

# Don't sell out to greed and profit

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Recently, my husband and I spent a week in San Jose del Cabo (just north of Cabo San Lucas in Baja California) We were stunned at the development along that beautiful coast line. Soon, there will be a wall of hotels making beach access available only to those with deep pockets and essentially blocking it to the local population.

An advertisement for a new “residence resort” boasted a “nature area,” a “health area,” an “entertainment arena where 3,000 could see the resident Cirque du Soleil and where the children would be greeted by Mother Goose. A 30-acre fresh water swimming pool they proudly tout as “the largest swimming pool on the planet” will be carved out of the Sea of Cortez and fed by a desalination plant.

We were even more stunned to realize that all this glitzy virtual entertainment appeals to many folks who are looking for a way and a place to escape their work-a-day worlds, and that somebody somewhere is calculating to make fortunes and build empires with no concern for the destruction they leave in their wake of the indigenous natural environment and culture. The locals appear to be just workers staffing an entertainment extravaganza.

Upon our return, I translate our experience to the changes I have witnessed in my home town and county over the past 45 years. The parallels are striking, saddening and quite frightening. Land that in the 1970s was carefully designated for use in premium wine production is being subducted into the pit of marketing schemes for virtual entertainment venues, high-end retail sales, glitzy entryways; in short, schemes to put money in the pockets of folks who, in many cases, have never lived anywhere near our valley.

The justification for this sea change is probably that those of us from “the bad old days” don’t really understand the competition against which those in the wine industry are furiously battling and the necessity of doing something bigger and better to attract market share and customers.

A few weeks ago, we were “treated” to a tour of a new “estate,” which boasts five tasting rooms, a “sensory” room, art galleries, and a boutique grocery where a box of pasta costs \$14, along with high-volume wine production and storage facilities.

The East Coast owners had been “looking for a quaint town where they could fulfill their dreams.” They picked Saint Helena. Who wouldn’t? And what are we destined to become as a result of that kind of money, pressure, and values?

On the other side, through friends I know of many extremely successful wineries that operate out of tractor sheds, funky outbuildings, barns, or small, environmentally friendly facilities. Their wines are in such demand they do minimal marketing that doesn’t require a Disneyland approach. Their inventories are small; their excellent wines sell themselves to customers who pay a premium for the expertise of the vineyard workers, managers and wine makers.

There are large wineries still committed to the production of wines of excellent quality—eschewing the trappings of the tourist bait—just offering a generous tasting in a lovely, unobtrusive venue. Equally important, the generosity and community spirit of many of our prominent vintners is probably without equal in the country.

We who call the Napa Valley our home need to decide who we are. And we need to make this decision on a county-wide level. Are we the rural, agricultural community that brought most of us here—drawn to the generous bounty of a fertile and productive land, to its natural beauty, its serenity, and to a community committed to the well-being of all its folk? Or are we willing to sell ourselves to the sirens of greed and profit?

It appears there are many who are making this decision for us. Let's take a lesson from those wise authors of the Agricultural Preserve and create a solid vision and plan, one that builds and enforces guidelines to which everyone who wishes to participate in our community must adhere.

Our city of Saint Helena is poised to take a leadership role in this decision. The new mayor and city council may have an opportunity to revisit the latest mistake of their predecessors who approved the totally inappropriate plan to build a large winery, tasting rooms and entertainment facility directly across from (and sharing a narrow and busy street with) playing fields, a public swimming pool, a city park, a skateboard park and two of our three schools—in short an area where our children ages 5-18 spend most of their days, even in the summer.

This plan is a fatality waiting to happen. I hope our new leaders will have the courage to find a compromise that will satisfy the owners (who have long been part of that group of generous residents) and ensure the safety of our young ones.

On a larger scale, I so hope they will have the vision to develop a plan which will prevent the further exploitation of our town and that they will become the standard bearers for sensible and sustainable planning for the entire valley so our children and future generations will be able to enjoy the richly simple relationship to the land from which we have derived our livelihood, and the sense of community that has nurtured us for well over a century.

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