



## Golf Getaway: Healdsburg

By Tim Hunt



Getting away to wine country for golf, wine and fine foods typically means heading for the Napa Valley and the two courses at the Silverado Resort or playing Eagle Vines and Chardonnay along Highway 12 south of Napa.

If you want to head up Highway 101 instead to Sonoma County and Healdsburg, you will find many great wineries, but fewer golfing choices in northern Sonoma County. After visiting Healdsburg in May for the first time in nearly 20 years, we decided to combine our passions on a quick golf getaway.

Our headquarters were the splendid Vintner's Inn by Ferrari-Carano—a small 44-room property with four-diamond service, located at the River Road exit from 101. It is owned by Don and Rhonda Carano, the founders of the Dry Creek Valley winery that carries their name.

Guests at the inn are greeted in their well-appointed rooms with a split of Ferrari-Carano's Sauvignon Blanc. Our corner room included a couch and easy chair next to the gas fireplace as well as a comfortable king-size bed and a small balcony overlooking the fountain in the courtyard.

From any of the rooms, it is an easy walk to the signature John Ash Restaurant or the Front Room Bar and Grill café that serves breakfast and lunch. Locals enjoy the happy hour specials in the bar at John Ash. Fresh coffee is available in the foyer of the rooms daily.

The property is surrounded by 92 acres of working vineyards and orchards and there are garden plots scattered throughout the property that provide produce for the kitchen. We were particularly struck by the single-stalk staked artichokes and the tomato plants next to a small fig tree. There are so many fig trees on

the property that the fruit is processed and preserved for use year-round. The farming team utilizes its space carefully for a variety of vegetables, fruits, greens and herbs.

In addition to the signature restaurant, there's also an event center on site for corporate outings or meetings. It is also a favorite wedding venue.

We dined at John Ash and enjoyed our conversation with Executive Chef Thomas Schmidt. Schmidt grew up in the Bay Area and then spent 20 years in northern Germany before being lured back to John Ash. His German wife would like to return to her native land—he jokingly tells her when the weather in Bremen matches that of Santa Rosa, he will return.

Incidentally, for gardeners, just outside of the patio dining area, there was an 8-foot tall kale plant/tree. Yes, no typo, eight feet.

We started with a tiny bite of salmon with a pickled yellow beet. We opted for the four-course tasting menu paired with wines, passing on a special of the night, a 14-ounce rib eye steak that had been dry aged for 21 days.

The first course were Dungeness Crab Fritters over a Mexican cabbage salad with cilantro and spicy mango aioli. It was paired with a 2013 Matanzas Creek Sauvignon Blanc from Sonoma County.

A delightful roasted carrot soup with mint-infused crème fraiche followed. Adding a seared sea scallop enhanced the pairing with a 2012 Sterling Vintner's Collection Riesling from the California Central Coast.

My bride opted for the roasted Alaskan halibut that was served with asparagus, hummus and a pea shoot salad with a rhubarb chutney. We could see the rhubarb plants outside of the patio. The pairing was a 2013 Sonoma County chardonnay by Ferrari-Carano.

I opted for the dry-aged beef pave with roasted rainbow carrots (purple, yellow, orange), grilled trumpet mushrooms, smashed new potatoes with Pt. Reyes blue cheese. It was paired with a Zinfandel from the Alexander Valley, a 2011 Valdez "St Peter's Church Vineyard." The wine complimented the complex flavors perfectly.

For dessert, it was Mom's Buttermilk Chocolate cake with melted vanilla gelato, saltine toffee and cocoa nib tuile. As rich as it sounds, it was light and capped a wonderful meal.

Given that Ferrari-Carano owns the Vintner's Inn, it was only fitting to start our tasting time at its Villa Fiore hospitality center with its striking architecture. Five acres of gardens, all designed by Rhonda Carano, are open to visitors. Take the time to stroll around outdoors and enjoy the gardens.

Tasting options include the Villa Fiore wine bar with four tastes for \$5. These include the widely distributed Chardonnay and Fume Blanc. You have your choice of six whites and six reds. The winery sources grapes from vineyards around Sonoma and Mendocino counties—Pinot Noir from the Anderson Valley in Mendocino; Sangiovese and Zinfandel from Dry Creek Valley; and Cabernet Sauvignon from vineyards in the Alexander Valley. In all, nearly 2,000 acres of vineyards provide the estate-grown grapes.

We recommend either a private tasting (wine is served in a private room where guests are seated at tables) or the Enoteca where four of their better wines can be sampled for \$15. The venue is a particularly striking area. It was the wine cave. Half of it was transformed into the private rooms and Enoteca, while the other half is an active barrel storage area that can be viewed through glass windows

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