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Magical time in wine country

Forget Disneyland. For wine lovers, a grape camp in California is the real magic kingdom.

BY VANESSA PINNIGER, VANCOUVER SUN OCTOBER 29, 2012

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STORY PHOTOS (27)



Dinner is served al fresco on the terrace at Francis Ford Coppola's Winery. Photograph by: Darren Miller Photography

SONOMA COUNTY, Calif. — Harvest is a magical time in Sonoma.

Straw-coloured hills are bathed in a golden light and the lush landscape of wine country is bursting. Tractors hum between manicured rows. Trucks, weighed down under bins of grapes, amble along rural roads. Pickers work late into the night under the glare of artificial floodlights to pluck grapes cold from their vines. And cellars smell of newly fermenting juice.

The days are warm and the nights are cool.

Sound perfect? It is and one of the best ways to savour it is with Sonoma County's Grape Camp.

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A two-and-a-half day “immersion” into wine country, this is boot camp for food and wine lovers. From picking a cluster of grapes off the vine at sunrise to whipping up a soufflé in a cooking class at lunch, this is the ultimate food and wine experience.

With so much crammed into the two-day schedule, this is not for the faint of heart or stomach. On Day 1, Carolyn Barth, a self-professed “lightweight” from Texas, is caught counting on her fingers the number of wines we have tried — 14 so far. And it’s only lunch.

The marathon that is Grape Camp fosters a new appreciation for just what it takes to produce a bottle of wine. The fact that there are so many to try just makes the experience all the more enjoyable.

Base camp this year is The Applewood Inn in Guerneville, a secluded Mediterranean-style B&B nestled in the woods of Sonoma County, a 20-minute drive from the coast.

This is Northern California at its best, with soaring redwoods and cool morning fogs that roll in from the sea.

To the east, vineyards roll across the verdant Russian River Valley. It is here on the first night that we feast on filet mignon in the cave at the Thomas George Estates Winery.

Owner Thomas Baker is a Canadian from Toronto who runs the winery with son Jeremy. Their artisan wines, handmade in small lots by winemaker Chris Russi, are primarily Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays from three hillside vineyards.

With dinner, we are served a 2009 Chardonnay from the Starr Ridge Vineyard, and two Pinot Noirs — a 2009, also from Starr Ridge, and a 2009 from the Baker Ridge Vineyard.

Folks from neighbouring wineries — Gary Farrell Vineyards, Valdez, Williams Selyem, Arista and Davis Family Vineyards — have all popped over to serve pre-dinner wine to compliment zesty appetizers: Ahi tuna tartar tacos, gazpacho shooters and matchsticks of Serrano ham and Manchego cheese.

It is like being invited to a fabulous neighbourhood dinner party. Only in a cave.

With so much good food and great wine on just the first night, we quickly realize the need to pace ourselves. Especially since we have to be up bright and early the next morning for the first of two grape harvests.

We are put to work at Windsor Oaks Vineyards at 8 a.m. Let loose on the vines, clippers in hand, we soon learn just how much hard work went into the many glasses consumed the night before.

Job done, we move on to a different winery to see the next step in the process. At J Vineyards we are greeted by the effusive Judy Jordan — the winery’s namesake owner. A second-generation vintner (she is a daughter of the Jordan Winery clan), Judy has been producing Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, Chardonnay and sparkling wine at J since 1986.

Inside, we watch as crates of just-picked grapes are hand sorted. Then

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it's off for a tasting with winemaker Melissa Stackhouse. We try 2005 Brut, crisp 2011 Pinot Gris and 2010 Chardonnay and smooth 2010 Pinot Noir before heading off to Relish Culinary School in Healdsburg.

Here, under the tutelage of chef Tracey Shepos and owner Donna del Rey, campers are broken into five groups to prepare a five-course lunch, each course perfectly matched with wine. Heirloom tomato, watermelon and mozzarella salad gets a 2011 Kunde Sauvignon Blanc; Tuna Crudo with olives and capers, the 2010 Schug Sonoma Coast Chardonnay; chicken skewers with pomegranate glaze, 2009 Patz & Hall Pinot Noir; grilled flatbread with figs, radicchio and prosciutto, 2008 Jordan Winery Alexander Valley Cab Sauvignon; and for the individual chocolate soufflés, the 2007 Pedroncelli Four Grapes Vintage Port.

Armed with all the recipes and wine pairing notes so we can recreate this culinary masterpiece at home, we can barely waddle out the door to Healdsburg for some free time before moving onto Francis Ford Coppola's Alexander Winery in Geyserville.

His newly renovated "wine wonderland" opened in 2010 complete with two restaurants, swimming pool, movie gallery and more. The pool has south-of-France feel, complete with cabins for changing, and is available to the public during the summer season (\$125 for pool access, including cabine, chaise longue and umbrella for four).

