



FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2015

McEvoy Ranch Summer Winemakers Dinner – the McEvoy Ranch Chinese Pavilion and the Petaluma Gap American Viticultural Area (AVA)

My Traveling Tales by Linda

"The wind and the fog are the Petaluma Gap's trademark. The 'Gap' is actually a wind gap named after a coastal mountain opening that stretches east from the Pacific through the town of Petaluma and then roars south to San Pablo Bay." –Petaluma Gap Winegrowers Alliance



The beautiful and singular McEvoy Ranch Chinese Pavilion.



Here's the part that I did know before my recent visit to the famous McEvoy Ranch in the beginning of August. I knew that the ranch is located just a short seven minute drive from my house in downtown Petaluma, because often when escaping clogged traffic on my late afternoon commute home from Mill Valley where I work, I will catch a short cut home by getting on the Petaluma Point Reyes Road. This bucolic road takes me on a gander through hills and pastures before it passes right by the McEvoy Ranch on the last leg of my drive, where suddenly I am greeted with gorgeous views that open up down into the valley where the olive orchards are visible from the road. The ranch, no matter the season, is mysterious and lovely in my view from the top of the road, and I never fail to exclaim to myself, "It's so beautiful—I must visit soon!"



What I absolutely did *not* know, is that on this stunning 550 acres of land where 80 acres of organic olives are grown and crushed to make award-winning olive oil, and grapes are grown that produce delicious wine—there is also an amazing Chinese Pavilion. On this beautiful and warm evening, the pavilion would be the setting for the inaugural Summer Winemakers Dinner, for which I purchased tickets on a whim for myself and Mark a week before the event. My jaw literally dropped at first glance when the majestic pavilion in the gorgeous but unlikely setting came into my view. In conversation with the McEvoy staff, I discovered that it was built by Nan McEvoy who had traveled extensively in Asia and had acquired a loved for chinoiserie.



Nan Tucker McEvoy, who died recently in March of this past year at the age of 95, was an heiress, successful business woman and matriarch. She was the granddaughter of M.H. de Young, co-founder of the Chronicle—a San Francisco newspaper. When the newspaper was sold in 1999 against her wishes, and she was forced into retirement, she decided (with her three grandchildren in mind) to move on and devote her considerable resources and energy to the establishing of a working ranch in Marin County. The ranch would become one of the premier producers of premium olive oil in the country within a decade of the trees being planted. Inspired by her love of Tuscan olive oil, the ranch was started with 1000 seedlings shipped in from Tuscany.



On this August evening, about 50 guests arrived to participate in the first winemakers dinner to be hosted at the ranch, with the wines being served from the three different wineries—McEvoy Ranch, DeLoach Vineyards and Fogline Vineyards. All of wineries are located in what is referred to as the **Petaluma Gap AVA**:

The *Petaluma Gap* is a geographical region in Sonoma County, California which extends in a band from the Pacific Ocean to San Pablo Bay. It is an area of low land 22 to 31 miles (35 to 50 kilometers) wide in the coast ranges of the northern San Francisco Bay Area. The western edge of the gap is located in the coastal lowlands between Bodega Bay and Tomales Bay. The eastern edge of the gap is located at San Pablo Bay around the mouth of the Petaluma River. The city of Petaluma is near the center of the gap.

The Petaluma Gap affects wind patterns (and thus microclimates and air quality) in the San Francisco Bay Area. Fresh marine air generally blows eastward through the gap, branching into southward and northward streams which blow toward the Carquinez Strait and Santa Rosa respectively. The southward stream brings marine air overland into the central Bay Area from the northwest. Warm air rises from the land and allows cold, moist air, plus winds and fog to move into the area.

During the 1990s, the Sonoma County wine industry adopted the term *Petaluma Gap* to help differentiate its products. The gap is a part of the Sonoma Coast AVA, a designated American Viticultural Area, but is not itself an AVA. Wine grapes growing in the Petaluma Gap are said to be influenced enough by this climate to give the area's wines a distinctive character. Mornings in the region tend to be foggy, followed by sunny days and windy afternoons. The cool evening temperatures help to preserve the natural acidity of the grapes over an extended growing season. In 2006, twenty-four local organizations and individuals formed a promotional group called the Petaluma Gap Grape and Wine Alliance, now known as the Petaluma Gap Winegrowers Alliance.



