

Exploring Sonoma Wine Country

By Jaimie Hall Bruzenak.

Napa Valley is the best known wine-growing area in the United States. Neighboring Sonoma County is also a premier wine-growing area, though not as well known. I'm a fairly frequent visitor to the Santa Rosa area in Sonoma County because my son, Jim, and my grandkids live there, but I'd never stopped at wineries in either location until recently.

In past visits, I have driven both Highway 29 and the Silverado Highway through Napa Valley, passing numerous wineries including big ones like Sutter Home and Beringer. Traffic was heavy, though, and I had no idea which ones to visit.

My son now lives in Healdsburg, north of Santa Rosa. When I visited him recently, I found out that his girlfriend, Jenny, worked in the wine industry for eight years. When she suggested we visit a couple of wineries out Dry Creek Road, I was all for it -- here was my chance for a guided tour.

Healdsburg has three wine-growing valleys within easy access: Dry Creek, Alexander Valley and the Russian River Valley. According to Jenny, the wineries in this area are more laid-back than the Napa Valley wineries, and a larger percentage are smaller, family-run wineries scattered along rural roads. Touring these wineries is easy and delightful. An added benefit for RVers is that wineries in Sonoma County are accessible to several RV parks (see below).

We headed out on a Sunday afternoon to visit two very different wineries.

Ferrari-Carano Vineyards & Winery

After the busyness of Santa Rosa and the Napa Valley, Dry Creek Road is another world. We followed this winding, quiet country road along the edge of the valley to one of the larger, more elegant wineries: Ferrari-Carano Vineyards & Winery, nine miles from town. Villa Fiore, the winery's immense, elegant, Italianate hospitality center, is located here, one of Ferrari-Carano's several locations.



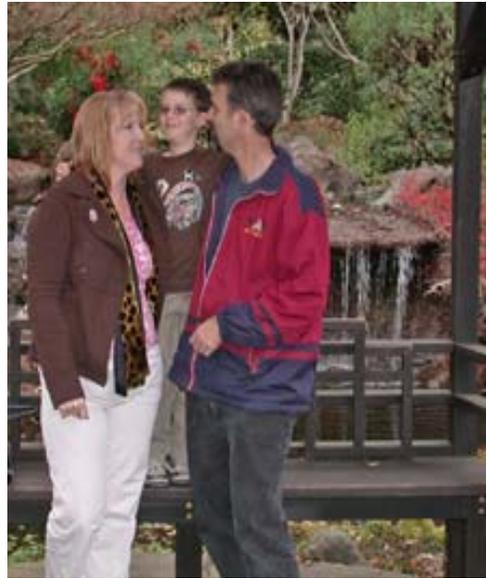
We parked and walked up through gardens past a huge bronze boar to a stone-covered patio. Acres of vineyards at Ferrari-Carano Vineyards stretched out across the valley. A door opened into the gift shop and wine-tasting area, whose high ceilings, large windows and golden walls give it a warm, open feel. After looking around, we descended a curving stone staircase to the wine cellar and the Enoteca Lounge, used for tasting the winery's limited-release and reserve wines.

Instead of tasting wines, we admired the building and grounds. A meandering path crosses a stream that loops by a fish-filled pond fed by a waterfall. In warmer weather, these five acres of gardens could take several hours to explore and would be the perfect place for a picnic. Spring brings more than 10,000 tulips and daffodils into bloom.

(Tulip Hotline: 707-433-5349/707-433-5349).

Preston Vineyards

Our second stop was at Preston Vineyards on West Dry Creek Road, across the valley from Ferrari-Carano. To get there, retrace your steps back toward Healdsburg 1.5 miles to Yoakim Bridge Road; turn right and drive 0.6 miles to West Dry Creek Road. Turn right, and go 0.7 miles to the winery.



Preston is a small, family-owned and operated organic farm that produces olives, orchard fruit, market produce and fresh breads in addition to wines from their estate-grown grapes. The farm's emphasis is on sustainability. Instead of a mansion, Preston is housed in an old barn next to a modest farmhouse, and the family has cut back on production to produce fewer and better varietals that thrive on the property and "capture the local character."

They run their diesel tractors on used fryer oil from local restaurants, use solar power, and shred and compost most of their farm, winery and office waste.

Preston hand-sells the farm's products to local customers, stores and restaurants and sells at the local farmers' market.

