

Weinberg's Wine Notes #217 – Wine On The Road in Sonoma Part I



I've just finished a week and a half in the heart of Northern California wine country, the first three days in the Napa Valley and a full seven in Sonoma County. This column is dedicated to my time in Sonoma, when I was accompanied by Paul David of winepairings.biz, a regular travel companion. It's a lot to relate in one article so I've decided to break it into two parts, this week and next, divided more-or-less chronologically.

Sonoma County, located on the northern coast of California, is the largest in area and northernmost of the nine San Francisco Bay Area counties. It is the southwestern county and largest producer of California's Wine Country region, which also includes the counties of Napa, Mendocino, and Lake. Sonoma has 13 approved American Viticultural Areas and over 250 wineries. Its largest city and county seat is Santa Rosa, which is located in the approximate center of a wheel of stellar wineries.

Sunday, July 15, started with a picnic at Jordan Winery. John Jordan and Communications Director Lisa Mattson joined us at John's private airstrip and hangar/man-cave on top of one of the peaks he owns as part of his 1,200 acres of Sonoma County. I've written about John and other members of wine's nobility before and thought I had seen everything there was to see in the world of the grape, but watching John waggle his wings before landing on his grass airstrip, and then sitting down not 100 feet from his airplane for lunch prepared by his in-house chef was a truly unique and enjoyable experience.



While I do like Jordan's Cabernet Sauvignon, it was too hot at our outdoor picnic for red wine. So I grooved on the Chardonnay, where aromas of fresh green and yellow apples led to an elegant palate framed by lively acidity and a hint of butter and filbert nut on the long, lithe finish.



Monday morning brought a Jordan grower's tour with Assistant Winemaker Ronald Du Preez, a fascinating exercise in vineyard thinking with one of the world's rising stars of grape growing. After a quick detour to Napa to drop off Paul's wife Susan and visit Larkmead (see last week's column), we headed back to Sonoma for a tasting at Thomas George Estates with Tasting Room & Wine Club Manager Adrienne Donnelly and General Manager Sean Tevik. A cottage at Thomas George Estates would also be our base of operations for the next couple of days.

I reported on this winery last year and was anxious to try the next vintage because I could see promise and potential in their first attempt on-premise. I'm happy to say that much of that promise has been fulfilled. Thomas George's 2009 bottlings are light-years ahead of their 2008's and I'm excited to keep following this estate in the future. Of special note were the Chardonnay Cresta Ridge Estate from the Russian River Valley, full of lime zest, white peach and juicy apple pie, and the Pinot Noir Campbell Ranch that's sourced

from near Annapolis on the Sonoma Coast. This was dusty and juicy, with elements of cranberry, mace, red raspberry and Ranier cherry.

Tuesday began with a Buena Vista Winery tour accompanied by General Manager Jean-Charles Boisset and Chief Winemaker Brian Maloney. From its innovative beginnings under zealous founder Count Agoston Haraszthy to its historic rebirth under Boisset, Buena Vista has always produced stylistically diverse wines using many varietals. The winery is currently under reconstruction and the vineyards are already being managed biodynamically. These are two of the more important changes being made by Jean-Charles, who has proved himself a worthy successor to the Count. We tasted a lot of wines on our visit but my favorite was the 2009 Merlot from Carneros, a red-black concoction that boasted aromas of pomegranate and black licorice alongside flavors of rose and blood sausage.

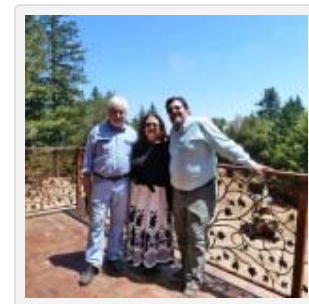


The day concluded with a tour and tasting at B.R. Cohn, owned by the manager of the Doobie Brothers. This time we were hosted by General Manager Anthony Dicarlo, who showed us a terrific Zinfandel from the Olive Hill Estate, that portion of the vineyards immediately adjacent to the winery. This bottle showed dark chocolate and red cherry up-front, followed by red raspberry and orange cream on the full, round finish.



Wednesday brought lunch at Fort Ross with owners Linda and Lester Schwartz, old friends who appreciate the beauty of the Sonoma Coast from their magnificent backyard patio. The Schwartzes are in the process of finishing their new tasting room, the only one in the region that is at all close to the coast. It was a process that took so much effort and money that, as Lester says, "After we experienced such high marginal costs, no one else will ever build another one around here."

