

CALIFORNIA PRUNING

Mira Advani Honeycutt travels to the Napa estate of a Hong Kong couple who have swapped the city for the new world winery lifestyle.



Stanley and Helen Cheng on their terrace in Napa Valley overlooking the lake and vineyards

Stanley Cheng sweeps his hands over a dramatic landscape, a 127-acre estate anchored by a lake cradled in the golden hills of Napa Valley, California's premier wine region. "I love the land so we bought this," he says. His sprawling patch includes a skeet shooting range, an "airport" for serious model airplanes, which one of his companies designs and builds, and a magnificent vineyard. The secluded Golden Valley property, on the eastern side of Napa, is an hour's drive from the main wine-growing arteries.

Hong Kong couple Stanley and Helen Cheng has joined a coterie of oenophiles who are not satisfied with a well-stocked cellar; they want to own a vineyard and enjoy the wine country lifestyle. And for a serious investor looking for a world-class cabernet sauvignon vineyard, Napa Valley is the destination in America. "When we

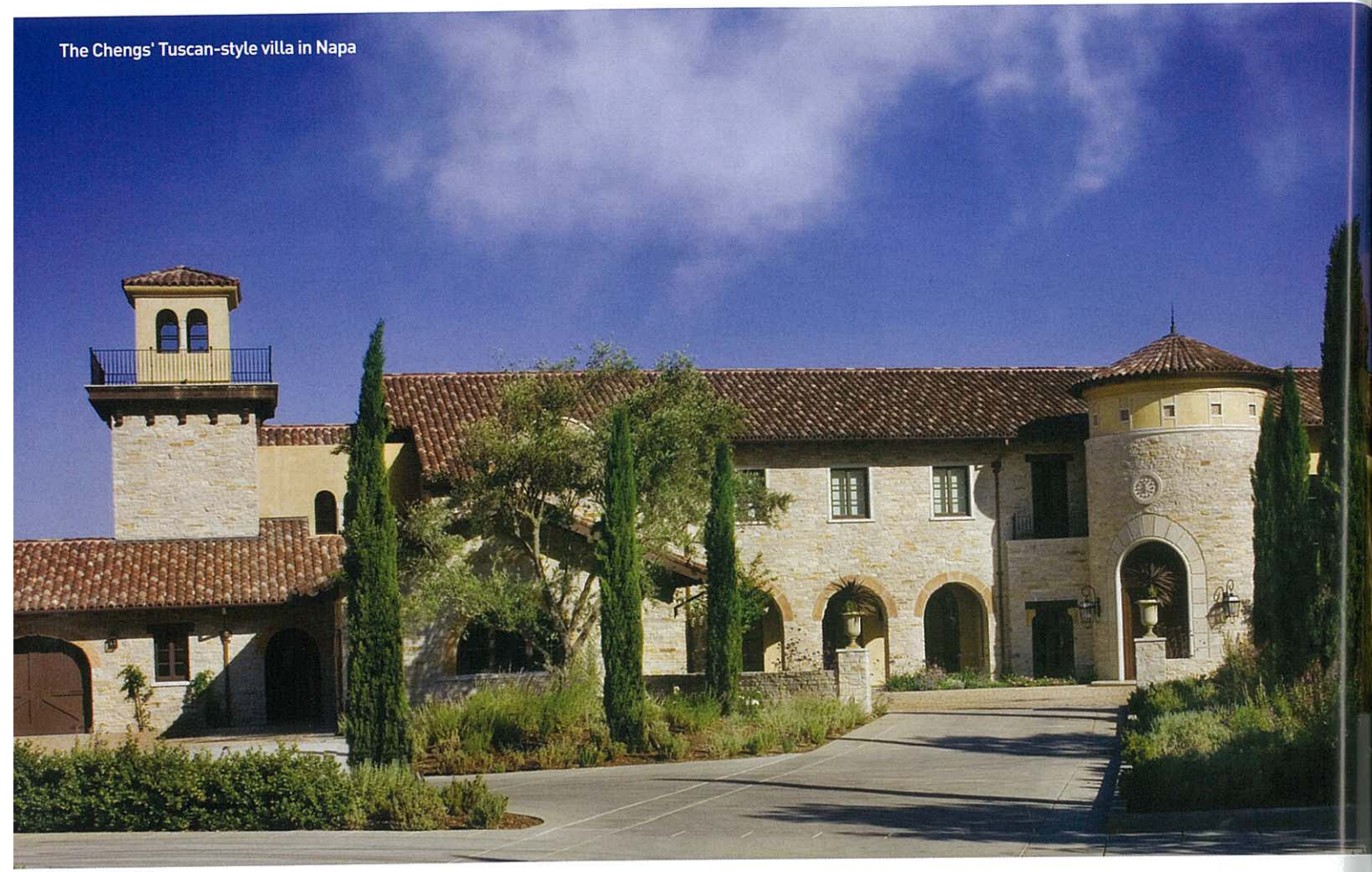


Hestan tasting room in Yountville

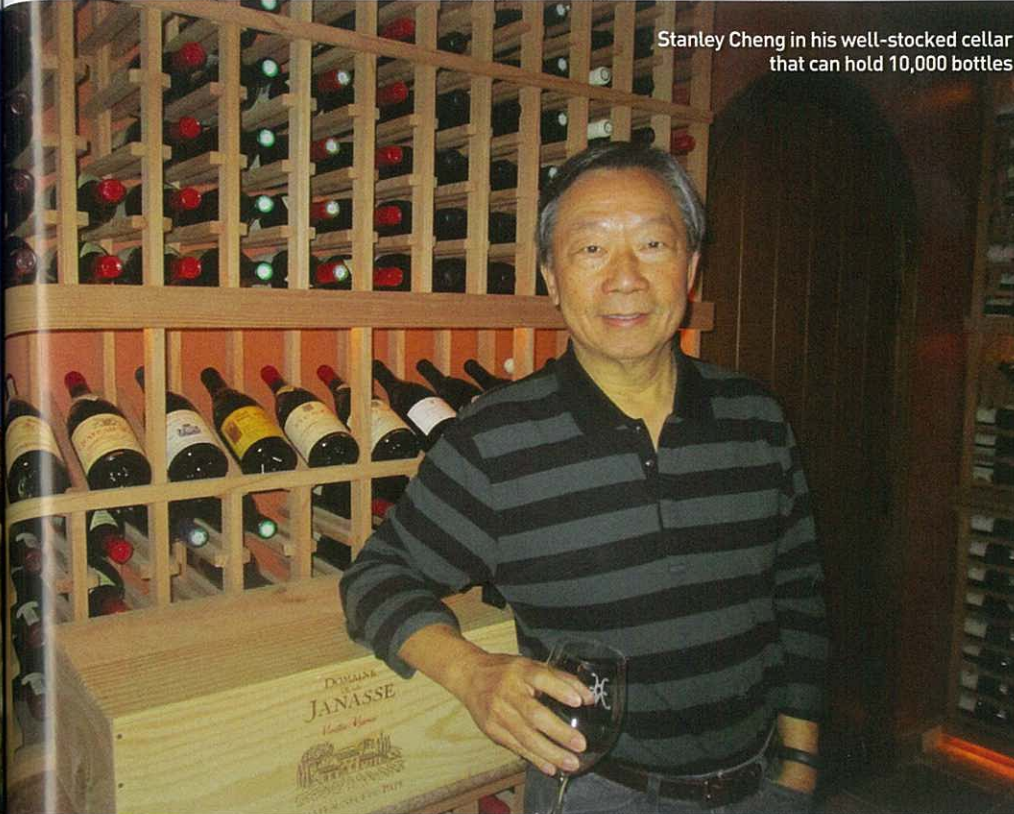


Hestan Vineyards is divided into 25 individually farmed blocks

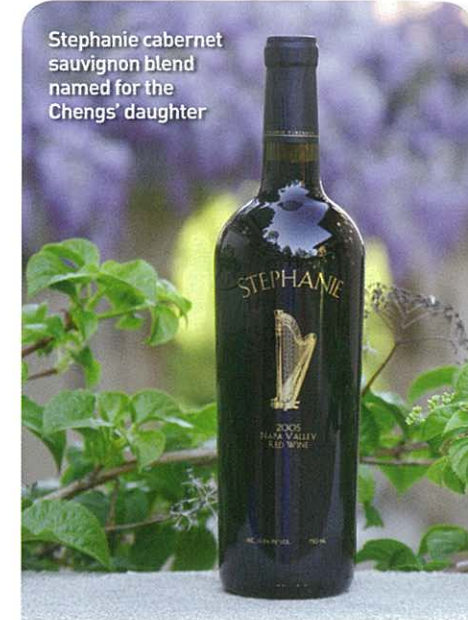
The Chengs' Tuscan-style villa in Napa



Stanley Cheng in his well-stocked cellar that can hold 10,000 bottles



Stephanie cabernet sauvignon blend named for the Chengs' daughter



ON THE BOTTLE

REDS

The Chengs' red wine portfolio comprises three labels – the flagship Hestan Vineyards, Meyer and Stephanie. All wines range from US\$40-\$110 (about \$312-\$858) a bottle, very affordable by Napa standards.

- The limited production of Hestan Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon (a mere 500 cases annually) is an opulent wine lush with black fruits, showing depth and complexity. Winemaker Thomas Rivers Brown crafts it from the finest lots in Hestan's hillside vineyards.

