





## Wine's wild ride

Grower offers jeep tours of family vineyard

Capital Press Staff Writer



Newkirk inspects a load of

recently-harvested grapes at

her ranch near Paso Robles.

Newkirk started an experiential learning

to public tours.

component to the farm, opening the family operation PASO ROBLES - With gentle persuasion, winegrape grower Cindy Newkirk turns the key of her family's vintage 1958 Jeep, "WineYard

Cool morning fog has hypnotized Willy into a deep sleep. After a few coughs the decades-old workhorse rumbles to a wild start.

A spark ignites in Newkirk's blue eyes as she throws Willy into reverse and the two lunge into their first vineyard tour of the day.

Together they know every inch of the Steinbeck Vineyards. Vertical hills known to roll even the best tractor drivers. The 1928 barn, which has been the backdrop for many professional photo shoots. And the winegrapes, ripening sweet this fall, which Newkirk's father, Howie, started planting in the early 1980s.

"People told him he was kind of crazy," Newkirk says of her father's transition into vineyards.

They wouldn't think that anymore. Today the Newkirks sustain a family vineyard operation, growing premium winegrapes for a host of winery clients in one of the fastest growing wine regions in California.

Howie, 68, still oversees the "small, but not small" operation, while all the other family members take hands-on roles.

Help with record keeping comes from Newkirk's husband, Tim. Her son also pitches in, along with a vineyard manager, who isn't really family, but is also family.



her vineyard in the classic 1958 Jeep — named

to give public tours.

WineYard Willy — she uses

"And I'm the sort of daughter who does what needs doing," Newkirk says. In one breath she explains that she's a tractor driver and has also taken an important leadership role in the operation.

The fifth generation to live on this land, Newkirk has taken the business to a new level. After time away to cultivate her love of teaching and youth ministry, she came back to the ranch in the mid 1990s. She found a way to incorporate all her passions into one, new venture.

She built the WineYard, a simple little schoolhouse that's part museum, part classroom.

It sits atop a small hill entirely surrounded by vineyards. From there, she teaches visitors about her family's history in the industry (starting back to 1923) and the science and art involved in growing premium grapes.

Newkirk takes a drive through Newkirk doesn't let anyone leave without first realizing that great wine begins in the vineyard with sustainable fruit.

"I love having the people come and experience who we are," she says. "I need to be with people."

On foot, by bus or traversing the vineyards in Willy, Newkirk is, above all, the family's spokesperson and tour guide. With her engaging personality she brings to life tales of Willy's wildest days, the moment her parents, just sweethearts then, chose the perfect hilltop for their future home and goals of someday watching her son raise his own children on this land.

Although she chose the job to satisfy her desire to educate, Newkirk's adventures in agritourism have helped the family operation diversify.

"It's absolutely critical to agriculture," Newkirk says

But it's not the last chapter for the winegrape grower. She and Tim are already planning to take their operation from the vineyard to the cork. Along with two partners, the duo is preparing to launch the Steinbeck Vinevards and Winery

In the next year they'll begin producing about 1,000 cases of cabernet sauvignon, petite syrah, merlot and viognier.

The winegrapes will be specially chosen from the vineyard's best blocks, so Steinbeck fans can see, and taste, what makes their winegrapes special.

As much as the family tries to spread out its investments, tough times are inevitable in a cyclical industry. Newkirk says they survive the rough spots by managing their

"In a boom year you don't spend all your money," she says. "And in a lean year you manage your costs. In an up year you have to realize it's not always (going to be) this way.

After coaxing "WineYard Willy" up a steep hill with a vineyard view that clearly marks the grand finale of the vineyard tour. Newkirk puts the old guy into low gear. He still soars down the dusty, bumpy trail,

When asked if Willy has ever toppled over on one of the rough ranch roads, Newkirk fakes a frown.

"We just won't talk about that," she says.

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