The tasting room is gorgeous — a perfect place to enjoy Ft. Ross's precious chardonnays, pinot noirs and even a pinotage that I think is the best in the world. The bottle I tried held a red-black elixir from which aromas of black cherry and granite were the first to emanate, followed by a hint of tobacco. The lengthy palate was dominated by black raspberry and dark chocolate with a bit of Earl Gray tea thrown in for good measure. But it is with Pinot Noir that the Schwartzes make their vinous name, and the regular bottling was my overall favorite. The color reminded me of purple lip gloss and the smells evoked pink raspberry and salty sea rocks. White pepper, strawberry and allspice finished off this prodigious package.



Our second Wednesday tour and tasting came at Flowers Winery with Winemaker Dave Keatley and Estate Director Christopher Barefoot. Flowers is now part of the Huneus wine empire (which includes Quintessa in the Napa Valley), and the same attention to detail that informs their other wineries has been implanted on the Sonoma Coast.



Two wines really wowed me. The Chardonnay Camp Meeting Ridge Estate, from the original estate vineyard, was of a gold hue, with a nose of yellow pear and lime and a taste of tangerine, quince and salty ash. The dusky blue-red Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast showed kirsch and dark chocolate at first, followed by strawberry, cinnamon and raspberry liqueur on a long, dense, finish.

The breadth and variety of Sonoma-based wineries can be overwhelming but great juice abounds at every turn. They showcase the best of New World fruit and winemaking and deserve a place at your table. Next week's column will finish my Sonoma journey, and the one after that will show off the final three days of my western swing, during which I played in the dirt of Walla Walla, Washington, at Merlot Camp.

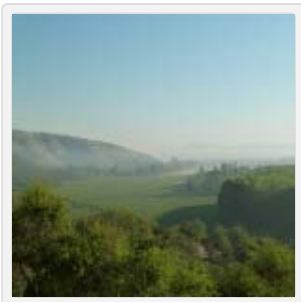
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A trip is scheduled for October 6 – 14, 2012, led by acclaimed wine educator and Tasting Panel Contributor Stuart George and Contributing Editor Benjamin Weinberg. Planned stops include the terroirs of Maipo, Aconcagua, Cachapoal, Colchagua, Curicó, Maule, Casablanca, San Antonio and the capital city of Santiago itself. Sponsorship is provided by Brandabout, a wine marketing firm based in Santiago with specialized knowledge of Chile, and Wine On The Road, an international provider of wine-country tours.

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Recommended:

White

Jordan Chardonnay 2010 (Sonoma County, California) \$29

Thomas George Estates Chardonnay Cresta Ridge Estate Russian River Valley 2009 (Sonoma County, California) \$38

Flowers Vineyard & Winery Chardonnay Camp Meeting Ridge Sonoma Coast 2010 (Sonoma County, California) \$58

Red

Thomas George Estates Pinot Noir Campbell Ranch Sonoma Coast 2009 (Sonoma County, California) \$38

Buena Vista Winery Merlot Carneros 2009 (Sonoma County, California) \$25

B. R. Cohn Zinfandel Olive Hill Estate 2009 (Sonoma County, California) \$38

Fort Ross Pinotage Sonoma Coast 2007 (Sonoma County, California) \$30

Fort Ross Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast 2007 (Sonoma County, California) \$39

Flowers Vineyard & Winery Pinot Noir Sonoma Coast 2010 (Sonoma County, California) \$50

August 2nd, 2012 | Tags: [b. r. cohn](#), [behind](#), [buena vista](#), [california](#), [camp meeting ridge](#), [campbell ranch](#), [carneros](#), [Chardonnay](#), [coast](#), [county](#), [cresta ridge estate](#), [Estate](#), [flowers](#), [fort ross](#), [jordan](#), [luxur](#), [merlot](#), [note](#), [olive hill](#), [pinot noir](#), [pinotage](#), [recommend](#), [road](#), [russian river](#), [scene](#), [sonoma](#), [tast](#), [thomas george estates](#), [tour](#), [unfilter](#), [unfin](#), [valley](#), [vineyard](#), [visit](#), [weinberg](#), [wine](#), [winery](#), [zinfandel](#) | Category: [Articles and Columns](#), [Ben's Blogs](#), [Weinberg's Wine Notes](#)