TASTE
of the seacoast

Report from the Symposium

By JoAnn Actis-Grande



I've just returned from an incredible trip exploring the ins and outs of wine writing. Special thanks to Raymond Vineyards for sponsoring my fellowship to attend the 2011 Symposium for Professional Wine Writers at the Meadowood Resort in Napa Valley (www.winewriterssymposium.org). The symposium is four days dedicated to bringing together outstanding leaders in the wine writing field. I wanted to share with you some highlights of the experience.

Before the event officially began, I took a tour and tasting at Raymond Vineyards, one of Napa Valley's great estates. The historic property, founded in 1970, is situated in Rutherford, the heart of Napa Valley. The property was purchased in 2009 by Jean-Charles Boisset and is now part of the Boisset Family Estates collection of wineries. Boisset is a brilliant, dynamic man committed to honoring the legacy of Raymond Vineyards while creating and adding his own personal style. He also is devoted to sustainable, organic, and biodynamic farming.

The symposium officially kicked off with optional vineyard and winery visits. I selected Conn Creek Winery for a scheduled AVA Cabernet Blending Session—making wine fascinates me. The winery provides juice from various Napa appellations, as well as several grape varietals with cabernet sauvignon as the main blend. My creation, "Jagalich," was 60 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 20 percent Merlot and 20 percent Petit Verdot. Conn's winemaker, Mike McGrath, commented on how good my wine turned out! Of course, I am now dreaming

of making wine in Napa Valley.

The first full day started with a welcome from Symposium director Jim Gordon, former managing editor for Wine Spectator Magazine and current editor of Wines & Vines, a magazine for North American winemakers and grape growers. Dominique Browning, former editor of House & Garden, gave a moving speech on "follow the love" by doing only what you love. Undeniably the participants, including myself, are doing just that. Gerald Asher, former Gourmet magazine wine columnist and author, spoke about his career in wine writing, offering tips on how to write with panache, style, and humor. Other speakers included Antonia Allegra, author, career development and food writing coach; Karen MacNeil, author of The Wine Bible; Jack Hart, author and former editor of The Oregonian; Lettie Teague, wine columnist for The Wall Street Journal; and Jon Bonne, wine editor for The San Francisco Chronicle.

Mornings consisted of lectures and workshops. The "Employing Storycraft in Winemaker Profiles" was very helpful as I write such profiles for Taste of the Seacoast. We spent afternoons at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) at Greystone, for wine tasting panel discussions and private writing coaching sessions.

Napa Valley wines were provided throughout the entire Symposium. We were blessed with enjoying the best wines Napa Valley offers, especially their world famous Cabernet Sauvignon. Dining at the Meadowood was unforgettable; the food lives up to their three-star Michelin award. If you visit Napa Valley, I suggest taking the time to explore and indulge at the Meadowood.

The last evening included a fellowship dinner held at Meadowood's Vintners Room, where I had the pleasure of meeting and dining with Jean-Charles Boisset of my sponsor, Raymond Vineyards. During the dinner, 15 wines were poured, each representing the 15 wineries sponsoring fellowships. I tasted all the wines but was not able to finish them, although many others did. A few participants were missing at breakfast.

Immediately following the Symposium we were invited to "Premiere Napa Valley" sponsored by the Napa Valley Vintners association. The event is a one-of-a-kind weekend of networking with wine writers from all over the world, as well as other wine trade professionals. I had the opportunity to taste special blends from barrels, wines that were created only for this event. I look forward to sharing my discoveries in upcoming articles. Cheers!