

Los Angeles' best kept secret, Moraga Bel Air

Text & photo: Claes Löfgren

The Moraga Bel Air winery is completely unknown to most Los Angeles residents, including wine enthusiasts.

It lies anonymously behind a high wall along Moraga Drive in Bel Air, the city's most mythical residential area. Here, the posh villas of billionaires line the streets of Moraga Canyon and unauthorized visitors are not welcome. Land prices in Bel Air are probably the highest in the world.

The property was built in the 1930s by Victor Fleming, director of *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz*. He wanted a place in the mountains to relax and entertain his guests.

It was built as a ranch with horses and a large house. Aircraft manufacturer Tom Jones bought the property in 1959 and decided in 1980 that it would be fun to plant grapes on the steep hillside. The idea was to emulate a Bordeaux chateau that the Joneses had fallen in love with.

The calcareous and partly marine soil was considered suitable. They chose to plant chardonnay and sauvignon blanc. After three years, everything had to be replanted because it was affected by Pierce's Disease.

After replanting, Cabernet Sauvignon and new clones of Sauvignon Blanc proved to be the most successful. Merlot, cabernet franc and petit verdot were added later. The altitude, about 270 meters above sea level, and the cool winds from the sea keep the grapes from being cooked during the hot summer months.

The Joneses enlisted the help of various winemakers and vineyard experts to get the best results, and the grapes were previously trucked to Napa after harvest where they were vinified.

The first commercial vintage was in 1989, but the big breakthrough was in 2005 when the construction of their own winery was completed. Embedded in the mountain is everything needed for high-quality winemaking. The Bordeaux model lives on, they make Moraga Red and Moraga White.

The white wine is 100% sauvignon blanc fermented in steel vats. Part of the must, 20% has been allowed to ferment in new French oak barrels and then blended with the rest of the wine. An elegant wine that lives up to its model and feels very "un-American".

The red wine is dominated by cabernet sauvignon followed by merlot. Petit verdot and cabernet franc spice up a little extra but are negligible. Typical Bordeaux with blackcurrant, a little higher alcohol than the model, but still very elegant and delicious.

Winemaker for many years was Scott Rich, who had great success with the wines of Robert Parker and others.

A new chapter in Moraga's history was written in 2013, when billionaire Rupert Murdoch was allowed to buy the property in exchange for a promise to continue winemaking. He lives in the house when he is in town and, according to the papers, is getting married for the fifth time this summer at the vineyard.

Former wife Jerry Hall was reportedly very involved in the winery.

Paul Warson has been winemaker and manager since 2021 and has taken over with great respect for the success of his predecessor. He has nevertheless steered the work towards more ecological thinking, with different cover crops between the rows, no chemicals in the vineyard and since last year he has hired 300 sheep to graze through the cultivation, instead of mechanically cutting the plants.

He has a solid background working in large vineyards in Napa and Santa Barbara. Now he enjoys his work here, but also finds time to make some wine under his own name. With grapes from Los Angeles of course! A nice person who doesn't seem impressed by who he works for.

The only restriction I get is not to take pictures of Murdoch's residence, which seems reasonable.

Twice I have visited Moraga. The first time during the winter, when it was quite quiet and the vines were dormant. The second visit was in the summer, when the grapes were well advanced and the vineyard was large and lush. We wandered around the steep slopes that are more reminiscent of Côte Rôtie than Bordeaux. The vegetation outside the rows of vines attracts bees and other insects, chickens run around in a pasture.

A rural idyll in the bizarrely large city of Los Angeles. The steep slopes make tough demands on the eight full-time workers, everything must be done by hand.

I also got to attend a tasting of old vintages held at Lincoln Wines in Venice. Customers of the wine shop and the Moraga Wine Club were able to buy tickets and sample old vintages dating back to 1997. It was a great evening and showed that the wines age well.

Production is around 10,000 bottles a year and the price is well over a thousand dollars for the red, 140 dollars and a little less for the white, 90 dollars. Yet the business makes no profit and is a hobby for Murdoch, who can afford it.

Moraga Bel Air does not yet accept individual visitors, but Paul Warson says they will become a little more accessible with a few visitors and with some different events. The wines are available in high-profile wine shops and through their wine club.

An oasis in the urban jungle!