

he quality of light is extraordinary. Rolling hills glow a burnished gold; venerable oaks spread havens of shade; the clear air smells of equal parts soil and sunlight. Hawks and crows share the sky's dry heat, whirling high above, cawing far below. Behind well-kept fences are llamas and cows, horses and ostriches, chickens and goats. Sleepy cats loll while panting dogs lie nearby, both too relaxed to bother with one another.

Paso Robles would be bucolic enough, but when you factor in the grapes, it's close to a pure slice of paradise. Though months remain until harvest, already, neat rows of vines curl their tendrils and latch on, preparing to support the weight of heavy clusters of fruit when the time is ripe. That time is harvest, when everything jumps into high gear, when summer's sleepy heat yields to fall's purpose, when the days can't quite last long enough, but somehow they do, and plump, sticky, sun-warmed clusters are transformed into wine.

From the outside, this Central California idyll offers up concrete examples of just what a life worth envying looks like. While it's true that hard work, sacrifice and long hours play a part — even a big part — there's no denying that this particular glimpse of heaven is as sweet as it gets, at least for those willing to do what needs to be done to make it happen. And, perhaps not surprisingly, this is where a disparate group of USD graduates have wound up, in search of their own particular version of *la dolce vita*. Or is that *la dolce vino*?

Sometimes the stuff that makes your dreams come true starts with something as simple as the lack of a decent place to eat. Cris and JoAnn Cherry knew they didn't want to settle down in a city. The couple — who met as freshmen on their first day of class, dated for a week, went their separate ways, then reconnected nine years later — both grew up in small, rural towns. After they got married in the tiny beach town of Cayucos, the Cherrys set their sights on California's central coast. It wasn't long before they zeroed in on Paso Robles — or "Paso," as the locals refer to it. "This was a sleepy little cowboy town then," recalls JoAnn '88. "We loved the area, and would come up here to check out the few wineries that were here then."

**Cris and JoAnn Cherry are living the dream. Their Villa Creek Restaurant is a haven for local winemakers, and their wines have been extremely well-received by those in the know.**

Self-described "foodies" — Cris came of age working at his father's well-regarded Vista, Calif., restaurant, La Paloma — the pair quickly realized that there simply wasn't a local place to eat that offered up what they were used to; fresh, flavorful food with a decent wine selection. So when they heard of a downtown property for sale ("an old former dive bar," Cris '89 describes it), the decision of where to land was made: they'd buy it, and transform it.

It was a stellar move; over the last decade, their Villa Creek restaurant has built a loyal clientele, at least partly made up of the area's now-plentiful local vintners, who drop by nearly every night of the week. On a mid-summer weekday evening, floor-to-ceiling doors open to a crowded sidewalk patio overlooking the quaint Paso Robles town square, and the terrace out back is filled with wine-quaffing diners.

"On any given night, there will be five different winemakers in the restaurant," remarks Cris, who's snagged the seat nearest to the kitchen.

A born restaurateur, he's got a perpetually upward-tilted mouth and the demeanor of one who delights in working the front of the house. Joann, who has a background in design, is a calmer presence; her contribution is not just in the distinctive look of the place — flavored with regional touches like Oaxacan wall-weavings — but in working with her husband to manage the kitchen and its attendant details.

Those details have grown exponentially, and now include not just the well-reviewed menu (a recent *Los Angeles Times* article called their food “precocious and explosive”), but a commitment to making the most of locally grown bounty, including not just wines, but goat cheese, heirloom tomatoes and olive oils. Villa Creek's social scene has turned the restaurant into what one aficionado admiringly calls “the epicenter of the Rhône movement in Paso Robles.”

It was their longtime interest in wine that led the couple to try their own hand at winemaking. In 2001, they started Villa Creek Cellars, intending to create a house wine for their restaurant. They worked with local vineyards to come up with the grapes that resulted in their own small family winery that specializes in blends that reflect the “richness and diversity of the area's unique microclimates.” That *raison d'être* has proved to be brilliant: they've had more than one of their vintages singled out by experts as among the best wines of their types.

Right off the bat, *Wine Spectator* awarded Cris' first wine, the 2001 Avenger Paso Robles, 93 points on their 100-point scale, “ranking it with the finest Rhône-style blends coming out of the appellation.” And they've been consistently lauded in the years since: “Another exciting and terrific wine from Villa Creek,” says one critic of their 2005 red blend, dubbed “Mas de Maha,” described as a “deep purple wine (with) an intense and inviting bouquet. On the palate, this wine is smooth as silk.”

