



LAURA NESS

Her VineNess

Calling all River Road wine lovers!

Get your tickets now for the River Road Passport, coming up rapidly on Feb. 8, the Saturday before Valentine's day.

Tickets are \$45 online, riverroadwinetrail.com. Each winery will offer its own food and wine pairings.

Here's a quick look at the lineup: Hahn Winery: SLH Chard and SLH Pinot with Charcuterie and Cheese plate, including Fra'Mani Salame Rosa Panini and Jambon-Beurre and "Wagon Wheel" by Cowgirl Creamery; Manzoni Estate Vineyards: Swiss Sausage, Cheese Fondue, Sliced Cheeses & Salami; Paraiso Vineyards: Port and Chocolate. A food truck is also scheduled to appear; Pessagno Winery: Italiana Rustica Pizze e Zinfandel; Scheid Vineyards: come enjoy the magical pies from "On Fire" Mobile Pizza oven; Talbott Vineyards: Assorted flat bread gourmet pizzas paired with their Kali Hart and Logan Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs; Ventana Vineyards: Butch's Sausage and Chili made with Ventana wine; and additional food trucks are expected to make appearances along the way.

Pinots From The Northland

A brief excursion to Sonoma gave me the opportunity to taste some pinots far afield of our beloved little treasure chest in Monterey. We get so spoiled living here, with all that great Arroyo Seco and Santa Lucia Highlands stuff, not to mention the brilliance of Chalone.

But exploring the different pinot growing areas of the West is part of my job, and so, I headed north to Sonoma to visit a venerable brand and a relatively new one.

The 2011 DeLoach Estate Olivet Bench pinot from the Russian River is the winery's second iteration of pinot from this recently planted vineyard that calls a lovely piece of dirt on Olivet Road, home. We all

know how challenging 2011 was, and here in the Russian River, it was super foggy and nobody thought the grapes would get there. But this combo of Dijon 115, 828, Calera and Swan clones shows how beautifully pinot can perform even when the odds are stacked against it.

The aromas are wonderfully floral, with rosy perfume and hints of earth, lavender and rosemary. On the palate, the cornucopia of flavors includes cinnamon-spiced cranberry relish and savory ham. Grippy tannins, great acid and a taut tightrope of focus, make this phenomenally mouthwatering wine a gourmet delight.

It's fabulous paired with DeLoach's mustard growing partner from Burgundy, Edmund Fallot, whose wonderful stoneground concoctions are featured as part of a special Mustard & Wine Pairing adventure, available at the winery,

and a good selection of them are available for sale in the tasting room as well.

I also enjoyed the 2010 Mabaroshi vineyard pinot from the west Sebastopol hills, planted by a couple pursuing their whimsical dream of making awesome pinot. The vineyard's name in Japanese fittingly translates to "mirage."

This is quintessential Russian River pinot, with aromatics of plum, ripe cherry and char, followed by a full-on flood of powerful cola, cherry and chocolate, ollaliberry and baking spice, making me want to pair it with turkey mole.

DeLoach is open every day, and the tasting adventures abound, including "Winemaker for a Day," which are available every day at 10:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. by advance reservation.

Next stop was En Garde Winery in Kenwood. The name comes from a fencing term, and the logo is four *fleurs de lis* fashioned into what looks like a sharp spearpoint.

Yet the Hungarian owner, Csaba Szakal, is anything but intimidating, even though he's 6 foot 8. His smile is as big as he is, and his heart, bigger than anything you can imagine. His always sunny nature and big handshake remind me of Steve Pessagno.

Csaba makes wines of incredible adroitness and finesse, despite his physical presence. There is a delicate balance in every one of them that truly expresses his desire to keep that rapier's edge focus that a truly great wine requires. His lineup is both broad and deep,



and there's not a yawner among them.

Step up to the delightfully minerally 2012 albarino from the Bokisch vineyard in Lodi and be seduced by its salinity and linen-like texture. If you fancy a rosé that drinks like a racy grenache, Csaba's got you covered with this saignée of tempranillo and the five Bordeaux varieties he whips into reds that will make you weak in the knees. Done *sur lies* (stirred on the yeast) and barreled for two months for a voluptuous texture that gives it the plushness of a velour robe, this rosé follows exactly the same recipe his grandfather used in Hungary to make the only wine he produced.

We're sure glad Csaba steps beyond rosé to make several awesome pinots, Tempranillo, cabernet franc from the Ghielmetti vineyard in Livermore and cabernet sauvignons from Diamond Mountain. They're all terrific, but I'm particularly fond of the 2011 Green Valley pinot made from clone 23, Pommard and 828.

It's filled with coriander, cranberry, pomegranate and intriguing notes of saffron.

I'm also a sucker for his cab franc, a Gold medal winner at the Cab Shootout, and so white peppery in the nose, it made my friend Ellen, sneeze. I love the intense, plum, lavender and rose petals that swirl around your olfactory lobes like a windstorm of pleasure.

Cabernet

For cabernet lovers,

En Garde is your candy store, with brilliant efforts from the elite, high elevation Diamond Mountain Vineyard, at half the price of other Napa labels that are lucky to get this coveted fruit.

For \$98, you can enjoy the 2008 En Garde Reserve Diamond Mtn cab that spent 27 months on 100% new French oak. From the gitgo, this wine is the Harvard Club in Cambridge, MA, exuding the unmistakable manliness of a cloud of cigar box, fine leather furniture, cologne, cedar closet and tobacco smoke. It drinks as powerfully as a velvet anvil. Extraordinarily sexy wine.



Pessagno Wines were among a wide variety of wineries at the Salinas Rotary Club's "Pigs, Pinot, & More," Saturday, Jan. 25. TRAVIS GESKE/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN