



The other wine country

Head north of the Bay Area for an eclectic tasting experience

BY CAMILLIA LANHAM

Thursday, January 22, 2015



Drive into downtown Sonoma and you can feel the bourgeois atmosphere that comes with being a super destination for wine and food tourists. Boutique bakeries, \$40- to \$50-a-plate eateries, and those lovely little artisan-craft-selling stores that I love to look-but-not-buy-in are perched in a literal square around the historic city hall. And if you're into that, sweet! Travel no farther, because it's perfect and a fun place to poke around.

I had a budget to keep, so I hightailed it out of there.

Once I left the center of town, the grape vines loomed in their winter form—ghost-like and devoid of life—along both sides of the road, hills unfolded, shouting with rain-fueled life. Out there is the backbone of Sonoma: Interspersed between the wine estates were rural homes and equipment, between Mercedes Benzes and Land Rovers were diesel trucks and beat-up work vehicles, and mingling with the tourists leaning on any wine-tasting room bar were the locals who keep the land alive.

Luckily for me, I was visiting one such local—a farm manager for Bi-Rite Markets, San Francisco grocery stores hawking produce from their Sonoma-based farm. We went to a couple of her favorites, and each one is like its own museum of history, culture, landscape, and wine.

My friend is a wine club member at Buena Vista Winery; its founder Agoston Haraszthy—a self-proclaimed “Count”—basically started California’s wine industry when he opened the winery’s doors in 1857. The tasting room is minutes from the downtown square and housed in a three-story, stone-walled historic press house that’s a five-minute walk from the winery parking lot.

A stuffed lion leaping through the air greets tasters as they walk through the door, a photo of the count rests over the mantle of an old fireplace, and attendants dressed in period costumes greet customers behind a shiny, long wooden bar with shelves of wine rising above it. You can take a tour with a costumed performing attendant, do a barrel tasting, or just step up to the bar.

After our free tasting—oh, to be a club member—I settled on purchasing a bottle of the 2012 Private Reserve Zinfandel, a velvety smooth, dark berry-filled, earthy delight. My friend snagged a bottle of the 2010 Sparkling Brut for New Year’s Eve.

Buena Vista’s neighbor is Bartholomew Park Winery, another historic winery with acres of

land that aren’t all occupied by grape vines. We didn’t taste here, but we did take my dog for a hike through the oak and redwood covered hills of Bartholomew Park, a private park on the property—which used to belong to Count Haraszthy. It was a serene walk with creeks, views of Sonoma, and what looked like an abandoned reservoir.

I guess we kind of made Buena Vista our theme, because on New Year’s Day, we hit up its sister winery in St. Helena. It’s about a 40-minute drive from Sonoma, and you can swing through Napa on the way out there—we stopped at the Oxford Public Market, which has wine tasting, a distillery, food- and wine-themed shopping, and restaurants.

Walking into Raymond Winery is like entering a club in San Francisco. Red lights beam down from behind a glass door to the right of the lobby. To the left is a tasting room, straight ahead is a hall of smells (literally, about 20 different red wine aromas in a row), and to the right is the reserve tasting room. We headed to the right for a taste of the winery’s cabernet sauvignons: Four for \$30. Damn!

But, we had that wine club membership, so, we didn’t have to pull out our wallets.

The reserve room is a dark stainless steel tank room with tea lights strewn on tables and the mirrored bar, mirrors dangling from ceilings and tanks, crystal glassware for sale in glass cases, white mannequins adorned in red, black, and pink club wear, and a row of expensive cabs—the highest priced was the Generations Cab, \$110 a bottle with the club discount—in crystal decanters. Apparently, Raymond throws a hell of a Halloween party every year.

And outside of the winery is a biodynamic garden demonstration, chickens and peacocks, a kennel for visiting dogs, and, of course, vines.

There are wineries everywhere you look, and most of them are pretty good—and if you search hard enough you can find free tastings (Jacuzzi Winery), but the sushi I had in Sonoma pretty much tipped the flavor scales. It’s totally worth doing everything else cheaply just to treat yourself to a fantastic meal.

Rocket Catering and Sushi's bar faces the front door with Hawaiian-trained sushi chef Jacob Talbert slicing and rolling up fresh, melt-in-your mouth delicious fish behind the refrigerated glass case. We got the chef's special—which is basically whatever Talbert feels like giving you. That night, New Year's Eve, he first served up Waygu beef nigiri, seared in front of me with what I'd call a flame-thrower, with a dollop of horseradish cream.

So good. My other favorite was something he called "escolar carpaccio." It was seared butterfish, with deep-fried capers, and olive oil and different aiolis drizzled over the top. There was also yellowtail served up as Japanese-style Buffalo wings and miso soup with truffle oil, Dungeness crab, and shitake mushrooms.

I'll be back. ○

Managing Editor Camillia Lanham loves to road trip, wine, and dine on a budget. Contact her at clanham@santamariasun.com.