

# Star Advertiser

## Sonoma bliss

*Wine country provides an escape for those who appreciate the fine things in life, as well as zip lining*  
By Julie L. Kessler

Special to the Star-Advertiser

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JULIE L. KESSLER / SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER

For most baby boomers, turning 55 is only marginally significant. However, for my husband, acquiring "double-nickel status" held particular import. Thus, he required a four-day celebration of activities most important to him: good food, wine and beer, with a chaser of Mother Nature and a bit of exercise thrown in for good measure. The Northern California wine region of Sonoma County, about an hour's drive from San Francisco, boasting world-class wineries, award-winning breweries, charming hotels and beautiful landscapes, fit the bill perfectly.

I am nothing if not a loyal and devoted celebrator, so I arrived in the area a few days earlier to start celebrating his birthday — even though he was still at work.

Sonoma County stretches from the Pacific Coast to the Mayacamas Mountains and is home to almost 60,000 acres of vineyards and more than 400 wineries. Within the borders are 16 American Viticultural Areas (AVAs, or appellations), each with its own characteristics.

I checked into Vintners Inn in Santa Rosa, a lovely 44-room hotel on 92 acres of vineyards with courtyards, fountains, a spa, a jogging path and herb gardens, and the home of the legendary John Ash & Co. Restaurant, the first Sonoma Country restaurant to combine seasonal cooking with regional wine. Its location in the heart of this region made it the perfect base for exploring the area. Its trademarked motto, "Celebrate everything," fit like a fine Italian shoe.

The Wine Road of Northern Sonoma County comprises a triangle area containing three valleys: Alexander, Russian River and Dry Creek. Driving north on Highway 101 about 20 minutes from Santa Rosa brought me to Dry Creek Road — an incredibly picturesque, 15-mile drive with more than 10,000 vineyard acres and 81 wineries, growing 26 varietals. At the northern end I stopped at Ferrari-Carano Winery. As you enter the property, you face Villa Fiore, a magnificent Italianate "palazzo" that houses its main tasting room with vineyard and fountain views. Downstairs is Enoteca, its reserve tasting room, where the 2012 Tresor (Bordeaux-style blend) and 2010 Prevail Back Forty (100 percent Cabernet) convinced me that I should be legally adopted by the Ferrari-Caranos. What also sets this vineyard apart from others nearby are the magnificent gardens.

### **Wine and food agree**

Heading south for 10 minutes brought me to the hamlet of Healdsburg, where I half expected Aunt Bee and Opie to make an appearance, so charming is the town, with its grassy plaza that boasts summer jazz concerts Tuesday evenings. Healdsburg also has several excellent restaurants, art galleries and boutiques. At Willi's Seafood & Raw Bar, I enjoyed a delicious lunch of warm bacon-laced spinach salad and ahi tuna tartar in ginger-jalapeno-and-coconut-milk marinade served with crisp taro chips. Thus fortified, I walked around the corner to Seasons of the Vineyard for a sampling of Scharffen Berger chocolates and wine pairings in a lovely shop filled with wine and kitchen paraphernalia. Of the five samplings, surprisingly, my favorite was the 2009 El Dorado Gold, a dessert wine that's 100 percent Botrytized Semillon paired with coconut and macadamia nut chocolate. A luxuriously divine combination.

Toward Healdsburg's northern edge, I happened upon Seghesio Family Vineyards, which has 600 owned and leased acres and produces some excellent wine, especially its 2011 "Old Vine" Carignane with raspberry and blueberry overtones, and its 2011 Grenache from its "1942 Block" (producing only 100 cases a year).

After all this tasting, I was starving, and made my way to Chalkboard Restaurant with its patio dining for an unforgettable culinary experience. Commencing with Dungeness crab-filled tater tots and creme fraiche (resembling no potato ever served by my granny), I devoured hamachi with white soy and squash blossoms in Meyer lemon verbena. However, the piece de resistance was a cocoa-infused homemade rigatoni with duck confit, foie gras butter and hazelnuts paired with a 2009 Aje cabernet. It was continental canard contentment, thanks to Chalkboard's inspired chef Shane McAnelly.

Feeling marginally guilty the next morning, I donned my running shoes for a jog through the Vintner's Inn property. At Mile 2 I came upon eight extremely well-fed goats and, oddly, a Canada goose. I later learned that the goose, which can't fly, was adopted by the goats, and other than the fact that she's convinced she actually is a goat, she's enjoying life with her bearded, hooped harem.

