



The Vintners' Vision : The Burbank Ranch Estate Vineyard and Winery

By **Susan Kime** in **Epicurean, Travel**

To those who have lived and worked in Southern or Northern California, and traveled by car to or from San Francisco, Los Angeles or San Diego, there is a stretch of coastline halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco called the Central Coast. And somehow, very much like any quiet stretch between big cities, the Central Coast was left alone for much of the 19th and 20th centuries. What WAS there, and what made this area somewhat better known in the 1920s, was the Hearst Castle at San Simeon, built by William Randolph Hearst, for his lady friend, Marion Davies. Oh, the scandal. Watch *Citizen Kane* to discover more.



Hearst Castle, near the town of San Simeon, Central Coast California

But even back then, and for years after, the quiet of the hills, the sound of the surf and the Elephant Seals was not interrupted by the sound of tractors and concrete mixers, except for the construction of gas stations, diners and maybe a motel here and there. Today, though, this area is more populated with beach towns, but still, not metropolises.



Vineyard/Winery Signs near Templeton, California

Yet, east of Highway 1, over the first range of central coast mountains, is an area that feels like Tuscany – full of olive trees, aromatic lavender, and now, a lot of grapes. The vineyards wineries in and around the larger city of Paso Robles, and the smaller town of Templeton, have seduced many connoisseurs to take the 2-3 hour drive down from San Francisco, Napa and Sonoma, and up from Los Angeles to see the vineyards, taste the olive oil, and drink the wines of this area.



Burbank Ranch Winery & Bistro, near the Tasting Room

One of the youngest and most awarded is the Burbank Ranch Estate Vineyard and Winery. Though a young vineyard, the land and soil was part of a larger land grant holding, Rancho La Asuncion, that had been subdivided through a survey back in 1886.



Sunrise At The Vineyard

Traveling through the gates of Burbank Ranch Estate Vineyard and Winery, up the drive, there is a sense of quiet, balance, and harmony. Eucalyptus, Pampas grass, white and live oak, olive trees and lavender all surround the silent, yet green, nearly tangible growth of the 45 acres of grape vines.



Pampas Grass and Vineyard Grapes at Burbank Ranch

Burbank Ranch is an 83.5-acre parcel located in the El Pomar District of Templeton (within the Paso Robles AVA.) The property has panoramic views of the Salinas Valley, the Santa Lucia Mountains, and oak-lined seasonal creeks. The gently rolling hills of Templeton can be viewed from every vantage point on the ranch. The nearby Templeton Gap in the Santa Lucia Mountains – between the Pacific Ocean and Templeton – allows cool Pacific Ocean air to flow nightly into the Ranch, which is approximately 26 miles from the Pacific Ocean, and between 1020 and 1125 feet above sea level.



The Peace Of The Land and the Vineyards, Burbank Ranch

We were here a week before harvest, when Fred and Melody Burbank were riding their Kubota RTV between grape blocks in the vineyard, assessing their growth and health, deciding which to pick first.



Fred Burbank In His Kubota RTV, In The Vineyard

The soil is well fertilized and watered, and the grapes, picked in small bunches have a wild, vivid taste. At harvest, all the fruit will be hand-picked, and picking starts long before sunrise, as the pre-dawn light is enough for the workers, often including Fred and Melody, to see the grape clusters. Then, after picking, the fruit is immediately taken to the winery for hand sorting, crushing, and fermenting.



Freshly Picked Fruit

This commitment to creating something living, personal, and meaningful are the root systems of the Burbank Estate Wine brand. And the wines themselves have been honored by multiple awards, those that take other vineyards decades to win. We met and discussed these and other issues that contemporary vintners often face when we interviewed Fred and Melody:



Fred And Melody Burbank, In the Tasting Room, Burbank Ranch

Pursuitist: As regards you both, this was not your first profession. I am curious as to how you made the transition from medical doctor and marketing professional to successful vintners. Burbank Ranch Estate Vineyard and Winery is the culmination of a vision that both that you and Melody had. How did that vision emerge?



Products Of The Original Vision

Fred: I grew up in Omaha, Nebraska – a medium sized Midwest city surrounded by farmland. That countryside always seemed peaceful to me. Furthermore, the seasonal cycle of planting, growing, harvesting, and winter dormancy was a natural clock, one that ran at a human pace. Reflecting this environment, by 3rd or 4th grade children in Omaha had all learned many of the principles of farming: crop rotation, contour plowing, aquifers, and the like. After leaving Nebraska, I lived exclusively in cities or suburbs – with no surrounding farmlands. I missed open spaces, farms, and seasons.



Fred In The Vineyard.

Melody: Five generations of my family lived on small farms in the San Joaquin Valley. My grandfather retired from the Los Angeles police force to a little ranch in northeastern San Fernando Valley. Grandpa grew fruit trees and vegetables. I loved that country life and wanted a return to it.

Pursuitist: What made you choose the Central California area in contrast to the more popular Napa/Sonoma area? What attracted you to the Central Coast region?

