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Travel Blog

Just Back From: Sonoma County Grape Camp

Posted by [Linda Cabasin](#) on October 22, 2012 at 10:36:09 AM EDT
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Visiting [Sonoma County](#) during grape harvest in late summer and early fall is a prime time to connect with the beauty of this sprawling California Wine Country area (bigger than Rhode Island), the rhythms of agricultural life, the fabulous food, and the passionate professionalism of its grape farmers and winemakers. To go behind the scenes and meet the people who make the wine, I joined 24 people from around the country at [Sonoma County Grape Camp](#) for two and a half days of immersion in grape harvesting, winery touring, cooking and wine pairing, and blending.

And yes, tasting: I had the opportunity to sample around 65 pinot noirs, chardonnays, zinfandels, cabernets, sauvignon blancs, and more.

There's a premium fee for this curated access to wine professionals and outstanding food: \$1,850 per person includes accommodations, food, wine, and transportation during camp. Staff, like Nick Frey president of the Sonoma County Winegrape Commission, fielded questions on everything from microclimates in Sonoma's 15 viticultural areas to organic farming. As for my companions, all appreciated wine and some had cellars, but none was a wine snob. All were enthusiastic about learning—and the opportunity for a unique experience. Indeed, I'll never drink a glass of wine the same way.

Day 1: Base Camp and Dinner in the Wine Cave

Home base: I drove 50 miles north from [San Francisco](#) to Sonoma County Grape Camp's base at the [Applewood Inn and Restaurant](#), tucked off Highway 116 amid the redwoods outside Guerneville near the Russian River. The 1922 main house encouraged me to linger with its river-rock fireplace, cozy rooms, and pool and hot tub, but after an

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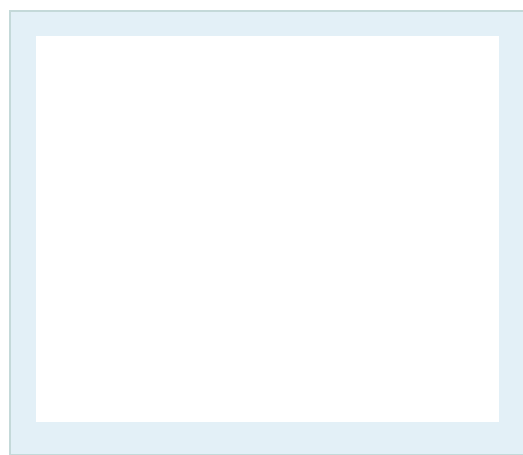
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alfresco reception we boarded the camp bus.



Dinner: [Thomas George Estates](#), a family-owned vineyard and winery producing small-lot wines, hosted dinner by chef Mark Stark in its tasting room and wine cave. Before dinner, we sampled pinot noirs from other small wineries including Arista, [Gary Farrell](#), and Williams Selyem, and talked to staff and owners. Served by candlelight, the food was full of California flavors from ahi tuna tartare tacos to chocolate soufflé with peanut butter mousse. As we headed back to the inn, we saw trucks and huge lamps setting up for night harvesting.

Day 2: Harvesting , Team Cooking, and Grape Stomp

Harvesting: Even an 8 am start couldn't dampen enthusiasm for harvesting grapes (malbec) on a crisp, sunny morning at [Windsor Oaks Vineyards & Winery](#). I pulled on a glove, learned how to use shears, and filled a bright yellow tub as I worked down a leafy row, cutting clusters of grapes and sampling sweet berries. Filling a 40-pound tub was satisfying, but I also appreciated the professionals who moved far more swiftly.

Team Cooking: In the pretty town of [Healdsburg](#) we cooked our lunch at the light-filled kitchen of [Relish Culinary Adventures](#). We tackled piles of colorful local produce as cooks guided us to create tuna crudo with lemon aioli; chicken with pomegranate glaze; flatbread with figs, radicchio, and local cheese; and more. Throughout, we sampled Sonoma wines from a rosé to a port—and discussed how each worked with the food. Free time in Healdsburg (alas, too short!), with its charming shops and tasting rooms, completed our visit.



Grape Stomp: Described as a "winery resort," the [Francis Ford Coppola Winery](#) has a spectacular setting in the Alexander Valley. A contrast to more modest tasting setups, Coppola resembles a chateau and includes two restaurants, movie memorabilia, a popular swimming

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pool, and bocce courts. Our task was a little competitive grape stomping for fun: two people stood in individual barrels and crushed cabernet sauvignon grapes while people measured the juice that streamed out. Our reward? A leisurely dinner on a terrace overlooking vineyards and mountains: we watched the sun set (and the moon rise) as we talked, ate, and sipped.

Day 3: Harvesting, Tastings, and Blending

Harvesting: Back in the vineyard again, we cut plump cabernet sauvignon grapes at family-run [Hanna Winery](#) in the Alexander Valley with vineyardist Duff Bevill. After filling a half-ton bin with grapes, we were joined by Christine Hanna, who brought glasses to the vineyard so we could sample her cabernet sauvignon (delicious even at 9:30 am) and hear about her business and family.

Tastings: I found the settings of many smaller Sonoma wineries as appealing as their wines. At [Quivira](#), we learned about sustainable and biodynamic farming practices, toured the garden, and tasted superb cheeses alongside their great sauvignon blancs and zinfandel. At nearby family-owned [Lambert Bridge](#), the winemakers craft small lots of Bordeaux-style blends and varietals. We watched grape sorting and then savored the wines and wood-fired pizza during lunch in the garden.



Blending: A Pinot Noir blending competition in [DeLoach Vineyards'](#) California-style outpost was our ultimate challenge. The charismatic Jean-Charles Boisset, president of a French family wine business and the owner of several California wineries, touched on terroir and sustainable farming. We learned about blending, and then teams of four tested their skill blending a French Burgundy and two of DeLoach's pinot noirs. In a nod to marketing, teams also named their blends and created labels. For my team's blend, called First Press, we sampled each wine, agreed to a test blend, and measured out a sample. Our first effort hit the spot, and we carefully filled our bottle and corked it. And yes, ahem, the judges named ours the best blend—DeLoach Pinot was our prize.



How to Make the Most of Grape Camp

1. Sign up early. 25 is the maximum, and people were already booking for September 23-25, 2013. Around 300 wineries are open to the public in Sonoma, so each trip is different.
2. Opt in for the optional Celebration Dinner at the end of camp, for \$125 or so. The Applewood Inn's chefs designed a menu around Mauritsen wines, and Mauritsen family members provided commentary throughout.
3. Keep wine notes. The daily schedule is fast-paced, with no lingering. (Grape camp is not commercial; so there's no pressure to buy.) Write down your favorites; some wineries had order forms, or you can order at home. The camp binder has detailed information about the wines, wineries, and winemakers.
4. Pace your sipping. During long days of tasting, use the dump and spit buckets, or let your glass sit full. Food offered at tastings helps you deal with the alcohol.
5. Ask questions. Friendliness and approachability were hallmarks of Sonoma winery staff, winemakers, and owners. No question was too simple or too wine-geeky.
6. Linger after camp and explore Sonoma. I walked in Armstrong Redwoods reserve and drove Highway 1 by the Pacific from Jenner toward Bodega Bay. But you could visit nearby towns, go biking or ballooning, or... visit more wineries.

Photos courtesy of Darren Miller

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