### **Zippering through the air**

A 10-minute drive to the heart of Santa Rosa brought me to Old Railroad Square and the quaint shops of 4th Street, including the unusual Legendary Bead Shop with beads from around the world, and Area Art Gallery, housing an excellent selection of large-scale originals by Tom Everhart. Everhart was granted a lifetime right

to use the "Peanuts" comic strip characters in his art, by one of Santa Rosa's most famous past residents, creator Charles M. Schultz. (The Santa Rosa airport is also named after Schultz.)

Needing some adventure, I drove east past the picturesque small town of Occidental into the towering Alliance Redwoods for some zip lining.

As we were instructed on our gear by our able guides, I gazed upward toward the massive, 200-foot redwoods in my midst (including one struck by lightning, tilted at nearly 45 degrees, and oddly named Walter) and wondered if, when I'd agreed to this, I had lost a few marbles with the region's wine tasting. I was then told that in 2010 a woman zip-lined to celebrate her birthday. Dorothea was then 92. Sonoma Canopy Tours requested Dorothea return for her 93rd birthday; however, she couldn't: Dorothea would be busy in nearby Cloverdale, jumping out of an airplane. There were seven zip lines, the longest one measuring 800 feet, followed by two narrow sky bridges to traverse, a suspended spiral staircase and, by far the scariest for me, an air rappel (jumping off a platform into the abyss using a pulley system to gently descend to the ground below).

Once my feet were happily on solid ground, I was given a completion certificate, but what I really wanted was something far stronger than regional wine.

Mr. Double Nickels finally arrived in time for dinner at John Ash & Co. Starting with perfectly mixed Cosmopolitans and delectable fried avocados, then graduating to Chef Thomas Schmidt's four-course tasting menu of ahi tartar with Asian pears, followed by mushroom bisque, then a perfectly prepared grilled New York pave with zinfandel reduction, coupled with a 2010 Ferrari Reserve Cabernet. Of course, there wasn't room for dessert, but that didn't stop us from devouring the sublime buttermilk chocolate cake with saltine toffee and cocoa nib tuile.

### **Drinking and biking**

For the quintessential wine country experience of cycling, though with a twist, we'd signed up for Sip-N-Cycle, a leisurely 10-mile ride over mostly flat terrain with two vineyard visits in neighboring Calistoga. Our first stop was Chateau Montelena, constructed in 1888 by Alfred Tubbs and beautifully resembling an English Gothic castle. In 1958 it was sold to the Frank family, originally from Hong Kong, who added the idyllic Jade Lake, Chinese pagodas, bridges and gardens surrounded by willows and native fauna. The smaller tasting room has an excellent photo montage history of this vineyard.

Cycling on, we stopped at Bennett Lane Vineyards with lovely gardens overlooking Mount Saint Helena, where, in 1883, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote "Silverado Squatters," a memoir of his two-month honeymoon trip with Fanny Vandegrift. We toasted Stevenson with Bennett Lane's 2009 Maximus and its delightful fruit-driven finish.

It was time then to visit Safari West, a wildlife preserve on 400 acres with more than 800 animals, some of which are threatened species, including the massive southern white rhino. There were also several reticulated and Maasai giraffes attempting to chomp the top of our Jeep's canopy, many African Cape buffaloes, wildebeests and plenty of zebras, including several babies. Our guide Richard was extremely knowledgeable about the resident two- and four-legged charges.

Duly parched, we headed to Third Street Aleworks, where brewmaster and biochemist Tyler Laverty shared his encyclopedic beer knowledge and gave a tour of the brewery, which appeared strikingly similar to a "Breaking Bad" set. What they produce are carefully crafted, recipe-laden, delicious ales, lagers and stouts, with 13 different types on tap daily having alcohol percentages ranging from 4.0 to 7.6. My favorite, Helles Lager, was complemented by the best blue-cheese-and-grilled-pear hamburger money could buy.

Our final day started with brunch at Russian River Brewing Co. Ten minutes before opening at 11, there was already a line of 75 people; five minutes later every seat was taken, and there was still a long line outside.

Its award-winning Pliny the Elder has a cultlike following, and every February, for just two weeks, Pliny the Younger is sold to adoring fans. This is craft beer at its finest.

After driving north 20 minutes, we spent the rest of the afternoon around Lake Sonoma, a reservoir created by the Warm Spring's Dam construction, nestled in the beautiful coastal foothills, with more than 50 miles of shoreline, perfect for hiking, biking boating, camping, fishing or hunting.