- The Meyer label, named for Cheng's high-end global cookware company, is made by Mark Herold and represents the epitome of Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon quality and value.

- The Stephanie label, named after the Chengs' only child, an accomplished harpist, bears not just her name but also her instrument etched in gold. This line, crafted by Jeff Gaffner, has three bottlings – a cabernet sauvignon, merlot and bordeaux blend using all five varietals. The wines are seductive and elegant with smooth tannins.

WHITE

Hestan Vineyards produces a chardonnay from a cooler region near San Francisco Bay, where a two-and-a-half-acre vineyard was planted in 1997. With a delicious mouth-feel, it has a wonderful minerality and just a trace of oak. Cheng proudly tells us that the 2011 vintage was served at a White House dinner held for visiting Chinese president Hu Jintao.

The couple with their white wine, which was served to Hu Jintao



bought this, there was nothing here, so we started from scratch," remarks Cheng, the uncle of renowned fashion designer – and this magazine's esteemed columnist – Barney Cheng. The rustic ranch was once used for cattle grazing, and some 30 acres of hillside are still home to cows, horses and llamas that aid weed control.

The Chengs bought the ranch in the mid-1990s, graded the hillsides, tore down an old farmhouse and commissioned San Francisco-based architect Farro Essalat to design an upscale Tuscan-style farmhouse. Vineyard planting began in 1997. By 2002, they had released their first vintage of Hestan, a label created by combining the names Helen and Stanley.

Comprising 56 planted acres, Hestan Vineyards is a tapestry of more than 25 small, individually farmed blocks planted with the five principle red Bordeaux varietals, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, petit verdot, cabernet franc and malbec. It produces 6,000 cases annually, and for such a young winery the