

PREMIERE

Expect the unexpected at Premiere Napa Valley



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Certain things were expected at Napa Valley Premiere this year: barrel tastings of the 2011 vintage, tasty food, and the meeting of new and old friends in the industry. And then there were the surprises, such as Domaine Chandon pulling out a traveling caviar cart, Tim Mondavi displaying historic maps used in the creation of the Napa Valley AVA, and an exotic dancer climbing a floor to ceiling swath of cloth in the Raymond cellar.

While the valley has for long surpassed guests' expectations, sometimes the Napa Valley even outdoes itself.

My task was a lucky one. The Star's editor, Dave Stoneberg, sent me out to report on Napa Valley Premiere 2013 events which I would attend. Little did I know this journey would take me from magical fairyland to hopping nightclub over the course of three days.

In the past, my Premiere experience was limited to one very incredible day, the Saturday barrel tasting and auction. But Premiere is tour de force of at least four days of continuous events. Trade guests fly in from China, Japan, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong and from all across the United States, like the new friends I met from Louisville, Kentucky — past bidding winners, Jerry and Debbie Rogers of Party Mart, and their friends Bea and Phil Douglas. The main task for all guests is to view the new vintage of Napa Valley's wines, but the Napa Valley Vintners, wineries and restaurants plan on so much more.

I knew my first stop would be sheer wine and food hedonism. There are many splendid buildings and sites in Napa Valley, but Domaine Chandon is magical. As you walk from the parking lot and take the footbridge over the pond, the scenery transforms into a mystical forest of trees and bushes surrounded by soft lights. This only primes you for what is ahead. With a glass of one of my favorites, the Etoile rosé, in hand, I encountered the rolling caviar cart. I would later dream of that cart following me around all evening.

Perry Hoffman's cooking at the winery's Etoile restaurant is always exciting. Dungeness crab, lobster, rabbit and Zabuton (special cut of beef) were all served with an intriguing

mix of flavors and fresh ingredients from the Domaine's garden. The top wine of the night was Chandon's Premiere auction lot, the Late Disgorged 2000. This is an incredible wine with honeyed stone fruits and wonderful brioche and toasty flavors that come from aging on the lees.

On Friday, I headed to Hourglass Winery where Jeff Morgan, owner of Covenant Winery and winemaker for Peter Paul Wines, was moderating an Insider's Discussion and Tasting of Napa Valley AVAs. A dream team panel, the speakers included Tim Mondavi, Beth Novak Milliken, Aaron Pott, David Ramey, Jeff Smith (Hourglass) and Benoit Touquette (winemaker of Realm Cellars).

Tim Mondavi had all of the guests craning their necks to see an overlay of maps that were used when the Napa Valley AVA application was first being formulated. Aaron Pott kept everyone laughing between intriguing comments on the world's first vineyard designated wines and pairing down today's AVA system in the Napa Valley.

The panelists all voiced opinions on the AVA system and where they see it going. With Napa Valley such an intricate weave of complex microclimates, soils, aspects, diurnal swings and more, there was consensus on the difficulty of defining new boundaries. The question of whether Napa Valley would head toward the AVA system in Burgundy, France where portions of vineyards receive their own AVAs arose. There was no consensus except, as Tim Mondavi pointed out, large changes would not happen anytime soon. "We have the flexibility and passage of time" to better understand the valley, he concluded.

A number of beautiful wines were then tasted, including the Continuum Estate 2010. Coming mostly from Pritchard Hill, this wine had plenty of dark berry fruit with soft tannins; a wonderfully balanced sip.

Eager to see the Far Niente caves, I headed to the Oakville Winegrowers tasting next. BOND, Harlan, Groth and so many other famed wineries were there. I had not tasted Paradigm in a long while, and their 2009 cabernet sauvignon was a stand-out: inviting aromas of dark fruits yet with a fresh lift on the palate along with concentrated and delicious flavors.

The House of Cab event, hosted by the Stags Leap District, followed. The Pine Ridge caves were decorated in a very cool lounge style, with many top wineries pouring numerous wines. The Stag's Leap Wine Cellars 1999 FAY was a knock-out. Spitting religiously all day, I held on to this glass.

Nothing could have prepared me for my last stop: Raymond's extravaganza called Mardi Gras. The registration table was strewn with feathered masks, although many guests came decked out in special costumes. Owner Jean-Charles Boisset was front and center, taking photos with guests as they arrived. My dear friend, Anna Miranda from the winery, led me to another great highlight of the day: she introduced me to Steven Spurrier, a man as charming as he is wine knowledgeable.

It was in the Raymond cellar, however, where I encountered my biggest surprise. On a

regular day, the cellar is decorated with crystal and mirrors - a feast for the eyes. Yet that night, among the pulsing music and sparkling wine bar, were scantily (and beautifully) dressed dancers, deftly moving to the music atop the bar. This was only topped when one of the dancers moved to a floor to ceiling swath of cloth between two rows of tanks, and proceeded to climb and display light acrobatics. It reminded me once again there is likely no showman in Napa Valley today quite like Jean-Charles Boisset.

Premiere then culminated in the grand barrel tasting and lively wine auction on Saturday, with the lucky winners owning one-of-a-kind lots of wines that will never be offered again. Ever. These unique wines have a fine home in this one-of-a-kind destination, the Napa Valley.

(Catherine Seda is the Star's tasting panel writer.)