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Wine Trips *Of Your Dreams*

Looking for a one-of-a-kind dream vacation? Try sipping with top winemakers, chefs and celebrities in Napa, harvesting grapes and blending wine at Sonoma's Grape Camp, or relaxing in Austria by a lakeside bird sanctuary near cobblestoned villages where fine red wines are made.

BY BECKY SUE EPSTEIN



OPPOSITE: Luxurious vineyards at the 125-year-old V. Sattui Winery in the Napa Valley, California; ABOVE: You can relax at an al fresco lunch or dinner practically year-round in Napa and Sonoma.

Go for the Glamor, **Stay for the Giving Back:** **Auction Napa Valley**

Clinking glassware and laughter beckon you into a tall open-air tent with pennants flying above. As you approach, you inhale new-mown grass in the California sunshine. Inside, you take your seat among owners and winemakers from Napa's top wineries, many of whom you have gotten to know at the lunches, receptions and dinners you've attended in wineries and private homes over the past few days. And it's all for charity.

What is this crazy fun event? It's **Auction Napa Valley**. It happens every June, and if you plan in advance, you can be one of the favored few that gets on the register to attend. It's a unique and fabulous way to celebrate a very special anniversary or birthday; I recommend buying the whole package as this may be your once-in-a-lifetime, best-ever wine bash. (One day passes are also available.)

Last June during the Auction weekend I stayed at one of my favorite places in the world, **Meadowood Napa Valley**, which happens to be ground-zero for the live auction on Saturday. Whenever I had a free moment I could sit by the pool or walk the property's well-marked wooded paths. Of course if I'd been more organized I could have taken yoga, booked a spa treatment, gone on a guided hike, learned croquet or played tennis...instead of merely wandering from my hillside suite over to the main lodge where there were always refreshments and fresh-baked cookies.

I hung out with winemakers, wine lovers and international millionaires—and I never knew who I was sitting next to until we started talking. But it doesn't matter when you're enjoying a flight of world-class Napa Cabernets over lunch or dinner: the wine and food brings everyone together.



ABOVE: Dozens of wines are opened for tasting at Auction Napa Valley events. Every auction lot winner has cause for celebration!



ABOVE: Meals and winetastings may be inside or out, depending on the winery location and the early June weather at Auction Napa Valley.

Auction Napa Valley begins with dinners and receptions held by young winemakers and vintners throughout Napa Valley. On Friday you have a chance to spend several hours at a beautiful winery admiring the art and nibbling delicacies while tasting wines. You can sip both current releases and new wine blends that are still in barrel, from over 100 wineries, in order to bid on the barrel of your choice. Yes, you can own a case of wine from your chosen barrel, as soon as the wines are bottled for release, with all the money going to charity.

Then it's time to rest up before trekking off to your elite, private dinner;

the dinners are held at the homes of various vintners around Napa Valley. The atmosphere ranges from a completely casual barbeque to fun/dressy full-service dinner. The vintners and their families pull out all the stops for these dinners, importing exclusive chefs and opening vintage wines.

On Saturday, you drift over to Meadowood — all the parking and shuttles run like clockwork — to feast on fresh, local foods and wines for lunch, before taking your seat in the air-conditioned Auction tent. If you're bidding, you might want to stop drinking now...but it's so tempting to continue, when winemakers are trading

top vintages of their wines across the tables, and the seats are comfortable couches. Again, you're surrounded by wine and media celebrities — I've met the Mondavis, Oprah, John Legend, **Jean-Charles Boisset**, and others there. The excitement builds as two professional auctioneers trade off the gavel while encouraging live bids, and a troupe of vintners surround each successful bidder, popping bottles of Napa sparkling wines in congratulation.

For the past 35 years, the winemakers of Napa have put together staggering selections of wines and winery access, customized parties from top chefs, amazing vacations and other cool experiences, gear, art, clothing and accessories from sports cars to couture fashion and jewelry. There's also an e-auction going on; a total of about 200 auction lots are sold, each more spectacular than the last. And it's all to raise funds (\$150 million to date) for the nonprofits that provide healthcare, education and other services for the disadvantaged in Napa county.

Start planning early to attend Auction Napa Valley which takes place the first week of June in Napa, about an hour and a half north of San Francisco.

Reserve early if you want to stay at Meadowood Napa Valley, the home of the big, live auction on the weekend. There are also plenty of other wonderful places to headquarter for your big trip, and Auction events take place in various locations up and down the Napa Valley.
www.AuctionNapaValley.org
www.Meadowood.com

"Working" the Harvest at Sonoma Grape Camp

If you long to learn about wine out in the vineyards, Sonoma Grape Camp is for you. Don't worry, there are plenty of glasses of wine involved, too. And you don't have to dress up for any of it.

SUNDAY: Sunset in Sonoma

The California evening sunlight turns to muted shades of orange while we introduce ourselves. I notice that my fellow “Grape Campers” are unwinding, new friends smiling at each other on this first day of a long-anticipated vacation. We have already started sampling California-fresh cooking: apparently we have to be well-fed in order to spend a few days “backstage” at Sonoma wineries during harvest. We also have wine glasses in our hands, in order to become familiar with the final product (wine) that we’ll learn how to make from vineyard through bottling, at a half-dozen wineries throughout Sonoma, California during the next few days.

