners to protect their rights. When we did our initial



LaVine uses many eco-friendly measures to ensure that man treads softly on the ranch. From left: While the "leaky fence" keeps out wild boars and deer, who like to eat grapevine shoots, smaller and less trouble-making animals can get through; as an alternative to pesticides, goats are allowed to munch on the invasive star-thistle plant; pest-eating birds are lured to the area by newly constructed homes.

Jackson, Gallo and Mondavi, as well as government agencies.

In the words of Kris O'Connor, executive director of the CCVT: "The fact that there is a statewide sustainable movement today is the direct result of the early efforts of Central Coast Vineyard Team and Robert LaVine."

Says LaVine, "In those days, we didn't know what to call it. We called it 'natural' and 'sustainable,' but the bottom line was that we were all trying to wean ourselves and our growers off heavy-duty chemical usage."

Then in 1998, when the idea of planting vineyards on the virgin territory at Santa Margarita Ranch was offered to Mondavi, LaVine jumped at the opportunity. "There were no neighboring vineyards," says LaVine, "and we had been pondering the idea of growing great Cabs in the Paso [Robles] area. The Santa Margarita Ranch property fit our picture of what it would take to get those great Cabs. Currently we have Cab, with a bit of Merlot, some Syrah, Zinfandel, Malbec, Petit Verdot and Cab-

ripping [deep digging of virgin territory with a tractor], we had a Native American monitor from the local Chumash tribe watching all the time. We had an archeologist and someone from the tribe survey the land prior to the ripping, as well." Antiquities unearthed were limited to pottery shards.

According to LaVine, Mondavi has no plans for further vineyard development at the ranch. The current glut of grapes in California makes new plantings superfluous, as least for the time being, he says. This harvest will produce the first crop from Santa Margarita Ranch, which will be used to supply the winery's Coastal Private Selection line of wines (which has replaced its Coastal brand) as well as its Woodbridge California bottlings.

Like any good grapegrower, LaVine's long-range hopes lie in the quality of fruit that the ranch will produce. "My dream is that it is so damn good that it will be made into its own brand," LaVine says. Spoken like a true believer.

Lynn Alley is a freelance writer based in San Diego.

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