



Wine's wild ride

Grower offers jeep tours of family vineyard

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Winegrape grower Cindy Newkirk inspects a load of recently-harvested grapes at her ranch near Paso Robles. Newkirk started an experiential learning component to the farm, opening the family operation to public tours.



WineYard owner Cindy Newkirk takes a drive through her vineyard in the classic 1958 Jeep — named WineYard Willy — she uses to give public tours.

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 Vineyards 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 finances wisely.

"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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