To say that times have changed in Paso Robles over the past 10 years is an epic understatement: Though the first commercial vineyards weren't planted until the late 1970s, today the area is home to more than 170 wineries, with over 26,000 vineyard acres devoted to wine production. Where residents were once severely limited in options of where to sip and dine, there are, at last count, two dozen restaurants dotting downtown, along with 12 wine-tasting rooms.

Newcomer Andrew Firestone '98 calls Paso “an undiscovered gem.” His family, of course, are no neophytes to the business; their 500-acre Firestone Vineyard was the first estate winery in Santa Barbara county. Now tapped to be the general manager of the dynasty's newest venture, Firestone Vineyard Paso Robles, the third-generation scion is an enthusiastic advocate of the area.

“This is a very unique region,” he says, flashing a quick grin. He wears a pair of faded, perfectly broken-in jeans, along with a pair of black and white checked Vans. “Paso has all the necessary, important components you need to make good wine, like climate, soil and temperature.” Firestone is at absolute ease behind the bar of his pristine tasting room, which has been open for just a few weeks. Unfailingly polite, he excuses himself for a moment to chat with a pair of older gents who've dropped by to sample the wares, returning to the conversation a few minutes later with an apologetic shrug.

“Here, you don't have to be a member of an exclusive club to enjoy a wine and find something you like,” he continues. “There are wineries up north where you have to be a member to even taste the wines, but that's the antithesis of what Paso is all about. It's about enjoying what it is that you're doing, and hopefully bringing enjoyment to other people as well.”

Firestone is happy to give a mini-lesson on wine tasting, starting with

the basics. “Hold the glass by stem,” he cautions. “That's for aesthetics. You don't want fingerprints on the glass to muck it up, make it not as pretty.” He explains how to examine the wine's color and clarity and how to aerate the wine by swirling it about in the glass: “You want to coat the whole inside of the glass, because you want to smell it.”

He explains the importance of a wine's aroma (the nose), and isn't shy about instructing the best way to go about capturing it. “You want to get your nose right in there.” His voice is a bit muffled, as his entire nose is, in fact, inside of the glass. “There might be other smells — maybe you're at a restaurant and they're cooking with garlic — and that can interfere.”

“Then, when you taste the wine, let it go on every part of your mouth, over your teeth, almost like you're gargling. You want the wine to react to the taste buds, which are sweet and sour, salt and bitter. You want to let the wine rest all over your tongue, all the way to the back of your throat. Every wine will react differently, and not only will it taste differently, it will feel differently in your mouth.”

While he clearly enjoys it, in truth, Firestone sees his role in the family business as more of a calling than vocation. While he worked in investment banking in San Francisco for several years after graduation, he doesn't miss that life at all. “I've struggled with the question, ‘What is my contribution to society?’” he says, reflective. “I've decided that mine is to allow the meal to go a few minutes longer. Wine is a catalyst. When I was an investment banker, everything had to get done right away. Time was valuable. But now I'm starting to respect the fact that you don't rush away from the table when there's half a bottle of wine left.”

While some of the winery's traffic may be made up of from celebrity seekers hoping to get an up-close-and-personal look at “The Bachelor” (a role he played on the reality-TV show's third season), Firestone is happy just to be there. His job duties keep him traveling quite a bit, but there's nothing he likes better than opining wine all the livelong day. “My time here at the facility is precious,” he admits. “I enjoy it quite a bit. But when you're out selling wine, it's not like selling spark plugs or widgets. When I'm out around the country doing tastings, I see myself as an ambassador for the industry, for the region.”

While that attitude is all well and good, there's definitely a fun aspect to the job. “It's cool that there's a contingent of young people in Paso,” he says, flashing an infectious grin. “It reinjects enthusiasm for the wine business and is healthy for the industry. Wines aren't old and stuffy and high-priced. Wines are meant to be enjoyed at barbecues. And Paso is more fun than Napa.”

For Firestone, who was born the year of his family's first harvest (“a '75 Cabernet”), he's perhaps happiest when multitasking. “Here, I'm a farmer, a chemist, a marketing person,” he says. “Wine is about craft, and there's no magic formula. The fun part is learning more.”

