

Raising a Toast to the Russian River Wine Road

Photos and Story by JOHN BLANCHETTE
CREATORS SYNDICATE, INC.

COPYRIGHT 2008

Born in the Redwood Valley of Mendocino, the Russian River meanders south into Northwest Sonoma County, carving through some of the richest wine growing areas in the world. More than 200 wineries call Sonoma County home in a valley that is only 52 miles wide and 47 long.

Pinot noir is king and chardonnay queen in the Russian River Valley, but 30 other varietals also reach their full potential in the vineyards planted along other waterways and valleys in the region.

One hundred wineries, 200 growers and 50 country inns, lodges and restaurants are all within the Russian River Wine Road area that runs through the other American viticulture areas, or AVAs, of Alexander Valley, which specializes in cabernet sauvignon and merlot, Dry Creek Valley, known for its zinfandel and sauvignon blanc and Chalk Hill for rieslings.

Located just off the Pacific Coast, 60 miles north of San Francisco, in the evening ocean breezes filter in and damp fog moves up the valley, cooling vineyards and nourishing stands of enormous redwoods that shade the quiet two-lane roads running between the small towns and villages of the Russian River wine country.

This is not the busy commercial valley of sibling Napa, which lies across the mountains to the east. These are farming communities full of country inns, artisan shops and planted fields.

First visited in 1812 by Russian fur traders and hunters, who gave

the river its name, it wasn't until the gold rush of 1849 that settlement truly began. More than 2,000 ships were abandoned in Yerba Buena harbor, a city of 300 that would later become San Francisco, as crews and passengers streamed into Northern California to hunt for gold. Many of those who failed stayed on to farm the rich soils of the area, including Italian and Swiss immigrants who planted the first grapes.

But grapes weren't the first beverage planting of choice, hops were the leading crop for many years until a fungus destroyed the industry and moved it north to Washington state in the 1930s, where 75 percent of the American harvest is now produced.

The area that composes the Russian River Wine Road is shaped like a giant heart, with many arteries running off from the central point of Healdsburg, a sophisticated town built around a wooded park with a covered bandstand.

Its discrete shops, restaurants and period architecture are a bit reminiscent of the East Coast communities of Long Island's Hamptons.

Dining is spectacular in this wine country town. Cyrus owns two Michelin stars and celebrity chef Charlie Palmer plies his trade at the Dry Creek Kitchen inside the area's finest hotel, the Hotel Healdsburg. All around town there are packed bistros and moderately priced restaurants that cater to locals and tourists.

Over the weekend we visited small family-run vineyards and large operations, such as the well-manicured estate and grounds of Jordan, the elegant Ferrari-Carano, the modern designed Gary Farrell vineyard and the former hop barn turned winery, Martinelli. It's a historic wooden structure built in the 1890s and produces award-winning zinfandel from its famous Jackass Hill vineyard. Don't ask for apple cider, wrong Martinelli.

They were nervously awaiting the arrival of Robert Parker, publisher of the Wine Advocate, to review their wines. My palate said no worries; even a jackass would love these rich aromas and flavors.

A variety of wine styles are produced in Sonoma, from austere, bone dry European sophisticates, to bold and fruity new world showoffs.

Some of the smaller wineries I particularly enjoyed were Dutcher Crossing, where we had a lovely winery lunch at picnic tables overlooking the vineyards.

A visit with former biker now owner of the industrial vineyard Manzanita, Jack Salernzo, introduced me to big fruit-forward wines that were some of my favorites, especially his petit syrah and zinfandel.

At J. Rickards winery, his wife prepared a country dinner for us with corn bread and braised wild boar that had met its demise in the vineyard the day before. It was terrific with his cabernet.

Jim Morris and winemaker Ginny Lambrix of Truett-Hurst have just produced their first biodynamic wine on land that features gardens, livestock and organic farming.

Janae and Frane Francicervic, a transplant from Croatia, are a fun winemaking couple who endlessly barrel-sampled their wines for us at Sunce Winery. Their crush party at the end of harvest is a major event (the 17th this year).

Balletto produced my favorite gewurztraminer and Field Stone had the best petit syrah. Other vineyards we enjoyed included Windsor Oaks, Peterson, Joseph Swan and Simi Wineries.

There are a number of fine B&Bs and country inns in Sonoma, most with excellent kitchens. Recommendations include: Sonoma Orchid Inn — yes there's a garden of orchids on the property; Applewood Inn has a fine Italian chef who does a nice job with mushroom-truffled risotto; Farmhouse Inn, which has a Michelin star; Radford Inn, a lovely Victorian cottage set in the vineyards; and West Sonoma Inn & Spa.

If you like olive oil, don't miss the knowledgeable and dedicated

young growers at Dry Creek Olive Oil Co. You can taste a number of their oils, all extra-virgin and cold pressed, from peppery Tuscan varieties, to Spanish, Greek and smooth, satiny American-style olive oils.

For the candy lover, Winetravel.com's "50 Best Things to Do in Sonoma" lists at No. 4 the Powell's Sweet Shoppe in Healdsburg. The radio in the store is set to an Internet station that just plays candy related music ("On the Good Ship Lollipop," "Sugar, Sugar," "Lollipop," etc.) to a TV screen that constantly shows the film "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory."

Rick Moshin at Moshin Vineyards has perfected marinated smoked salmon, which he served us with his pinot noir in the tasting room. A match so perfect I have supplied the recipe.

RICK MOSHIN'S SMOKED SALMON

1/2 cup of soy sauce

1/2 cup water

1 tablespoon garlic salt

1 tablespoon brown sugar

1 tablespoon smoked paprika

1 tablespoon black pepper

1 tablespoon thyme

1 large (3-pound) salmon fillet.

Yields 4 to 6 servings.

Combine first 7 ingredients in zip-top plastic bag. Place salmon fillet in bag marinate in refrigerator overnight.

Stack charcoal briquettes in barbecue grill and ignite. Meanwhile,

soak 1 pound of fruitwood chips - or pinot noir vines, if you have them — in 2 to 3 cups of pinot noir for 20 minutes. When charcoal is ready, drop chips on glowing coals.

Place salmon on grill away from direct heat and close grill cover. Cook salmon till done and smoke properly flavors fish, about 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Serve with bottle of Moshin Pinot Noir.

IF YOU GO

For travel brochures, housing and restaurant information and lists of events and festivals, contact the Russian River Wine Road at www.visitwineroad.com, 800-723-6336. Free guides to the area include Discoveries magazine, 101 Things to Do in Sonoma County and Spotlight's Wine Country Guide.

###



Quiet Sonoma Valley farmland is quite different from that of its more commercial Napa Valley sibling. Photo by John Blanchette.



The leaves are changing color as the last petit syrah grapes await harvest along the Russian River Wine Road in Northern California. Photo by John Blanchette.



Grapevines wind uphill from Dry Creek Valley, location of Dutcher Crossing Winery and Vineyard, one of more than 100 wineries that have taken root along the Russian River Wine Road in Northern California. Photo by John Blanchette.

John Blanchette is a freelance travel writer. To find out more about John Blanchette and read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at www.creators.com.

COPYRIGHT 2008 CREATORS SYNDICATE, INC.