This is the first of our three nights at **Vintner’s Inn**, and we’re feeling very Californian in this collection of one and two-story buildings set among gardens and terraces; it also houses a well-known **John Ash & Co.** restaurant.

We’re in Sonoma, one of California’s classic wine regions, which is home to about 400 wineries, about an hour north of San Francisco.

Tonight we are going out to **Paradise Ridge Winery**, a favorite sunset venue for wine tastings and weddings, with its giant “LOVE” sculpture set in a hillside clearing. On a veranda overlooking the vineyards we sip Paradise Ridge Wines paired with innovative, locally sourced dishes: Corn Soup, Pan-Seared Pacific Halibut, Fall Succotash; Roast Leg of Lamb, Fresh Marrowfat Beans, Spiced Cauliflower; Gravenstein Apple Galette, Caramel Ice Cream and Almond Crisp.

MONDAY: Starting out in the Vineyards

The next morning it’s refreshingly cool in the vineyards. Talking with my fellow Grape Campers, I realize that many of us are here in celebration of a special birthday or anniversary. We range in age from 30s through 60s, and

everyone seems surprisingly comfortable together.

The excitement builds as we are issued our grape-cutting shears at **Munselle Vineyards** in the Alexander Valley, an area where farming and grape growing has been going on for the past 130 years. Our instructions: cut only the finest bunches of merlot grapes in this vineyard. If you see blemishes, leave the grapes on the vine. Dropping our carefully selected bunches into the plastic bins at our feet, we move slowly down the lines of vines. When each bin is full, we bring it back to the end of the row and dump it into a larger container on a tractor. Repeat until finished.

Luckily, we get to “finish” after an hour or so. We’re all very proud of the 300 pounds of grapes we have picked — until later in the day, when we learn that this is literally a drop in the bucket for the regular harvesters who work here. But now the morning is fresh, the



leaves and the vines are flourishing, and the grapes are cool and full of flavor. (Yes, of course we taste them.) There's nothing like the first-time thrill of holding grapes that will turn into a quality Sonoma wine you can actually drink one day.

Then we proceed to a crushpad, a concrete area outside the winery where the just-harvested grapes are received and sorted. This sounds like a simple process, but here at the relatively young **Stryker Sonoma Winery** it involves an eagle-eyed, back-breaking inspection, bending over "sorting tables" (conveyer belts) in order to remove any leaves, stems, flawed bunches or even individual grapes that are not wine-quality perfect.

By this time the day is warming up, the dew has evaporated from our shoes, and our hands are authentically grape-juice sticky. Grape Camp has assigned us just enough work to understand the harvest, to see what happens to the grapes and wine along the way to bottles and labels and not be tired or bored with any of the experiences.

Rinsing off, we are ready to move to our next stop, lunch *en plein air* at **Jordan Winery**. This winery may look formal, but it has a whimsical side too. Along with award-winning traditional style wines, the entire winery regularly produces bold, musical YouTube videos, which feature heartfelt performances by everyone who works there, from 20-somethings to grandmothers – including Jordan's owners.

We tour the winery, a French-style chateau set at the edge of acres of rolling hills of vineyards which are scattered with man-made lakes. The chef sources seasonal produce and herbs from his nearby kitchen gardens for our delicious noonday feast. We dine at tables laid out on the luxurious, shady lawns next to the chateau.

The afternoon is warming up, and we move inside for a wine educa-



OPPOSITE: A view over the vineyards to the sea shows how the ocean's cool air influences grape growing in Sonoma; ABOVE: Friends old and new toast Auction Napa Valley with vintage wines at one of the host wineries.

tion seminar at **MacRostie Winery & Vineyards**, one of the early grape planters in the Sonoma Coast region. Afterward, dinner is another enjoyable experience of wine and food pairing, held outside on the private terrace at **Gary Farrell Vineyards & Winery**, overlooking the Russian River Valley area of Sonoma. Usually by this time it's quite cool but today we begin our appetizers in the heat of the afternoon, before a few breezes begin as sunset moves closer.

TUESDAY: Tasting, Cooking, Blending
We're happy that the next day also begins in the vineyards. At **MacLeod**

Family Vineyard we graze on breakfast items while listening avidly to 90+-year-old founder and patriarch George M. MacLeod reveal secrets from his book "How to Grow Great Grapes, Make Distinctive Wines & Live Forever."

Then we travel southward to the cool Carneros wine-growing region near San Francisco Bay. Our destination is one of the most well-known sparkling wineries, **Gloria Ferrer**. This winery was founded several decades ago by the Ferrer sparkling wine family of Spain, and it has been a pioneer in California sparkling wine production too. Led by enthusiastic winery veteran

Eva Bertran, we meander through the wine-ageing caves and enjoy a tasting of several sparkling wines. It's a nice morning's work.