When Josh and Gibsey (Pence) Beckett met at USD, it was a “bolt from the blue.” At least that's the way Gibsey remembers it. “Josh was a transfer student, and we immediately hit it off,” she recalls. The golden-skinned blonde deftly manages a rambunctious toddler, a sedate dog, and a free-ranging interview with such effortless grace that it's easy to forget that she's eight months pregnant.

Back in the day, the couple — Josh is class of '98, Gibsey, class of '99 — would travel through Paso Robles on their way to a hideaway at nearby

**The influx of young winemakers to Paso Robles includes scion Andrew Firestone '98, a relative newcomer to the region, who calls the area an “undiscovered gem.”**

Lake Nacimiento, and Gibsey, for one, was not impressed. "I thought it was an armpit," she says flatly, in regards to Paso.

It's relatively cool in the shade under a tree in front of the old schoolhouse. Inside, the Peachy Canyon tasting room is doing a brisk business. Owned by Josh's parents, Peachy Canyon is one of the larger wineries in the area, producing 85,000 cases a year. "Josh stayed in San Diego for about a year after graduating, then his dad asked him to come back to the winery," Gibsey recalls. "He'd sworn he'd never come back to wine, but he started shoveling grapes, and helping with the harvest, and his dad said, 'Just for a year, we need your help,' so he came back."

That year turned into nine years, though somewhere in there, the couple did a stint in Australia when Josh got a job working harvest at the Cape Mentelle Winery, a gig that culminated with a three-week surfing trip across the southern part of the continent, all the way from Sydney to Perth.

When Gibsey turned up in the family way, the couple moved back to California in time to welcome daughter Sydney (get it?) to the family. "Over the years, Josh has done it all for Peachy Canyon; everything from schlepping grapes to sweeping floors to head winemaker," she says with pride. "It wasn't his degree; we both majored in English. He's learned it all through the trade, the college of hard knocks."

While the work itself is hard, the scenery is sure easy on the eyes. The land around the tasting room is dotted with neat farms sporting exotic livestock like ostrich and llamas, along with the more prosaic horses, sheep and cows. Out back, there's a fairy-tale gazebo which was custom-made for Josh and Gibsey's wedding. Clearly a full-on family affair, Peachy Canyon also employs Josh's younger brother, Jake, who, says Gibsey, "went off to school, got a degree in anthropology, and ended up coming back to the winery to work for the past seven years."

She's found herself involved as well. After teaching for a year, she managed the winery's tasting room before the couple took off for Australia. "While we were there, we'd learned the ways of the world during harvest," she recalls. "It's this intense, 24-hour-a-day, three month period, and at the winery where Josh worked, they had a chef who cooked for all the workers. It was a great idea. Before, at Peachy Canyon, the workers would bring their own lunch, but they'd come home at midnight and have to be back 6 am; there was no time to go grocery shopping."

So Gibsey stepped in and convinced her father-in-law that it would be more productive to provide the workers with beer ("essential") and food during harvest. "I cooked two meals a day for 10 to 15 people," she recalls. "Lunch and dinner, and I'd stock the kitchen with snacks on a daily basis. The crew would sometimes go 'til midnight." From enchiladas to tri-tip, Gibsey says she'd "throw the baby on her back" and get cooking. Before long, she began planning and executing events like an annual pumpkin carving day and the winery's involvement with the Paso Robles Zinfandel Festival, which takes place every March.

"Peach Canyon has made their name through their production of Zin," says Gibsey. "We carry seven to nine varieties, and its really coming into its own."

Although she's not entirely enamored by the Paso wine scene — confessing that the busy social life is difficult to keep up with when you've got young children — she does enjoy meeting other young couples in the community.

"It's unlike Napa," she says, keeping an eye on Sydney, who's running through the sprinkler, shrieking with laughter. "Here, there's a lot of shar-

**Peachy Canyon, one of the larger wineries in the area, is all about family. Here, Josh and Gibsey Becket stroll through the vineyards accompanied by daughter Sydney and dog Kiley.**

ing of equipment. We try each other's wines, let each other know what we think. There's a group of us who get together quite a bit, barbecue, play Bunco."