This past August, Mark and I arrived at the ranch in the late summer afternoon. We parked our car near the ranch store/tasting room, and then we walked up the olive tree-lined dusty dirt road to the event venue. Making our way up the hill in the warm afternoon air, I actually did feel like I was in Tuscany again, except that I could see beautiful California oaks dotting the hillsides, and a few distant palm trees waving their fronds aloft in the welcome summer breeze.





We were greeted with wine, and several beautiful cheese and fruit platters were set on tables in the courtyard along with McEvoy olives and local bread. The Chinese Pavilion is set at the back of a bamboo-lined courtyard. On this night inside the pavilion, the intricately designed and custom made stone floor was set up with several round tables where we dinner guests would be dining later in the evening. The tables were covered with flowing green cloths and then topped with polished glassware and gleaming flatware that shone brightly in the afternoon sunlight which was pouring through the pane glass doors that surround the entire pavilion.





Guests began to arrive into the courtyard, where they were served wine by the three winemakers who were waiting for us at several tables. To begin, I explored the awe-inspiring pavilion and another older building that is situated at the back of the courtyard. That building was also amazing—old wood floors, a giant wood chandelier and ornamented with a red grand piano standing in the corner that was gleaming light from its shiny surfaces in the late afternoon sun that was slanting the last of its long rays through the large casement windows. This obviously, is where the McEvoy Ranch red wine blend gets its name. Mark was told the piano once belonged to Elton John. *There is a great story there—I am sure of it.*





Winemaker Katie Carter of DeLoach Vineyards on the left, and Kelly Robertson of McEvoy Ranch on the right.

It is always of interest to me to meet winemakers and to listen to them discuss their wines. Present for the dinner was the winemaker from McEvoy Ranch, Blake Yarger. Also attending was winemaker, Katie Carter, of DeLoach Vineyards, and winemaker/owner, Evan Pontoriero, of Fogline Vineyards. I had the very good fortune of sitting next to Katie during dinner and I was able to chat with her among our dinner companions at our table. It surprised me to find out that Katie is a local girl who was raised in Forestville. The very small town of Forestville touches the Russian River on one side, and it is where I settled when I moved to the North Bay from San Jose. Katie told me that they had begun harvesting grapes earlier that day at De Loach, and she was gearing up to enter the frantic time of the year, known here in wine country simply as 'crush'.



The Winemakers: Blake Yarger of McEvoy Ranch on the left, Katie Carter of DeLoach Vineyards in the center, and Evan Pontoriero of Fogline Vineyards

De Loach Vineyards is owned by the fabulous and debonair **Jean-Charles Bossiet**, who is married to Gina Gallo (of the Ernest and Julio Gallo family). JCB, as he is known in the industry, also came from a family wine dynasty. He has purchased several local vineyards that he is adding to his wine property portfolio. DeLoach is one of these vineyards, and Mark, Michelle and I had the pleasure of tasting at the beautiful estate last September.



Jean-Charles Boisset has become a well-known personality in the wine biz, and even has his own bobble head doll, which gave all of us a good laugh. He obviously has a very good sense of humor.

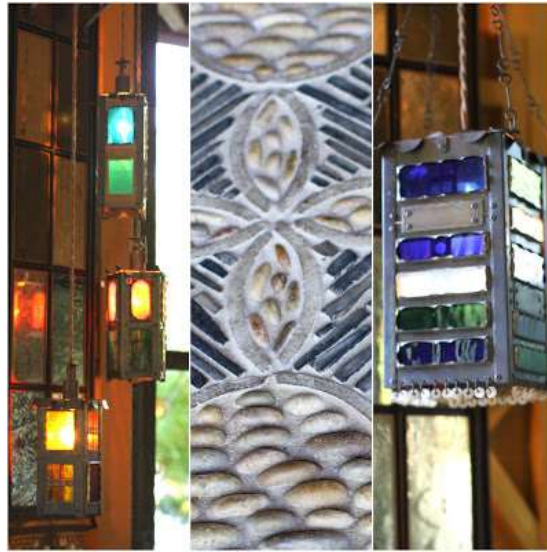
After chatting with the winemakers for an hour or so while we sipped wine, we all gathered in the Chinese Pavilion for dinner. There is a detailed history written about this beautiful pavilion included in the the book, *New Garden Design: Inspiring Private Paradises* by Zahid Sarder:



"Lizards like the native skinks that roam the McEvoy Ranch in Marin, have become the olive farm's logo. They were replicated in cast bronze door handles for the Chinese-style pavilion." writes Sarder.