Fred: When I made the transition from clinical practice to full-time medical device development, Melody and I had a bit of free time. We used that time to visit the two well-known wine grape-growing regions in California: the Napa Valley and Sonoma. Although Napa and Sonoma were charming they were a bit overdeveloped and fancy for me. For whatever reason, they did not feel right.

Melody: When we went to dinner in Napa at a well-known high-end restaurant, Fred showed up without a proper tie and jacket. He had to borrow both from the restaurant. You can picture how much he liked that. Then the food came. He maintains that his dinner consisted of one pea on a huge white plate with a drizzle of purple something or other splashed around it. I think he asked the waiter for additional bread a dozen times. Maybe more. The restaurant was definitely not our kind of place. We were seeking something, like what Napa and Sonoma were 40 years ago, not now.

Pursuitist: How did you find the land that was to become Burbank Ranch?

Fred: When our youngest child, Noah, started college at Stanford in Palo Alto, we began driving up to the Bay Area from Laguna Niguel to visit him. To break up the drive, we often stopped in Paso Robles – a good halfway point.

When we arrived there in the early afternoon, we toured wineries. Unlike Napa or Sonoma, Paso still had a country feel to it. It was possible to drive by a ranch and find a pickup truck up on concrete blocks with someone crawling under to fix a leak or replace an oil filter. It reminded me of rural Nebraska.



The Vineyard In Pacific Coast Fog

Melody: The rolling hills on the eastern side of Paso Robles captured me. Vineyards were present, but undeveloped ranch land was everywhere. Rather than purchasing an existing vineyard, we decided to build our own from the ground up. I had looked at many vineyards and lots of land and when we saw our property I knew it was the one. I felt peaceful and serene and I knew we had arrived.

Pursuitist: How did development proceed?

Fred: We chose a property on El Pomar Drive. El Pomar means “orchard” in Spanish, reflecting the past when orchards had been planted in our area.

I wish I could say that we planned it all oh-so-carefully in advance, but we didn't. Each step led to the next, and here we are today with 45 acres of planted wine grapes, an estate home, and a guest house, a barn, a working winery and tasting room.



Main Residence In Front With Lap Pool, Winery And Tasting Room Behind.

Pursuitist: What are your favorite times of the day at the Vineyard?

Melody: I like early mornings and late afternoons best because the lighting is best for picture taking. I never tire of seeing the sun come up, shining light across the vines. Similarly, each sunset over the Santa Lucia Mountains seems more beautiful than the last. I never miss the sunset. I also like the nighttime because you can see so many stars.

Fred: I like midday. In the summer it is generally hot at noon, just perfect for swimming laps in the pool.

Pursuitist: As regards the Central Coast area, it is becoming a popular wine, and olive growing area now. When you bought the land that would eventually become Burbank Ranch, could you see the growth possibilities of the region? Or was this a surprise?

Fred: By the time we purchased our property in 2008 wineries in Paso Robles had already proven that they could produce world-class wines from grapes grown in Paso. In fact, in 2013 Paso Robles was named the "Wine Region of the Year" by the Wine Enthusiast magazine. The award was given to Paso because it exhibited positive "...spirit and can-do positivity ... it's the region to watch."



Veraison Early Grapes

Melody: In reflection, I guess I could see the growth possibilities because there's so much land available and the wines coming from Paso are really good. Furthermore, because the Paso wine scene is relatively new, it's not gotten stuck in a niche like Napa Cabernet. Paso lends itself to Bordeaux style grapes, Rhone style grapes and many others. That aspect of the area is very appealing for someone who wants to get into the wine business.

Did I anticipate that it would grow with more vineyards and olive orchards? I didn't think about it. But I'm not surprised. It's a lovely area and people are attracted to it.

Pursuitist: Burbank Ranch produces Estate Bottled wines – what does that mean?

Fred: "Estate Bottled" means that 100 percent of the wine comes from grapes grown on the Ranch and those grapes are crushed, fermented, finished, aged, and bottled on the Ranch. With the completion of our 19,000 square foot crush pad, tank room, underground barrel storage vaults, offices, and tasting room building, we now produce estate bottle wines.



Burbank Ranch Tasting Room, Sunset

We hand pick grapes either at night or at first light, transport them to the crush pad, hand sort the bunches, de-stem, hand sort berries, must pump grape berries to temperature controlled fermentation tanks, ferment, store in barrels, rack, filter, and bottle all on the ranch. Consequently, our wines are now “Estate Bottled.”

Pursuitist: Burbank Ranch has won multiple awards, and the Vineyard is still young. What are your thoughts on these accolades? And which one was the most surprising to you?



Interior Tasting Room, Burbank Ranch

Melody: Our intention from the beginning of this adventure was to produce high quality grapes that lead to producing excellent wines. While Fred and I have both earned London-based Wine & Spirit Educational Trust (WSET) Level II Sommelier Certification, and we knew our farming practices were top notch and we thought our wines are fantastic, I still wanted outside evaluation of our initial wines to feel confident that we could produce world-class wines.



