

COVER STORY

Ah, Napa.

The very word conjures up images of rolling hills of vines,



leisurely outdoor dinner parties, mouthwatering cheeses, breads, olives and other gastronomic delights. The growing popularity of wine appreciation, however, has made Napa and its sister valley, Sonoma, a tad crowded and increasingly commercial. Many wineries have consolidated or been acquired, creating conglomerates that own multiple brands, rather than embodying the entrepreneurial taste and experience that independent wineries once had. And, while the influx of visitors has motivated many wineries to build gorgeous tasting rooms and offer more retail options, it also has caused an increase in visitors' costs. Gone are the glory days when most Napa and Sonoma wineries let you taste for free, and higher tasting fees, in many cases, may not apply to a bottle purchase.

Don't get me wrong. I love Napa and Sonoma. If I'm away too long, I actually crave a visit like a smoker needs nicotine. The wineries I've grown to love beckon, the fabulous peaceful vistas calm, and the friendly staff get me excited about wine tasting all over again. I recently got married here in The City and as a treat to our out-of-town families, we arranged a Napa wine tour as part of the weekend festivities. But in planning the excursion, I became a little disheartened. One winery I absolutely adore and to which I always took visitors recently re-branded, changed its name, and now

charges a \$25 fee per person just to walk in the door - whether you taste or not. They told me this was to "control the crowds" which had been getting out of hand in recent years.

So while Napa and Sonoma are still near and dear to this wine-lover's heart - and always will be - I've recently been researching hidden gems scattered across the Bay Area. I discovered wines from these areas in restaurants way before hearing about their tasting rooms. Over the last few years, libations from the Santa Cruz Mountains, Saratoga, and especially Livermore have been popping up more and more on fine wine lists throughout the city. And word on the street is these wineries are the next new frontier: a mixture of the entrepreneurial, joyful spirit of independent winemaking that made Napa famous, with a much more approachable and cost-effective experience.

If you have never been to Napa or Sonoma and explored their delights, you must make that your first stop. But for those who want to take a tip from Robert Frost and explore the road less traveled for the pure pleasure and indulgence of wine country living, I highly recommend you broaden your horizons to these "Alternative Napas" for a fine day of small crowds, fantastic wines, and incredible views. I did some research to get you started.

Stellar Napa alternatives that are gentler on your gas tank

BY MARIA PICCININNI ROSS

Thomas Fogarty Winery

19501 Skyline Boulevard, Woodside, 650-851-6777

Tasting room open Thursday through Sunday from 11 am to 5 pm.

Tasting Fees: \$6 - \$12

This well-known winery nestled in the Santa Cruz Mountains just west of Palo Alto, boasts a 325 acre estate. With 25 acres of Burgundian-style varietals, they focus on Chardonnay,

Pinot Noir, Merlot, and Sangiovese. The Santa Cruz Mountains provide a challenging yet unique wine growing climate and terrain, responsible for well-regarded Cabernets, Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays. Fogarty began making wine in his own home and established the commercial winery in 1981. Enjoy your wine while taking in some of the most stunning views of the Bay Area.

Testarossa Vineyards

300-A College Avenue, Los Gatos, 408-354-6150

Tasting room open 11 am to 5 pm daily (except New Years Day, Easter Sunday, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day). Closed to the public on Release Party Sundays (one each in May and September)

Tasting Fee: \$10 (free with wine purchase)

In 1993, Testarossa was founded as a garage winery, producing 25 cases. Today they produce over 11,000 cases at the historic Novitiate winery and have earned several Winery of the Year awards. They are known for some of the best Chardonnays, Pinot Noirs, and Syrahs in the US. Located in Los Gatos, about 60 miles south of San Francisco, this winery - which has a special place in my heart as an Italian

redhead since its name is Italian for "redhead" - is "dedicated to making small lots of vineyard-designated wines from only the best vineyards in the cool ocean-influenced counties of Monterey, Santa Barbara and Sonoma."

