

The Wines of California: Napa Valley

Written by Terry Connor

Wednesday, 04 January 2012 09:10

I am flabbergasted. There I was in the tasting room at Chateau Montelena. I happened to turn to my left and who was standing there but Franco. I had a strange feeling once we parted company in Italy that I would run into him again. Well, better sooner than later. It seems that Franco hit the lottery (for how much he will not say) in France and decided to come to America. He had decided, as had I, to tour the Napa Region. After a short bring-each-other-up-to-date session, we agreed to pool our resources and tour together. Why not, since he had purchased a 2011 Lincoln SUV? Whattasetofwheels!!

The problem with touring Napa is that there are so many good wineries to visit. How does one choose? We tried to select wineries that ship product to the Lowcountry and to also come up with an assortment that represents the most common varietals. For Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Sauvignon Blanc, and Chardonnay we toured Beringer, Clos du Val, Cuvaision, Duckhorn, Elyse, Far Niente, Hess, Robert Mondavi, Rubicon, Silverado, Sterling, and Honing. For Pinot Noir we toured Alexander Valley, Beaulieu, DeLoach, Carneros, Iron Horse, Murphy Goode, and Rodney Strong. For Sparling Wine we toured Mumm, Carneros, Chandon, Gloria Ferrer, and Schramsberg. (Just in time for New Year's Eve) The list is long, however it represents a good cross-section of what we are about; i.e. quality, price, and availability in the Lowcountry. Are there others? To be sure, the answer is yes. There are over 300 wineries in Napa.

All of this winery touring makes a tourist hungry and in need of liquid libation. How about a picnic? Good idea as I have just the place. It is called V. Sattui Winery. This is a unique stop in Napa. It is a winery with a complete delicatessen, picnic grounds and very much a tourist stop. (Notice that I did not say tourist trap.) The food is excellent, their own wine is very good, in some cases award winning, and the popularity of the place is attested to by the ever-present crowds. Should V. Sattui not be to your liking, Dean and DeLuca has a deli just across the street.

Remember the AVA's that were previously mentioned? Napa Valley has thirteen smaller AVA's within the primary Napa AVA. The most important are Stags Leap, Rutherford, Oakville, Spring Mountain, Atlas Peak and Howell Mountain. (Karen MacNeil tells us in her WINE BIBLE that, according to legend, stags leapt to their death over the outcroppings of rock to escape hunters.) No matter what the name, Stags Leap Cabernet Sauvignon is a terrific glass of wine.

Also by Karen MacNeil we are told Napa is home to the Western headquarters of the Culinary Institute of America. The main Headquarters are in Hyde Park, New York. The campus in Napa

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sits on 30 acres of prime land that includes herb gardens, a Merlot Vineyard, some vegetable gardens and classrooms and teaching kitchens that host students and teachers from all over the world. The building itself was the former home of Christian Brothers Winery. I have seen the operation in person. It is truly impressive and worthy of any accolades that it receives. In my opinion this is a California Jewel.

I have a soft spot in my heart for Napa. Many of the wineries are favorites of mine. However permit me to plug just one. It is Rubicon Estate, The home of the Winery of Francis Ford Coppola. It has something for everyone. You can taste wine as expensive or inexpensive as you like, you may dine in the restaurant, view some of the movies that were directed by Mr. Coppola, take a look at his TUCKER Automobile, or you can tour the winery. On the tour that I took, the group stopped for a brief moment in one of the vineyards. A discussion started over competition between wineries. The tour guide jumped in immediately. He explained that wineries do not COMPETE with each other. Rather they PRESENT to the consumer their own "style" of wine. It all starts in the springtime after bud break. The winemaker knows at that time the crop that he will have at crush. After many experiments with blending, he is able to decide what he wants to present from that particular vintage. I have always thought that this is an awesome responsibility and not one to be taken lightly.

Cheers!

Winespeak

Touring wineries can be a great deal of fun whether it is in Napa or anywhere else. The vast majority of folks that work at the wineries are congenial, professional, and eager to please. However, no matter which winery you hit, you will be solicited to join the "wine club." There is

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absolutely nothing wrong with joining a club. It is a good way to stay in touch with your favorite winery. The wine will be discounted anywhere from 12 to 20%. However, there will be shipping costs. All I am trying to say is to go easy.

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