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Wine power player buys major vineyard in Napa's most illustrious region

Prices in Pritchard Hill start at about \$1 million an acre.



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There's a new power player in Napa Valley — and, surprisingly, it's not a conglomerate.

Winery owner Brion Wise has capped a recent Wine Country investment spree with a major purchase within the bellwether of Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon production: Pritchard Hill.

Wise has acquired the 128-acre estate in Napa's eastern hills known as Montagna. Situated at roughly 1,200 feet in elevation, the property includes 42 acres of vineyards and a 20,000-square-foot cave.

The estate is intended to become the future home of Wise's namesake winery, Brion, which specializes in high-end, single-vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon from



Vintner Brion Wise has purchased the Montagna estate in Napa Valley's ultra-exclusive Pritchard Hill region.
Provided by Jak Wonderly/Brion

top Napa subregions, such as Oakville, Coombsville and the illustrious Pritchard Hill. A tiny and remote plateau that towers above Lake Hennessey, Pritchard Hill is like a country club for some of Napa Valley's most exclusive wineries, including Chappellet, Ovid and Colgin.

The purchase price was not disclosed, but this property, which was first planted in the early 2000s, was listed for \$55 million in 2015. Wise said he had looked at it back then, but wasn't familiar enough with Napa Valley to make the commitment. Eight years later, he has quietly become one of the region's most prolific investors at a time when many iconic Napa wineries and vineyards are selling to corporations.

“It’s never gone out of my mind. I knew it was for sale and it was now or never,” said Wise, who estimated that the price per acre in Pritchard Hill starts at \$1 million. “This (vineyard) is on top of the mountain. You just want to sit there, watch the sunset and drink a glass of Champagne.”

The deal comes three months after Wise purchased Mark Herold Wines, known for big and bold Napa Cabernets, from one of his longtime winemaking partners. For Brion, he works with several of Napa Valley’s most sought-after winemaking consultants, like Mark Herold and Julien Fayard; Wise is also a part owner in three other premium vineyard sites: Caldwell in Coombsville, Yountville’s Sleeping Lady and a mile-long stretch called the Upper Range in Pritchard Hill, which abuts his newest acquisition. “It’s all connected and now becomes a massive estate,” he said.

With Montagna, which he’s renamed Brion Estate, Wise has a stake in nearly 2,000 acres of prime Napa Valley land — in addition to his Sonoma investments. The former oil industry executive’s foray into the wine industry occurred in 2001 when he founded his eponymous Sonoma brand, B. Wise Vineyards. He’s also the owner of Sonoma’s Amapola Creek Winery and is developing a vineyard estate in the foggy Fort Ross-Seaview region on the Sonoma Coast.

Due to its small size, Pritchard Hill is not an easy neighborhood to break into, but its rugged, rocky terrain is always in high demand; it comes with guaranteed clout and bottle prices of several hundred dollars. Last year, cult Cabernet brand Realm moved into the Houyi Vineyard estate, and in 2019, Brand Napa Valley sold to a pair of Apple executives. In 2017, Ovid was acquired by the owners of Silver Oak and LVMH bought a majority stake in Colgin.



Brion Wise has a stake in nearly 2,000 acres of prime Napa Valley land in addition to several Sonoma investments.
Provided by Jak Wonderly/Brion

Wise, who currently produces the Brion wines and hosts visitors inside a refurbished barn on the Sleeping Lady vineyard, plans to build a winery and hospitality space at the new property. But grapes from the estate likely won't make their way into bottles anytime soon. Wise plans to first focus on improving farming practices and replanting vineyard blocks that aren't thriving.

“We have to learn those vines and those roots and figure out what we need to do to take them to another level, to push the farming to the extreme,” he said. “It’s a long game, for sure.”

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Jess Lander joined the food and wine team at The San Francisco Chronicle as wine reporter in 2022. Based in Napa Valley, Jess has extensively covered California wine country for numerous national and international publications since 2014. In 2021, Jess published "The Essential Napa Valley Cookbook," a project that raised more than \$100,000 for Napa Valley restaurant workers impacted by the pandemic and fires. Jess hails from Boston, where she studied journalism at Emerson College and started out as a sports reporter before making the switch to wine.