

Tasting 'Sonoma Strong'

ON THE VINE

Sonoma County has experienced tragedy from the recent fires. There was loss of life and property, and we all see areas of scorched earth where beauty once prevailed. The land will recover, and the community has begun the healing process with an outpouring of community support.

Thanks to the efforts of firefighters and other public service personnel, most of the landscape remains unchanged, including our famous vineyards. Sonoma County is open for business, and the experience of great wine, food and natural beauty is very much intact. The following recommendations are intended to deliver it all for a memorable day-trip.



Lyle W. NORTON

The first stop is a late-morning reserved tasting at Limerick Lane Cellars, named for their street of origin, on property south of Healdsburg. Since the Limerick Lane Zinfandel Russian River Valley 2012 (94-pt) placed No. 12 on Wine Spectator's Top 100 list in 2015, their wines have become recognizable and highly rated. Currently, visitors can enjoy the 2015 Russian River Valley Zinfandel, the 2015 1910 Block Zinfandel (94-pt), a specialty field blend and the wonderful 2015 Syrah Grenache, a Rhone blend with a pinch of petite sirah added.

There are a plethora of good lunch opportunities in trendy Healdsburg, a few blocks north of Limerick Lane. Two of my favorites are The Shed, offering

a delightful farm-to-table menu, and Barndiva, with aesthetic patio dining.

Leaving town and traveling west, Healdsburg Road, passing over Highway 101, soon intersects with the iconic Westside Road that weaves through the heart of the Russian River Valley. Not all estates along Westside Road are open to the public, but MacRostie Vineyards, Gary Farrell and Thomas George Estates offer special tasting experiences that focus on cool climate chardonnay and pinot noir. All of their single-vineyard releases feature noted local vineyards like Olivet, Durrell and Wildcat Mountain.

They all offer a broad menu of tasting experiences, held in modish settings, that are both exceptional and pricey. Indulge yourselves while enjoying fine wines like the 2014 Gary Farrell Durrell Vineyard Chardonnay Sonoma Valley (94-pt). Reservations are required at each.

The continuing drive along Westside Road is a virtual feast for the eyes, passing through gorgeous Redwoods, oaks and vineyards like Allen, Bacigalupi and Bucher, which source grapes to many of the valley's producers. As with previous vintages, the medium-bodied 2015 Williams Selyem Westside Road Neighbors Pinot Noir, sourced from these and other nearby vineyards, has a rich mouthfeel with berry and spice flavors that pair well with my palate.

Driving south along Westside Road requires crossing the one-way Hacienda Bridge that affords splendid views of the Russian River. Soon, Westside becomes Wohler Road moving south to River Road, toward the Highway 116 wineries. This is a good time to set your GPS for Merry Edwards Winery on Gravenstein

Highway North (116) near Sebastopol.

With consistent great releases from an iconic winemaker, poured in a private setting, Merry Edwards Winery is unsurpassed. The free tasting treats you to more highly rated single-vineyard pinot noir, chardonnay and something more. The 2016 Merry Edwards Sauvignon Blanc Russian River Valley, as well as previous vintages, is arguably the best sauvignon blanc in California. Stable ratings in the mid-'90s and multiple appearances on Wine Spectator magazine's Top 100 Wines List substantiates its reputation. Several lees stirrings and the addition of sauvignon musque adds richness to the complex flavor profile of stone and tropical fruits with expressive mineral notes on the finish. The golden color and floral aromas alone earned a reserved place in my small cellar.

Another nearby option is Dutton-Goldfield, serving more chardonnay, pinot noir and the rich, balanced 2014 Dutton Goldfield Cherry Ridge Vineyard Syrah, using 40 percent whole-cluster grapes from a warmer vineyard to create a soft, velvety texture.

Zasu at the Barlow, featuring pork dishes, Jamaican food at Revibe or seafood at Handline provide options for an early dinner in Sebastopol.

Sonoma wineries are surely open for business and many are dedicating profits to assist fire victims. Enjoy some of the finest wines on the planet and help Sonoma County rebuild itself. Your taste buds will thank you.

Lyle W. Norton is a wine enthusiast and blogger in Santa Rosa who has written a wine column for 15 years. Visit his blog at www.lifebylyle.com.





COURTESY PHOTOS



Above: Staff at Merry Edwards Winery show exactly how strong Sonoma truly is.
Left: Patio tasting at Gary Farrell Winery.