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Can Murdoch Make Bel Air the Next Napa?

Inside the Media Titan's Wine Ambitions

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Rupert Murdoch, 93, married Elena Zhukova for the fifth time this month at his vineyard estate in California.

Rupert Murdoch's ventures have taken him from the hustle and bustle of media conglomerates to the serene, sun-drenched hills of Bel Air, California, where he's embarking on a new ambition: crafting world-class wines. At 93, Murdoch isn't slowing down. Instead, he's pouring his energy into transforming the Moraga estate into a name to be reckoned with in the wine world.

Murdoch's latest headline-grabbing move wasn't in the boardroom but on the very grounds of Moraga itself, where he recently wed biologist Elena Zhukova. The vineyard, the only one in Los Angeles, provided a picturesque backdrop that doubled as a grand stage for promoting his beloved estate. By choosing Moraga for such a high-profile event, Murdoch effectively showcased his commitment to the vineyard, hinting at grand plans for its future.

Murdoch acquired Moraga in 2013 for a cool $22.3 million, drawn by its unique location on 16 acres in Bel Air, with 14 acres dedicated to vineyards. The estate, perched on the Benedict Canyon fault, has faced its share of challenges, from wildfires to the general volatility of LA's climate. Despite these hurdles, Murdoch is determined to make Moraga a key part of his legacy, ensuring its prominence in the wine world and broader recognition.

Originally a horse ranch owned by Victor Fleming, famed director of classics like "Gone with the Wind" and "The Wizard of Oz," the land transitioned into a vineyard in the 1980s under Tom Jones of Northrop Grumman. When Murdoch spotted the estate in a listing in The Wall Street Journal—one of his own publications—it felt like fate. Since then, he's kept the vineyard's operations alive, aiming to maintain its heritage and elevate its status.

Murdoch's vision is straightforward: while Moraga isn't Napa or Bordeaux, it deserves its place among the world's top wines. The vineyard produces about 10,000 bottles annually, a modest output compared to some large-scale operations, but Murdoch's marketing acumen is expected to push these bottles onto the tables of discerning wine lovers and into the cellars of high-end restaurants. He's already enlisted Suzette Hébert as the new director of sales and marketing to spearhead this expansion, focusing particularly on the high-end restaurant scene.

Running a vineyard in Bel Air isn't without its financial strains. Murdoch candidly discussed the high costs involved, from production expenses to the hefty taxes in the area, calling it "wildly expensive" in an interview with Bloomberg. Yet, his passion for the project is evident. When sharing a bottle with his friend Jacob Rothschild, Murdoch was pleased to hear Rothschild commend the wine's seriousness, even as they compared it to the illustrious 1956 Château Latour.

To increase public awareness and appreciation of Moraga's offerings, the estate now hosts tastings at $150 per person, inviting wine enthusiasts to experience its charm firsthand. The vineyard produces a red blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Petit Verdot, and Cabernet Franc, and a Sauvignon Blanc, both reflecting the unique terroir of the Santa Monica Bay breeze.

Winemaker Paul Warson is enthusiastic about the future, emphasizing the desire to share Moraga's exceptional wines with a broader audience. "We want people to have access," he said. "We have a gorgeous, rare, and exceptionally special property in the heart of Los Angeles, and we want to bring neighbors and visitors together by creating the ability for us to share it whenever possible."

Murdoch's drive to make Moraga a world-class vineyard isn't just a business venture—it's a personal passion project that blends his love for fine wine with his renowned knack for business and publicity. As he toasts to his new marriage and the promising future of Moraga, it's clear that Murdoch's next great story is being written in the rolling vineyards of Bel Air.