Four Winning Burbank Ranch Wines

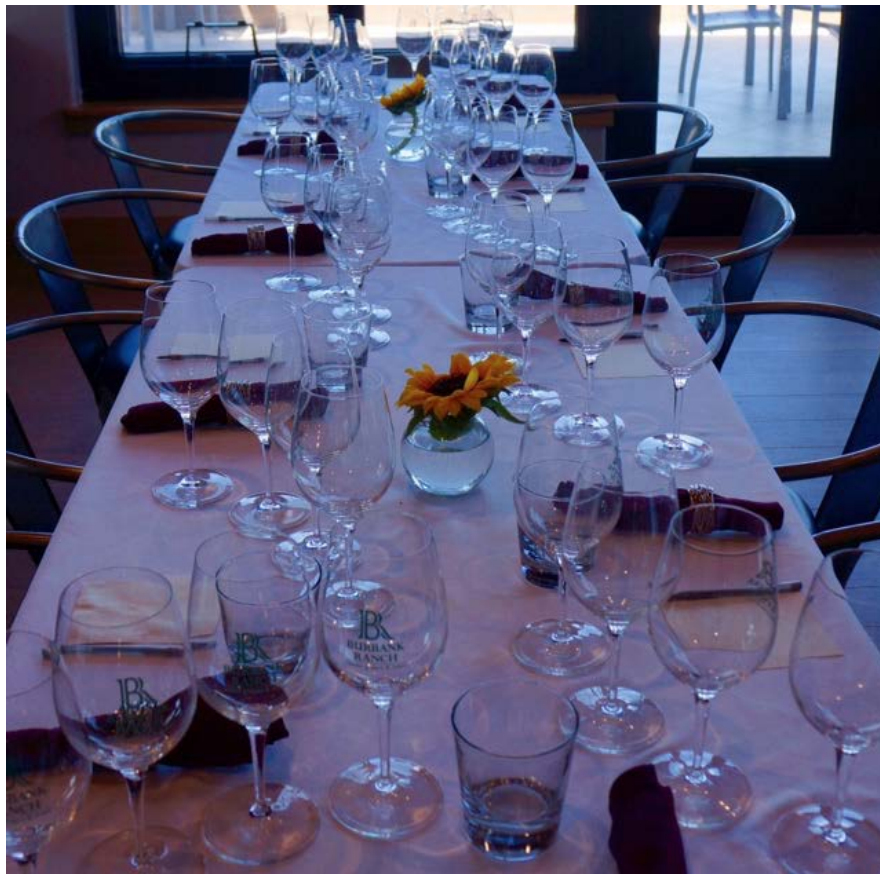
Our first vintage was 2010. My favorite wine, our 2010 Cabernet Franc, won “Best in Class” at the six-county, Central Coast Wine Competition in July of 2012. It went on to win a “Double Gold” award at the 2013 San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition, the largest competition of American wines in the world. This recognition confirmed my confidence in our wines. Since then, our wines have won awards at competitions across the country.



A Few Recent Burbank Ranch Wine Wins

Pursuitist: Where do you see Burbank Ranch in the next few years? Is there room for expansion?

Melody: Through wine competitions we have shown that we can produce high-quality grapes and from these grapes produce high-quality wines. The next step for the Ranch is breaking into commercial sales. Showing our wines in the tasting room and selling wine from that facility is pleasant and rewarding. And, in a sense, it is relatively simple. Customers have self-selected themselves as interested in a new wine experience. They have traveled some distance to reach the Ranch. And, generally, they are not in a hurry.



Tasting Room Table, Set For Private Tastings

Commercial sales are an entirely different process. Picture a busy mother, with her 3 year-old child in the shopping cart, pushing rapidly through the supermarket. She is planning an evening dinner, gathering the items needed. She reaches the wine aisle. Ugh! How does she choose wine to match her dinner? Does she do it by country of production, grape type, or wine maker style? Or does she just buy on price? Maybe label look? Unlike the tasting, room, no one is standing in the aisle ready to talk her through the maze.

Consequently, the next step is the commercialization of the sale of Burbank Ranch wines.

Pursuitist: Finally, what are a few lessons you have learned in this process of owning and building a successful vineyard and winery? Has the Vineyard created different priorities for you, in some way or ways?

Fred: We were very fortunate to have excellent consultants for phases of Ranch development that were foreign to

us. I have learned about soil and water evaluation, irrigation planning, root-stock and grape clone matching, plant spacing, and vine training systems — each required expert help. None of this was a surprise. And each phase had time boundaries. We knew when the phase would begin, and we knew when it would end.

Melody:

One of the simple fascinating things that I've learned is that farming depends a lot on Mother Nature. Of course I've always heard that but experiencing it over the last eight years has been eye opening, interesting and fun. Though we love rain, we can also get stuck in the mud. Though we love sun, it can also be too hot. Our grapes love balance, just as we do.



Freshly Picked Grapes From The Vineyard.

Our Ranch manager, Ruben, often says that working in the vineyard, and keeping all the 78,573 grapevines happy is like having 78,573 children. We feel that way also – each day, we care for them, and their nurturance. We know they are living things, and if we are good to them, they will be good to us. And they have.



The Fruit Of The Burbank Vines at Sunset