Having recently moved to nearby Morro Bay — perhaps to get a little distance from the family business — Gibsey says the family's routine is like "regressing to a San Diego lifestyle. We live on the beach, ride our beach cruisers, then come here to visit. When your family is so involved with the business, it can be challenging. You really have to evaluate your life."

Like any industry, there are terms in winemaking that are unique to the trade. There is "mogging" (sorting out Material Other than Grape). There is the "thief" (a device used to remove enough wine to taste from a barrel). There is the "bung" (the name for the cork on the side of the barrel; clever sorts may be able to divine what the name for the cavity is called). To neophytes, all this jargon may seem mysterious, but for vintners Maureen and Matt Trevisan, the esoteric language of wine has long since become as familiar as those of their three children.

Their family-owned and operated winery, Linne Calodo, is named after the limestone soils that their vines grow in. The couple have built the well-respected facility from the ground up; an accomplishment both are rightly proud of.

"Together, the two of us have done everything," says Maureen, a petite brunette who attended USD from 1984 to 1987. "When I met Matt, I could see right away that he was passionate about wine and winemaking. He always knew he wanted his own winery. I said, 'I'll get a book and see what you need to do to open your own business.'" So the two got to work, and in 2002, they built the air-controlled building that houses huge barrels stacked six-high alongside a bare-bones tasting area.

"When I think about it, it's kind of amazing that I ended up here," she laughs. "When I went to USD, we would drink wine out of a box. I enjoy wine a lot more now. Just within the last few years, I've been tasting and doing it on my own, doing staff tastings, where we pair wines with cheeses." An art history major in college, she also studied business and worked for a financial planner before being introduced to her future husband by her friends, JoAnn and Cris Cherry.

"Matt's seen as sort of a mad scientist of a winemaker," says Maureen. "He was so far ahead of me regarding wine when we met that it was intimidating."

"I originally wanted to build airplanes," says Matt, who speaks in rapid machine-gun bursts, befitting his high-octane personality. "Then I was going to make pharmaceuticals, then I decided to do winemaking." After graduating from University of San Diego High School — then just across the street from USD — he wound up at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, where he majored in biochemistry. "Winemaking puts you in a position where you're taking a naturally growing product and transforming it. I get to be outside, work on the vineyards, be inside, work on wines, talk to distributors and visitors from all over the country and the world, work with graphic designers, do lots of different things that you'd never get to do in a different job. It's a lifestyle choice," he says with satisfaction.

The wines of Linne Calodo are all blends, and the reviews have been seriously off the hook. The winery's classy Web site explains that their wines are "driven by four factors: vineyard location, uncompromising viticultural practices, minimalist winemaking, and the desire to learn from experience. The vineyards are farmed sustainably and the crop loads reflect the natural balance of the vine. We believe in harvesting at the peak of ripeness to produce wines that are rich and concentrated."

"We've evolved a little bit at a time," explains Maureen. "Our vineyards

are sustainable. We use minimal irrigation, mostly rainwater. We try to be mindful. Eventually, we could be off the grid entirely." While of course the life they've built is filled with hard work — today is septic tank cleaning day — when you look around, it's hard not to notice that the word "idyllic" could have been coined for this exact lifestyle.

"In college, I lived in Mission Beach," Maureen recalls. "Paso has some aspects of an old beach community. You go to the square, you run into people you know. It's a neighborly place. If you have a problem with your forklift, you call your winery neighbor and they'll help you out. It's a real feeling of cooperation, of being part of something new." Her intense eyes gleam and she flashes a rare, incandescent smile. "There aren't a lot of places left where you can have this experience. It's like a new frontier."

She's certainly chosen the right partner. "This is the life we've chosen," Matt says. "My kids eat warm tomatoes off the vine, they help with the crunch-down tool, they get their hands all red and juicy. It's all about camaraderie."

**I**t's a story that sounds like an after-school special: Amber and Joe Kidd met when they were in the fifth grade, knew each other all through junior and senior high school, and — finally — started dating as seniors. "I decided it would be silly to leave Chico and go off to college without having kissed Joe Kidd," says Amber '97, who went by the name Shannon Childs at the time. They did the "long distance thing" while Amber was at USD; in spite of the separation, she looks back on her college years with great fondness.

"When I looked at the wetsuits hanging over the Maher balcony, and saw that view, I knew I'd picked the right college," she recalls. "To this day,

my best friends in the world are from USD. In fact, I met my best friend the day my parents left me at college and I was standing there going, 'Oh, my God. What do I do now?'"