red wines are impressive: well-structured with finesse, balanced acidity and lush tannins. The vineyard's unique mix of soils, slopes, exposures, rootstocks, clones and varietals contribute depth and complexity to Hestan's entire portfolio of wines, which encompass three red labels and a white. Add to this vineyard manager Angel Carmena's meticulous hands-on pruning, leaf pulling, irrigation and harvest protocol and you get the very best of varietal character and vineyard signature of each block.

The Chengs call their villa a farmhouse, but it is anything but. This is an opulent, elegant home with antiques bought at auctions and from private collections. The proud man of the house points out a dramatic dining-room chandelier that once graced Maria Callas' Paris apartment; Helen's impressive collection of Asian *objets d'art*, and a buck's antler in the library. No, he didn't shoot the buck. "The antler was shed naturally and we found it in the vineyards," he says.

The *pièce de résistance* is the Steinway grand piano, circa 1861. "We acquired it when we were treasure hunting at the Hillsborough antique show," says Cheng. As if on cue, Helen, a keen pianist, regales us with *Mon Coeur S'ouvre à Ta Voix*, from the Saint-Saens' opera *Samson and Delilah*.

A villa tour takes us through Cheng's collection of model planes parked in the expansive garage, a gun collection and an impressive wine cellar. "The cellar has a capacity for 10,000 bottles and it's half full," he remarks, before rustling up a lunch of barbecued chicken with a sesame oil and honey glaze. It's delicious with the vineyard's Stephanie merlot.

The only disadvantage to this man-made paradise, he says, is that it's far away from restaurants. This is not such a challenge though, as the family has a pied-à-terre above the Hestan tasting room in Yountville, Napa's culinary epicentre and home to such tony restaurants as the French Laundry. 17



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