

For rent: grapevines to tend

Vineyard owner will offer oenophiles the chance to learn their stuff from the ground up

BY VERA CHINÈSE | STAFF WRITER

Anyone who's ever sipped a glass of merlot or chardonnay and wondered what it takes to grow a grape just right will soon have the opportunity to find out.

Come April, Theresa Dilworth will be offering would-be winemakers the chance to learn the intricacies of viticulture by actually trying it themselves at her Aquebogue vineyard, Le Clos Thérèse.

Participants will pay \$3,500 for the use of a half-acre plot and can keep the grapes they grow, which would be merlot or cabernet sauvignon varietals. Ms. Dilworth said a parcel of that size might yield one to one and a half tons of grapes a season, or vintage, as a particular season's harvest is called, and would sell for about \$2,000 a ton.

Ms. Dilworth has owned the Union Avenue vineyard with her husband, Sammi Shimura, a steel executive turned farmer and sommelier, since 2000. She said she has been thinking about renting a portion of the vineyard for years, more to reduce the workload of tending to 20 acres than to make a profit.

From April to October, tenants would be responsible for such tasks as tying down shoots and cluster thinning, which promotes larger, healthier grapes.

The heavier work, such as spraying pesticides or anything requiring a tractor, would be handled by the vineyard. "If we left that responsibility to the tenant, they could harm their part of the vineyard," she said.

Ms. Dilworth, who has a weekend home in Mattituck, said renting a portion of her land would be best for someone who would like to open their own vineyard someday but wants to test the waters before buying a large tract.

"Most of the farms around the North Fork, you can't buy a piece of land of less than 10 acres," she said. At her place, though, "people can do it on a



Theresa Dilworth is hoping to rent out portions of her Aquebogue vineyard to people who want to give small-scale grape-growing a try.

BARBARAELEN KOCH PHOTO

small scale."

Prospective candidates should have a weekend home in the area or live close enough to make a day trip, have some free time and be committed to working the entire season. Renters would be expected to come to the vineyard, once every other week, at the very least, and preferably once a week or more often.

"They should do their own research and take their own initiative," she said.

Ms. Dilworth, who also owns the multi-vineyard cooperative The Tasting Room in Peconic, said she'd like to have two to four tenant growers for the first season and perhaps expand in the future.

At the end of the season, they will be able to sell their grapes, keep some for personal use or send them to be turned into wine at the Premium Wine Group in Mattituck, where Ms. Dilworth sends the grapes to make her own label, Comtesse Thérèse.

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Long Island Wine Council president Chris Baiz said that renting vineyard parcels would be a great way for people to deepen their appreciation of wine by participating in its creation. Although he couldn't think of another local vineyard doing exactly what Ms. Dilworth was proposing, Mr. Baiz said he thought it could provide a niche for people who want to dabble in growing grapes without a major investment.

"As this region continues to grow in stature and reputation, I think there will be more opportunity for this kind of thing," he said.

While the concept of farming on rented vineyards is unique, there is another option for those who want to

make their own wine.

At Sannino's Bella Vita vineyard in Peconic, members of winemaking groups can harvest and press grapes, barrel and bottle wine and even design their own labels for \$4,700 per group of eight.

Lisa Sannino, who owns the vineyard with her husband, Anthony, said the program has been a huge success.

Although they harvest the grapes and participate in the wine-making process at Bella Vita, participants do little farming work. Ms. Sannino called Ms. Dilworth's concept "great and innovative."

"Custom winemaking is new and exciting and we have discovered that people agree with our 'stay local and reduce our carbon footprint' [approach] by harvesting their own grapes," she said.

Although no one has committed to a rental yet, Ms. Dilworth hopes there are prospective growers out there who want the opportunity to learn, enjoy wine and perhaps make a little money in the process.

"It's fun and you get something out of it," she said.

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