Meanwhile, Joe was studying viticulture; after graduation, the pair spent a few years in Atlanta before deciding to settle in Paso Robles.

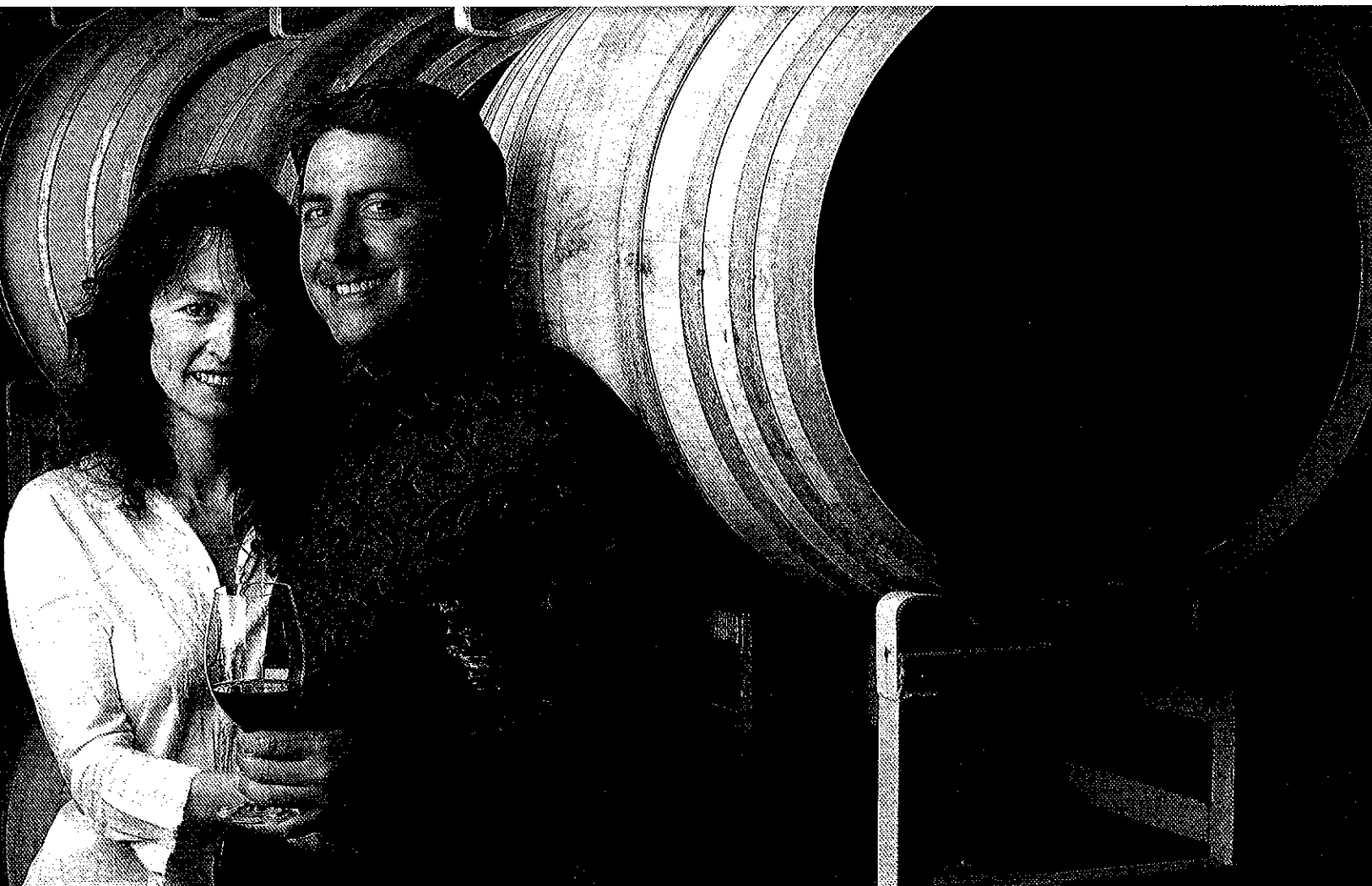
Now a winemaker for Sterling Vintner's Collection, Joe waxes rhapsodic over his career choice. "There's so much involved in winemaking. It's agricultural, it's business, it's science. A perfect day starts in the vineyard in the morning, maybe driving the forklift, doing a tasting in the afternoon, having a winemaking dinner in the evening." He grins, aware of just how lucky he is to have found his life's work. "This is the best example I can think of where you're turning an agricultural commodity into the opposite. You're connected to the land, solidly rooted to agriculture in all its nuance."