Bonny Doon Winery

10 Pine Flat Road, Santa Cruz, 831-425-4518

Tasting room open 11 am to 5 pm daily except major holidays

Tasting Fee: \$3 for eight wines

According to their website, Bonny Doon's goal is to "amuse and amaze, educate and encourage." I have been a fan of Randall Grahm's whimsical wine



labels, and more importantly, his spectacular everyday wines, at many a dinner party. I'm a special fan of his Big House Red, which recently dropped the Ca'del Solo moniker due to using many non-Italian varietals. You can also try the 2004 Big House White and soon-to-be released Pink.

Visit the winery for an innovative, unpretentious take on good wine and good humor. And their website, www.bonnydoonwinery.com, is a treat in and of itself.

Concannon Vineyard

4590 Tesla Road, Livermore,

800-258-9866

Tasting room open 11 am to 4:30 pm daily

Tasting Fee: Free

Livermore Valley, in the East Bay, is the new Napa. Leave your wine snootiness at the door at this lovely winery

and national landmark founded in 1883 by James Concannon, America's first Irish-American vintner. The winery boasts the country's first Petite Syrah and has a unique selection of red and white varietals. According to the winery, Concannon's Cabernet Clones 07 and 08

planted Napa Valley in the 1970's and have been the backbone of great California Cabernet vineyards for decades. Concannon has tailored its winegrowing techniques to work with, not against, the unique rocky soil of the estate, producing robust yet balanced wines. Grapes are harvested along the central coast, from San Francisco to Santa Barbara. Steeped in history and eager to educate with a proposed \$20 million renovation in process, this winery is a great place to start veering off the beaten wine path.

Wente Vineyards

Vineyard Tasting Room: 5050 Arroyo Road, Livermore, 925-456-2405

Tasting room open 12 pm to

6:30 pm daily.

Tasting Fee: \$4 Vineyard Selection or \$6 Reserve Tasting

Estate Winery

Tasting Room: 5565 Tesla Road, 925-456-2305, Press 4 Tasting room open 11 am to 4:30 pm daily. Winery tours begin at 11 am, 1 pm, 2 pm, and 3 pm.

Tasting Fee: Free

Wente Vineyards is California's oldest family owned and continuously operated winery. Founded in 1883 by C. H. Wente, the winery is now managed by the fourth and fifth generations of the Wente family. In addition to their two tasting rooms, you can enjoy their restaurant, Greg Norman designed golf course, wine country events center, and summer concert series. Weekend visitors can enjoy wine tasting and a bit of history in Wente's caves, capped off with a special release tasting, from 1 pm to 3 pm.

J. Lohr Winery

Paso Robles Tasting Room, 6169 Airport Rd, 805-239-8900

Tasting room open 10 am to 5 pm daily (closed New Years Day, Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day)

Tasting Fee: Free except for Cuvée Series wines.

San Jose Tasting Room, 1000 Lenzen Ave, San Jose, 408-288-5057 x35 Tasting room open 10 am to 5 pm daily (closed New Years Day, Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day)

Tasting Fee: Free except for Cuvée Series wines.

Founder Jerry Lohr came from a farming background and began exploring California grape growing regions in the 1960's, completing his winery in San Jose in 1974 after snatching up acreage in the Arroyo Seco appellation of Monterey County. He added properties in Paso Robles, which produces mostly Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and other red varietals, and expanded the Arroyo Seco vineyards with Chardonnay, Riesling,

Pinot Blanc, and Valdiguié. The winery also owns Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Sauvignon vineyards in northern St. Helena. You can find J. Lohr wines in over 25 countries worldwide. J. Lohr crafts three tiers of world-class wines from estate vineyards: The Cuvée Series, Vineyard Series and Estates. Two additional lines of note: Ariel wines, the

most awarded and recognized name in non-alcoholic wines - their Ariel Blanc won a Gold Medal against wines with alcohol for you teetotalers out there; and Crosspoint Vineyards which takes a new look at winemaking with bright, flavorful, fruity wines that are minimally aged and have tannins without drying astringency. ■

WINERIES IN YOUR BACK YARD