

# PORTRAITS *of the* ARTISANS

Larger-than-life, luxury-loving Los Angeles isn't just the consummate consumer any longer. As befits its 21st-century stature as an international hub nonpareil, LA is fast producing its own brand of artisanal, creative chic. Homegrown "haute for export. Take that, Paris.

BY FINN-OLF JONES

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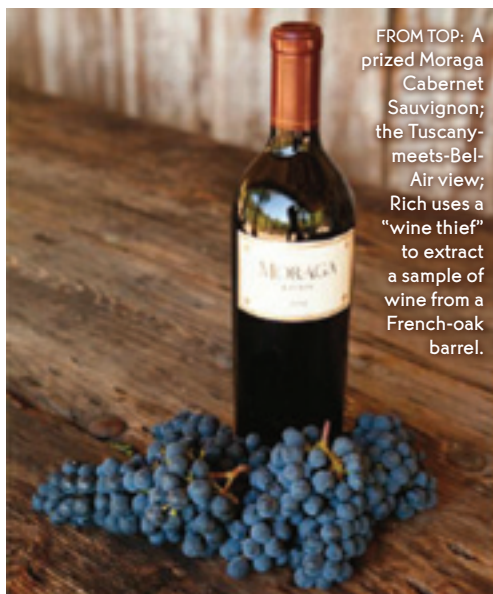
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**The prince of Bel-Air:**  
Moraga Vineyards'  
Scott Rich rules over  
eight acres of the priciest  
farmland in the world.

## SCOTT RICH crafts Alain Ducasse–worthy grands crus from a little burg called Bel-Air.

FROM TOP: A prized Moraga Cabernet Sauvignon; the Tuscany-meets-Bel-Air view; Rich uses a “wine thief” to extract a sample of wine from a French-oak barrel.



The big news at Moraga Vineyards in Bel-Air is that media tycoon Rupert Murdoch has just bought the 16-acre estate for \$28.8 million. But that shouldn't worry the ardent fans of Los Angeles's only vineyard/winemaker. For starters, Murdoch, whose own childhood was spent in his native Melbourne (near such wine regions as Yarra Valley and Mornington Peninsula), has promised to keep the vineyard going. (“Great wine!” he tweeted when he purchased the estate.) For another, Moraga is good business.

Only 3,000 bottles of wine a year come out of eight acres set aside for the vineyard, but they retail for around \$65 to \$125 per bottle. Despite being located on some of the priciest urban real estate in the world, the vineyard actually makes a profit—the lofty prices are possible because Moraga has a reputation for quality that has made it a worldwide brand—including in France. “It's the salmon swimming upstream,” says Moraga's winemaker Scott Rich, 56, about the exports to France, where his Merlots and Cabernet Sauvignons are served in multi-star restaurants like Alain Ducasse. “I think it shows the quality of the wine that it is liked in places where no one really cares about or knows our story.”

But it's quite a story. Just across the 405 from The J. Paul Getty Museum, the chaparral-covered hills topped by mansions suddenly give way to orderly rows of vines. Drive up Moraga Road, make a right behind a nondescript wooden gate, and suddenly you could be in Tuscany, replete with a steep vineyard and the entrance to a wine cave next to a tiny winemaking facility in the shade of a century-old spreading oak.

This is where Rich works his magic. Hired by former owner Tom Jones, who created the vineyard two decades ago out of what was once the horse ranch of director Victor Fleming (of *Gone with the Wind* fame), Rich now makes wine that has earned the praise of such renowned critics as Robert Parker and the *Financial Times*' Jancis Robinson (who cited it as one of her favorite California wineries).

“Most winemakers don't have this opportunity in a lifetime,” says Rich, eyes twinkling above a small goatee that makes him resemble a young Frank Zappa. A native of Chatsworth, Rich studied enology at UC Davis. Since then, he has had a knack for nurturing vines in unusual places, starting

with R.H. Phillips Wine Company, which hired him to create a vineyard north of Sacramento. He eventually launched his own wine label, Talisman, in Glen Ellen, and now splits his time between there and L.A. “Look at how [rich in calcium] this soil is,” says Rich, scooping up the earth beneath a row of Merlot grapes ripening in the sun, reflecting off the Pacific glistening between the Santa Monica mountains. “This was all once under water, and the drainage makes it very similar to other great winemaking areas, like Burgundy.”

The constant sea breeze keeps things chillier here than in other local wine regions, lowering the high sugar levels typical to California grapes. “This temperate climate means that the wine is not a Napa fruit bomb type of thing,” notes Rich. “It has a subtle, herbal quality more associated with European wines.”

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clusters grow darker. “This is a little pocket that gets protected from the breezes, so we planted Cabernet here,” says Rich. “They thrive more in warmer spots.”

At this time of year, the juice of these grapes will be brought down to the large steel fermentation vats in the hypermodern stone and glass winemaking building at the bottom of the hill. Afterward, the red wine will be stored in French-oak barrels lining a 200-foot cave dug into the side of the hill. The vineyard even has its own bottling machine. “Most small vineyards hire mobile units to come and do their bottling for them, but we want to be able to time everything perfectly,” says Rich. “It might seem extravagant for such small batches, but that way we can best control the quality.”

Leave it to L.A., where even grapes get the star treatment. [moragavineyards.com](http://moragavineyards.com)