And, of course, they're connected to other winemakers. Though none of them knew each other in college, Amber is friends with Josh and Gibsey Beckett and Maureen Trevisan; in fact, their kids are in a playgroup together. "There are 10 to 15 couples that we hang around with, and almost everybody, either one person or the other is in the wine industry," says Joe.

"We all used to meet on Friday and Saturday nights, have cocktails and dinner, and party like rock stars," interjects Amber. "Now we all have barbecues in our back yards, because the kids need to get to bed at 8 o'clock."

"But since everybody's in the wine industry, we'll have wine from all over the Central Coast," adds Joe. "We'll drink, and everybody talks about

**Years ago, Maureen Trevisan was known to drink wine out of a box. Now, she and her husband, Matt — nicknamed "the professor" — make highly rated wines at their Linne Calodo winery.**





wine. Wine and food are like the glue. The best way to spend an evening is to have people over, cook dinner and drink wine."

And what better place to do it than in Paso Robles? "It's sure cheaper than Napa," says Joe. "In Napa, grapes cost more, land costs more, so the wines cost from \$20-60 a bottle. I'm into vintages that people can afford; say \$12-14 per bottle. But what's really nice about the Central Coast, is that in Napa, they've already determined what grows where. In Paso Robles, it's much more wide open."

"If you're looking for city life, it's not here," says Amber. "But where else can you find a town of 30,000 with six restaurants you really want to eat at, and six other ones that are really good? Wine tourism, wine festivals, no traffic, and we're 30 minutes from the beach."

Not to mention the occasional winemaker's dinner. "That's where you talk to the chef who pairs wines with various courses," Joe explains.

"When you pair it right, it's like a beautiful marriage," Amber interjects.

The road to the Cherry's estate is utterly devoid of traffic on a weekday morning. Twisty roads are lined with oaks dripping moss; one side is all grape vines, the other creamy rolling hills. Their house is surrounded by a deck, which is flanked by neatly tended vegetable gardens. Out back, a pair of miniature goats may one day be called upon to produce cheese, but for now, their sole responsibility is cuteness.

The Cherrys have already been for a run, despite the 90+ degree weather, and the fact that the evening before, they'd hosted dinner at the restaurant for a group that included Mat and Maureen Trevisan, Andrew Firestone, and Amber Kidd. "Hey, you've got to pay the piper if you're going to do all this eating and drinking," Cris says cheerfully. "That's just the way it is."

#### **When Amber Kidd '97 and her husband, Joe, moved to Paso Robles, they didn't expect to be hanging out with other alums.**

It's hot even in the shade, but it's pleasant enough under the overhang of the Cherry's new 3,000 square foot wine production facility, which is just down the road from their house. "I love being out here where there's no people," JoAnn says. "We moved here for the lifestyle, not the money, although I think it's inevitable that it will come."

While the plan is that one day their 70-acre estate will house their own vineyards, until then, Villa Creek Cellars buys its grapes from local growers, and closely supervises the growth of its own particular vines. The couple is fully invested in making this venture at least as successful as their restaurant.

"The cool thing about all these wineries is that they're run by young people," says Cris. "There's a lot of concrete at these places, and you'll see people building skateboard runs. Outside the door there'll be a row of skateboards leaning against the wall and you'll see workers with tattoos skateboarding along with a case of wine in their arms."

"I know I couldn't work a desk job," interjects JoAnn. "I tried it. I used to work in advertising, but this is more the life for me."

"We do enjoy living up here," agrees Cris. "What we're looking to do with this property is to have our goats and our veggies, start making goat cheese, and the long-term plan is to grow grapes, olives, stone fruits, raise pigs and lamb that will be butchered and served at the restaurant. We hope to plant our vines in 2009."

While it all sounds like a lot of work, it also sounds a lot like heaven. "Hey, I've screwed off more than just about anybody, and when our friends come up here, they look around and say, 'You guys are living the dream.'" He sighs, then nods.

"And you know what? They're right." 