At the next stop we have to make our own lunch – sort of. At **Ramekins** in the town of Sonoma we plunge into a cooking class and turn out far more sophisticated dishes than we ever thought we were capable of: English Pea & Watercress Soup Shooters with Meyer Lemon Crème Fraiche, Salt Cod Beignets, Smoked Chicken Salad in a Cucumber Vol-au-Vent, and Caramelized Fennel and Pork Samosa with Spiced Apple Butter. As soon as we finish cooking, we stroll out to relax at dining tables in the shade-dappled courtyard behind the kitchens, where we also discover a selection of wines to pair with our dishes.

The afternoon is still warm so we're very happy to explore the recently renovated Buena Vista Winery, a stone edifice and cellars built into the side of a mountain when the winery was

founded in the 1850s. There in the cool caves, we have a blending seminar competition — and my team is a finalist!

That evening, the heat begins to wane. For our closing Grape Camp dinner at **Sangiaco Family Vineyards** we are seated outside on a garden terrace overlooking the fields where the family's grandfather first planted fruit trees in the 1920s. The family gradually transitioned to grape growing; a third Sangiaco generation now makes the wines.

By the end of dinner the temperature has cooled down to a (normal) chilly Sonoma September evening and we're all eager to move inside the tasting room for dessert. Then it's a quick trip back to our home base at the Vintage Inn to say fond good-byes to each other.

Sign up early for Sonoma Grape Camp because it happens only once a year, in September. It is organized by the Sonoma County Winegrape Commission

(SCWC) <http://www.sonomawinegrape.org/> which represents 1,800 vineyard owners producing grapes for Sonoma County premium wines. Partners include Sonoma County Winegrowers, Sonoma County Vintners, Sonoma County Tourism and Alaska Airlines.

Idyllic Lakeside Austria— and Red Wine

I never expected to be floating along a lake to my hotel near a bird sanctuary in Austria, while drinking excellent red wine from this region. Red wine from Austria? Is it due to global warming? Is it because there are new vineyards and winemaking techniques? Whatever the reasons, the red wines here are becoming more and more well-made and charming.

The most delightful red blend I had in this Burgenland area was a “field blend” of the local red grapes. For centuries, people planted different varieties of grapes in one field, reasoning





OPPOSITE: Ready for lunch in Rutherford at Rudd Oakville Estate. ABOVE: Approaching the town of Rust through the bird sanctuary at Lake Neusiedl. A bottle from one of the myriad of very good, small wine producers around the lake.

that, whatever the weather, this would ensure they had at least some very good grapes at harvest. They would pick all the grapes together and make them into a single wine. Today, knowing what we know about viticulture and harvest dates, we know this is usually not the best idea. Yet occasionally this method yields delectable white wines – and even more rarely with red grapes. In fact, winemaker Thomas Schwarz of **Kloster Am Spitz**, only makes a wine this way “if the mixture is breathtaking,” as it was in 2009.

He does make fresh, fruity white wines as well, as do most of the other dozens of winemakers here. The white grapes from this area (an hour or two south of Vienna) include the traditionally-grown gruner veltliner, muscat Ottonel, pinot blanc, pinot gris and welschriesling (which has nothing to do with riesling). A few international white grapes like chardonnay and sauvignon

blanc are have increased their presence here as the climate warms. This region, Burgenland, is one of the sunniest parts of Austria. And its large lake tempers the climate for these vineyards.

Many of Burgenland’s red wines are made with Austria’s most popular red grape, zweigelt. A few years ago Zweigelt wine became the darling of young US sommeliers, so you can find it on a lot of restaurant lists now. Blaufränkisch is a close second, with Pinot Noir and St. Laurent also growing in popularity as well as quality. Burgenland’s ancient Roman name was Pannonia, a region that included part of modern-day Hungary. Today, Burgenland borders Hungary on the East, and its foods and wines have a lot in common with its neighbor; in fact it was part of Hungary until the 1920s.

You can fly into Vienna and get here in about an hour. The **Seehotel Rust** is a great waterfront hotel to land at,



in order to decompress. Make sure to get a room with a lake view, and you can lounge on your balcony and gaze at the daily waterfowl parade; part of this lake is a bird sanctuary. Recently renovated, this four-star hotel also has a spa and an indoor pool. Location is a strong draw here: the hotel is only a few minutes’ walk from the cobblestoned center of the town of Rust (pronounced “roost”) which is bounded by appealingly historic buildings, sprinkled with tempting cafes and restaurants which are decorated with large tubs of flowering plants.

Best of all, across this lake, called Neusiedlersee, is another group of wineries that make an amazing, golden, apricot-honey flavored dessert wine. And if you stay in Rust, you can savor a small goblet of this caramel colored sweet wine at the end of your dinner, licking your lips as you saunter home in the warm summer twilight.

Everything you need to know about wine from Burgenland and planning a trip to Austria.

<http://www.austrianwine.com/our-wine/wine-growing-regions/burgenland/>

<http://www.austria.info/us> SeeHotel Rust <http://www.seehotelrust.at/>