The forty-two foot pavilion is the creation of interior designers Babey Moulton Jue and Booth of San Francisco, also has giant copper lizards on the roof, because the ranch lizards were a favorite of Nan McEvoy's three grandchildren.





The ceiling of the pavilion is created from resawn cedar boards which are installed to resemble the billowing silk fabric of Chinese tents. Illuminated hexagonal lanterns stream forth from the ceiling, and it is a truly breathtaking sight. The sides of the room are decorated with stained glass lanterns positioned near each of the large glass doors, and the Mark Davidson mosaic floor is created in an elaborate design that is made up of smooth, round river stones and flat stone tiles.



Two new acquaintances of the evening for me are internationally renowned sommelier, **Christopher Sawyer**, who was on hand to speak about the Petaluma Gap AVA. Chris lives in Petaluma, and actually had a hand in naming this new American Viticultural Area. A petition was submitted to the federal government in order to establish the AVA this past February. Also, Mark and I were both very pleased to meet Leslie Sbrocco, who is the host of **Check, Please! Bay Area**, a television show that we often watch that features local restaurants. She and Chris are old friends, and happily posed for photos.



On the left, local sommelier, Chris Sawyer, speaks to the dinner attendees about the soils and climate that create the growing conditions of the Petaluma Gap AVA. On the right he poses with his close friend, Leslie Sbrocco, of Check, Please! Bay Area.

Dinner was comprised of three courses which included local halibut served with an heirloom tomato salad and paired with 2014 Fogline Vineyards Chardonnay. A braised pork shoulder served with heirloom potatoes and summer squashes was paired with 2011 McEvoy Ranch Red Piano Mediterranean Blend. The last course was a salad comprised of McEvoy Ranch baby greens that were dressed with a red wine vinaigrette and paired with 2013 DeLoach Vineyards Pinot Noir. The food and wine pairings were well-matched and delicious.





During the dinner, the pavilion doors were opened to allow the cool breeze to float through the room while we ate and chatted. Each winemaker was given the opportunity to speak about their featured wine that had been paired with a particular course. At the end of the night, a zucchini olive oil cake and summer stone fruit compote was served for dessert. We ate, drank and enjoyed great conversation. The stars were out and glimmering in the night sky when the dinner finally ended. We all carried flashlights to help us carefully pick our way back down the dark ranch road to our cars.

It truly was an enchanted evening and very memorable experience. It may be a tad gauche to talk about the price of the tickets, but I feel that the \$90 price tag was an incredible value. That dollar amount would not buy an appetizer, entrée, sides and a glass of wine at a good restaurant in an ordinary setting. Not only were we served artisan wine, cheese and food courses that were all paired with wine, but we also received information and instruction from the individuals that actually made the wine. In addition, the McEvoy Ranch itself and the Chinese pavilion are truly breathtakingly beautiful.



Nan McEvoy has left an amazing legacy. She decided, against the well-intentioned advice of many, to grow olive trees on the land that she purchased because the ranch is **MALT protected land** and must always be used for agricultural purposes. As a local who is concerned with urban sprawl, I appreciate very much that the agricultural lands are being protected from development. McEvoy Ranch olive oil, wine and 80 Acres body care products are all available for purchase from their **website**. Contact the ranch ahead of time to arrange a visit to this remarkable location, or to taste wine in the tasting room—visits are by appointment only.

Now when I drive by the ranch after a long day at work, I will be able to imagine the beautiful Chinese pavilion in my mind's eye—the crown jewel of this beautiful acreage. This serene and majestic temple of sorts, is built of glass, polished wood, smooth stones, and cast bronze. This singular space is filled with sunlight and starlight by turns, and it is an inspiration for those who love superb design and flawless craftsmanship. I am already looking forward to my next visit.



Kelly is the Wine Club and Tasting Room Manager at McEvoy Ranch.