After getting the opportunity to try our hands, or feet, at some old-fashioned grape stomping, we are rewarded with a sunset dinner family-style on the terrace overlooking the vineyards.

While we dine on steak, chicken mattone and grilled salmon, along with 2009 Chardonnay, 2008 Director's 2008 Pinot Noir, 2010 Director's Cut Chardonnay, 2009 Reserve Pinot Noir and 2009 Eleanor, we are treated to something truly spectacular.

As the amber glow of the sun begins to fade, the most incredible moon rises into the night sky from behind the Mayacamas Mountains. It is a scene Coppola himself could have directed.

A magical moment.

Our bellies full, heads swirling, we pile back on the bus — exhausted, sated. Happy campers all.

Up again the next morning to do it all over again, the first wine comes early. It's on our berries at breakfast in a yogurt wine sauce at the Applewood Inn's Michelin-starred restaurant. This really is endurance training.

At Hanna Vineyards, we pick what can only be described as the perfect grapes. Hanging in thick clusters, they're a cinch to get off and plop into the bucket at my feet.

Then to Quivira Vineyards and Winery, where a beautiful spread of wine and cheese is laid out on long tables under a canopy of trees beside the river. We taste cool Sauvignon Blancs, Zinfandel and a Rhone-style blend called Elusive.

Delicious.

Lunch is at Lambert Bridge and we're surprisingly hungry, quickly getting into the groove of the Sonoma lifestyle.

They say there is something magical about Sonoma and that people who come here often come back, some never leaving at all.

At Lambert Bridge we meet a former JP Morgan employee who did just that, throwing in the towel for a simpler life. You can see why.

Lunch is prepared and served in the garden by chef Andrea Mugnaini — an assortment of pizzas hot from the wood-fired outdoor oven; wood-roasted pork tenderloin saltimbocca; roasted beets. All paired with wines: 2011 Sauvignon Blanc, 2008 Cab Franc, 2008 Crane Creek Cuvee, 2010 Chardonnay 2009 Forchini Vineyard Zinfandel and 2007 Limited Selection Cab Sauvignon.

It is a haze of wine and sunshine.

And it continues at DeLoach Winery, where not only do we have the pleasure of meeting the charming Jean-Charles Boisset, dubbed California's new wine "rock star" by Sonoma magazine, but we also get the chance to try his new No. 3 JCB.

In 2003, the Boisset family brought two generations of sustainable winemaking experience from Burgundy to the Russian River Valley with their purchase of DeLoach. Now with his No. 3 JCB, Boisset marries grapes from the Old World (40 per cent French Burgundy from the Cote de Nuits) and New (60 per cent Pinot Noir from the Sebastopol Hills and Russian River).

After our tasting, we are challenged to create our own wine blend from 2010 Jean-Claude Boisset Bourgogne, 2010 DeLoach Green Valley Pinot Noir and 2010 DeLoach O.F.S. Russian River Valley Pinot Noir.

We blend, taste, bottle and cork, then create our own label for the wines that are judged by Boisset himself. It's the best French class I've ever taken.

Graduation dinner that evening at the Applewood Restaurant is our last meal together after the whirlwind experience. Each course is thoughtfully paired with wines from Mauritsen Winery, and the two young Mauritsen brothers — Clay the winemaker, and Cam, a sixth-generation vineyard worker, are here to share it with us. On offer are a crudo of albacore tuna with 2011 Sauvignon Blanc; tempura squash blossom ratatouille with 2011 Rose, Rockpile; beef tenderloin and 2009 Cab Sauvignon; and chocolate mascarpone cannoli with 2009 Rockpile Independence.

We can barely move after dinner. I roll off to bed, realizing it will be worth the extra pounds I have inevitably gained. For gained with them are new friends, a new understanding of an industry that has always fascinated me, and a truly memorable experience.

The end result? I got on the scale the morning after I returned and I had lost two pounds. Magic indeed.

If you go:

The 2013 Sonoma County Grape Camp runs Sept. 23 to 25 next year.

Accommodations and wineries change each year. For more information visit the website at www.sonomagrapecamp.com

Sonoma County is a two-hour drive north of San Francisco through amazing wine country.

Air Canada, WestJet, United Airlines and more offer daily non-stop service into San Francisco International Airport (SFO) from Vancouver's YVR.

Alaska Airlines now flies directly into Santa Rosa airport from YVR via Seattle, alleviating the two-hour drive from San Francisco.

To experience Sonoma wines closer to home, Wine Arts 2012: A Taste of Sonoma takes place here next month.

This fundraiser for Arts Umbrella, in partnership with Sonoma County Vintners, features a Sonoma Winemakers Dinner Nov. 13 at Brix Restaurant and Wine Bar in Yaletown and A Taste of Sonoma Nov. 14 at the Sutton Place Hotel.

To purchase tickets visit www.artsumbrella.com/events/fundraising/wine

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