Heading back toward Santa Rosa, I pulled off the main road to make a call. Instead, I stumbled on the Raymond Burr Vineyards, where a huge outdoor party was taking place. Enveloped by the ongoing festivities, I was introduced to Robert Benevides, now 85, who was Burr's companion for 33 years until Burr's death in 1993. The vineyard had been sold, and this celebration was the kickoff party to its loyal staff and adoring fans (it's unclear when the new owners will take possession). Walking into the vineyard office was like opening a time capsule with various photos of the strikingly handsome Burr and, from the set, the bronze plaque emblazoned "Perry Mason, Attorney at Law." No objections there.

We "celebrated everything," and with all our senses satiated beyond measure, we boarded the plane home. Then I recalled the old adage "The best way to make your dreams come true is to wake up." Nowhere is that truer than in this utterly blissful region of Northern California.

*Julie L. Kessler is a travel writer and columnist based in Los Angeles and the author of the award-winning book "Fifty-Fifty: The Clarity of Hindsight."*

## IF YOU GO ...

### Sonoma County, Calif.

- » **Getting there:** Delta, United, Hawaiian, and US Air all offer round-trip, non-stop service from Honolulu to San Francisco during the summer starting at \$730.
- » **Getting around:** A car is necessary, or your hotel front desk can help hire a chauffeured limo (especially if extensive wine tasting is planned).
- » **Online info:** [visitsantarosa.com](http://visitsantarosa.com), [sportssantarosa.com](http://sportssantarosa.com)

### Where to stay:

- » **Vintner's Inn**, 4350 Barnes Road, Santa Rosa, 800-421-2584, [vintnersinn.com](http://vintnersinn.com). Rates start at \$295 for a large, beautifully appointed room, including welcome half bottle of wine.
- » **Hilton Sonoma Wine Country**, 3555 Round Barn Blvd., Santa Rosa, 707-523-7555, [hiltonsonomahotel.com](http://hiltonsonomahotel.com). Rates start at \$179.
- » **Geyserville Inn**, 21714 Geyserville Ave., Geyserville, 707-857-4343, [geyservilleinn.com](http://geyservilleinn.com). Rates start at \$135 in this 41-room property set among lush vineyards.

### Where to eat:

- » **Lobby Nook at Vintner's Inn**, 4350 Barnes Road, Santa Rosa, 800-421-2584, [vintnersinn.com](http://vintnersinn.com). Excellent coffee and delicious breakfasts, including smoked salmon Eggs Benedict, made with enormous local eggs.
- » **John Ash & Co.**, 4330 Barnes Road, Santa Rosa, 800-421-2584 or 707-527-7687, [info@johnashrestaurant.com](mailto:info@johnashrestaurant.com), [vintnersinn.com](http://vintnersinn.com). An unforgettable four-course tasting menu, \$65, \$100 with wine pairings.
- » **Willi's Seafood & Raw Bar**, 403 Healdsburg Ave., Healdsburg, 707-433-9191; [starkrealityrestaurants.com](http://starkrealityrestaurants.com). Favorites: Spinach salad and ahi, flash-fried calamari with orange chili gremolata, and pan-roasted shrimp with chillies, lemon and garlic.

## **Wine Tasting**

- » **Ferrari-Carano Vineyards & Winery**, 8761 Dry Creek Road, Healdsburg, 800-831-0381, Ferrari-Carano.com. Private tastings with food pairings also available by reservation.
- » **Seghesio Family Vineyards**, 700 Grove St., Healdsburg, 707-433-3579, seghesio.com. "Family Table" lunches offered March to November, include a winery tour, \$75
- » **Seasons of the Vineyards** (wine/chocolate pairings), 113 Plaza St., Healdsburg, 707-431-2222, seasonsofthevineyard.com
- » **Bennett Lane Winery**, 3340 Highway 128, Calistoga, 707-942-6684, bennettlane.com
- » **Raymond Burr Vineyards**, 8339 West Dry Creek Road, Healdsburg, 707-433-8559, raymondburrvineyards.com

## **Breweries**

- » **Third Street Aleworks**, 610 Third St., Santa Rosa, 707-523-3060, thirdstreetaleworks.com
- » **Russian River Brewing Co.**, 725 Fourth St., Santa Rosa, 707-545-2337, russianriverbrewing.com
- » **North Bay Brewery Tours** (on a bus outfitted with a keg), 707-602-7397, northbaybrewerytours.com.

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