

## How Anyone Can Be a Vineyard Manager



*Miguel Ortiz checking grapes at Ponzi Vineyards / Photo courtesy Ponzi*

Vineyard manager, agronomist, viticulturist. All refer to someone who's job is to make sure that [grapes](#) on the vine are tended to and allowed to flourish into their best selves. The role is like a project manager of sorts, where the fruit is shepherded from bud break to harvest to reinforce the philosophy that “great wine starts in the vineyard.”

“You are surrounded by wonderful landscapes, in the open air, with no pollution and in permanent ‘dialogue’ with nature,” says Manuel Iribarnegaray López, technical director at [Marqués de Cáceres](#) Group in Spain. He studied agriculture and spent six years as an agronomic engineer in Madrid, with a focus on crop management.

Today, he oversees roughly 1,500 acres in [Rueda](#), [Ribera del Duero](#) and [Rioja](#), and works with experimental grape varieties.

“The grape and the wine are totally linked,” says Iribarnegaray López. “What you do in the vineyard today is what you are going to delight in the wine in five, seven or 10 years.”

If you're passionate about grafting, [pruning techniques](#), soil pH, canopy management and other factors that ensure grapes reach their full potential, here's how to pursue a career amid the vines.

## Start with education.

An agricultural degree worked for Iribarnegaray López when he segued into viticulture. It augmented necessary technical skills like how to use crop management software, geo-localization and [vigor index](#) analysis by satellite.

Stirling Fox, owner of [Stirling Wine Grapes, Inc.](#), which is contracted to help manage the vineyards at [Abbey Road Farm](#) in Oregon's [Willamette Valley](#), recommends a two- or four-year viticulture degree. Fox has been a professional vineyard manager for more than 25 years. Working part time at restaurants during college piqued his interest in wine. He changed his educational focus from science toward viticulture.

## Work in the vineyards, learn from others and be humble.

“You must develop the ability to understand what the vine is asking you [and] what it needs,” says Michele Pezzicoli, vineyard manager at [Tenuta di Arceno](#) in Tuscany, Italy. “You need to understand the characteristics of the soil and how [they] transmit to the plant and, ultimately, the wine: its character, structure, [minerality](#), complexity and all that is required to make a great wine.”

There's a touch of mysticism involved in raising grapes destined for a bottle rather than a fruit bowl. Wines remain living organisms that continue to evolve in fascinating ways after grapes have been pressed and their juice is corked. Books and degrees are helpful, but it's no replacement for time spent among the vines.

“You must be in the fields with the vine workers and the plants, and get dirty,” says Franco Bastias, agronomist at [Domaine Bousquet](#) in Mendoza, Argentina.

The ability to listen and learn from others is an integral part of being a successful vineyard manager. Bastias's parents spent their lives in the fields. He would accompany them on field trips to a [Uco Valley](#) winery where a vineyard manager taught them techniques on how to prune and fertilize.

“Listen to the people who work with you, who many times lack formal education, but having grown up and spent most of their time working in a vineyard have a lifetime's worth of advice and techniques to offer,” he says. Know what you don't know, and be open to let others with more experience show you.



## **Use your management experience.**

Vineyard managers work with multiple crews and juggle a mountain of hectic tasks, particularly during growing and picking seasons. Draw on any experience in your background where you had to manage others, and tap into existing skills in delegation, motivation, teamwork and training.

“I teach and provide the proper tools to the vineyard crew so they can perform their jobs to the best of their ability,” says Miguel Ortiz, vineyard manager for nearly 25 years at Oregon's [Ponzi Vineyards](#). Born in Southwest [Mexico](#), he emigrated to Oregon as a young adult and began as a standard employee

before working his way up the ranks to foreman and manager. He continues to educate his 15-person crew about the importance of thoughtful farming.

“Work hard, be honest and always be open to learning,” says Ortiz.

Iribarnegaray López points out that the job doesn’t stop at the estate’s boundaries.

“Nowadays, a vineyard manager is not only in charge of the vineyards that belong to the winery,” he says. “[They’re] also in continuous contact with all the winegrowers that have relations with the company.” This means visiting and monitoring outside vineyards as well. Iribarnegaray López stresses that communication and organizational development is key.

## **Get a job in the cellar.**

California-born Maya Hood White, associate winemaker/viticulturist and former vineyard manager at [Early Mountain Vineyards](#) in Madison, Virginia, first studied mathematics and engineering. Her curiosity led to stints in wine cellars to gain experience, though she doubted her competence in the vineyard.

“I struggled growing basil plants in my house,” says Hood White. “How could I even consider vines?”

At the University of California, Davis she earned a master’s degree in viticulture and enology. During that time, her interest grew as her responsibilities expanded to vineyard work and management. Hood White recommends a combination of study and experience in both aspects of the industry, rather than feeling the need to pigeonhole oneself into either grape-growing or winemaking.

“At times, I felt the need to pick between a role in the cellar or vineyard,” she says. At Early Mountain, the lines between grape growing and winemaking are highly blurred. Today, Hood White splits her time between tasks like scouting vineyards for [pests](#) or [diseases](#), and balancing aromatics with barrel influence in the winery’s single-vineyard Tannat.

“I wish I knew how natural and seamless operating in two different spaces could be,” she says.

## **Relish your role in the winemaking process.**

Though Mother Nature gets a lot of the credit when a vintage turns out perfectly, so should the vineyard team.

“There is something incredibly special and gratifying to follow and support vines through a portion of their life,” says Hood White.

Fox agrees, citing it as the coolest part of his job. “Delivering beautiful, consistently ripe fruit for winemakers who appreciate our attention to detail and quality is a proud moment every time, every year,” he says. “It’s what our work is all about.”