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Anderson Valley, Then and Now

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Although few people know it, my “wine life” began around the time I first visited Mendocino’s Anderson Valley. The year was 1970. I had read about a tract of land suitable to plant vineyards that was being offered for sale. Because of the property’s remoteness, the price seemed quite cheap compared with the cost of vineyard land in Napa or Sonoma.

I had been drinking wine since the mid-1960s, and fallen in love with it. As I read about the Anderson Valley property, I saw a chance to take my love affair with wine to the next level.

I could plant a vineyard and become a winegrower!

I was living in New York and decided to fly out and have a look. The broker was a young man by the name of Tony Husch. He and his wife, Gretchen, owned a small, struggling family winery in the heart of Anderson Valley, in the town called Philo.

For a city boy, Philo represented a fantasy escape. Bare wilderness, mainly woods and open fields, and apple orchards. Little in the way of civilization or development. Philo’s commercial center was Jack’s General Store—right out of a Western movie. The next town over was Boonville, where my favorite Anderson Valley eating spot, the Sundown Café, was located. Great burgers, fries and shakes. Never mind that it was the only place to eat for many miles!

I fell in love with the property Husch showed me, whose 230 acres included a 50-acre apple orchard. The rolling hills and panoramic views were breathtaking.

I convinced a friend to invest with me. We purchased the land for about \$1,000 an acre, with only 10 percent down. My dream was to develop a vineyard.

While there were two working wineries in the area—pioneers Husch and Edmeades—the region was considered questionable for winegrowing because of its cool, coastal climate. Getting grapes to ripen seemed iffy. I went to the University of California at Davis to meet with Albert Winkler, a legendary professor and author of the classic *General Viticulture*, who was familiar with Anderson Valley.

It was his opinion that Region One grape varieties—those suited for the coolest of climates—could ripen there.

Other investors were brought in as partners to help finance the vineyard’s development. We hired a young viticulturist, Mike Rowan, formerly of Sonoma’s Jordan Vineyard and Winery, to head up the project. We planted four grapes—Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Gewürztraminer and Riesling.

When the vineyard was mature and grapes began to be harvested, new neighboring wineries bought our crop with enthusiasm. I spent about a decade visiting the property many times each year. In the mid-1980s, a wealthy gentleman came along and made the partnership an offer that we couldn’t refuse.

Sadly, my dream was over. But my memories of and love for Anderson Valley will never leave me.

Enjoy this issue’s cover story on Mendocino and the Anderson Valley by senior editor James Laube. Better yet, if you get a chance, take a drive up there. Following Laube’s story, we’ve included a travel guide to help you find your way around this unique wine country. Just a two-and-a-half-hour drive north of San Francisco, the area today has many small, family-run wineries. Visit a few, taste their wines. It’s one of the nicest places on earth.