Inside the winery, photos of the farm's animals decorated the rustic walls and Christmas tree when we were there. Quite a contrast to Ferrari-Carano. We did taste several wines at Preston.

As at most wineries, we paid \$5 each to taste but that fee was refunded with our purchase. I bought two bottles of L. Preston, a blend of three grapes, and a bottle of jug wine for Jim and Jenny. For me, one wine tasting was plenty for the day -- and I wasn't driving!



Planning your visit

With literally hundreds of wineries in the area, how do you decide which ones to visit? I asked Jenny for suggestions. She recommends obtaining a free copy of the Russian River Wine Road Map, available online and at wineries near Healdsburg.

You can then use your map to do some online research ahead of time. HealdsburgWineries.com allows you to search by feature and type of wine. At wineries, you can ask one of the hospitality room workers for recommendations, particularly if you are looking for a certain type of wine.

Here are some other ideas:

1. **Ask for recommendations.** Managers or guests at your RV park may have their favorites to share.

2. **Research online.** For example, the Web site WineCountryGetaways.com (<http://www.winecountrygetaways.com/>) has a number of tours to choose from. Ferrari-Carano and Preston are on the "Russian River: Dry Creek Valley Tour." Top wineries and driving directions for a nice loop drive are provided.

3. **Tour by wine type.** If you have a favorite type of wine such as zinfandel or chardonnay, stop at several different wineries and sample those.

4. **Decide how large a vineyard.** My sister, who has visited the area a few times, says, "I find the family-owned wineries the most interesting. The people talk to you and welcome you. The big ones give you a real show, but the little ones are more personal."

5. **Search out the unique.** Preston appeals to me because of its farming methods and other products. The Robert Young Estate Winery has a rich history; the first of the family came for the California Gold Rush and were among the first settlers in the Alexander Valley. What is now the vineyard was once a prune orchard!

Jenny mentioned the historic Hop Kiln Winery (<http://www.hkgwines.com/>), in the Russian River Valley, a 100-year-old working ranch that produced hops up until the 1950s.

6. **Be prepared.** There is a method to tasting wines so you fully taste each flavor and limit your consumption. WineTours.com offers articles on the art of wine-tasting as well as on safety and etiquette. You can print out a form from the Web site to use in your comparison of wines. [Note: This website no longer available.]

Whether you want to spend an afternoon or several days exploring the area and tasting wines, touring the wineries near Healdsburg and Sonoma County is a fun way to see this beautiful area.

You can also visit the Armstrong Redwoods, drive to Bodega Bay on the coast, visit the Charles Schultz Museum in Santa Rosa (see Alice Zyetz's article, "Good Grief, Charlie Brown! You Have a Museum"), or my favorite thing to do when I'm anywhere near the area — take a mud bath in Calistoga!



RESOURCES

RV parks

Locate RV parks by doing an online search by county or by checking your campground directory. Last year we stayed at River Bend RV Park in Forestville, along the Russian River. Friends have recommended the Sonoma County Fairgrounds in Santa Rosa, which offers reasonable rates and camping club discounts.

Members of the Elks club can camp at Elks lodges in Petaluma and Napa. RV spaces at Napa Elks are small and limited, but the campground provides the only RV camping we could find in Napa Valley other than a state park near Calistoga, which is for small rigs only.

I recommend leaving your RV in the campground and driving your tow vehicle (or "toad") while touring wineries if you can. The parking lots at some wineries can accommodate an RV but many cannot.

More Web sites

Information on Napa Valley wineries (<http://www.napavalley.com/drink/>)

An online map of wine valleys and roads near Healdsburg (<http://www.winecountrygetaways.com/>)

Healdsburg area information, or stop in at the Healdsburg Visitors Bureau at 217 Healdsburg Ave. (707-433-6935/707-433-6935).

Golden Haven Spa (<http://www.goldenhaven.com/>) in Calistoga is my favorite.

Photos (by Jaimie Hall-Bruzenak):

Jenny, Chris and Jim with "Bordeaux," a bronze sculpture of a boar that, according to legend, still haunts Ferrari-Carano.

Jenny, Chris and Jim by the waterfalls and garden at Ferrair-Carano.

Sign at Preston Vineyards

Pouring jug wine at Preston Vineyards

George Bruzenak enjoying a mud bath at Golden Haven Spa in Calistoga

Originally published at RoadTripAmerica.com January 2008.