Rutherford Grove

WINERY & VINEYARDS

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

SEPTEMBER 1999

TASTINGS / By Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

Going Directly to the Source

Napa and Sonoma Wineries Offer a Close-Up Look At New Tastes and Trends

SANTA ROSA, CALIF.—Friends always ask us: "What wineries should I visit in Napa and Sonoma?" We just spent a month here visiting dozens of wineries, and we have some suggestions.

If you've never come out here, you should. We've been visiting here for more than 20 years, and despite what you might have heard about it being overcommercialized and overdeveloped—"there's even a theme park"—this remains a beautiful and inspiring place. And, if you also happen to be interested in wine, it's a great place to see and taste the latest trends—not to mention wines that otherwise you'd never see.

At Gundlach Bundschu Winery, for instance, we found a wine called Kleinberger that isn't even used much in Germany any more. We bought a chilled bottle and drank it right there, with lunch, at the winery's picnic tables. And—no surprise—it was delightful.

Try to avoid weekends, which are crazy, crowded. Go off the beaten track. In particular, travel the Silverado Trail instead of the famous and crowded Highway 29. In Sonoma, head for Alexander Valley. If you're in a rush, Napa is easier than Sonoma. The wineries are closer together, easier to hit one after another. Sonoma wineries are more spread out, making them harder to visit. But that also makes them more laid-back, more enjoyable and generally less crowded.

The Fun Is in the New Stuff

Most of the wineries in Napa now charge a tasting fee—usually about $5—to sample their wines. We weren't bothered by this; we're willing to support the industry that we're writing about. And when you can also buy "reserve" wines by the taste without a four-figure check, the tasting room is the perfect place for a personal call to even acknowledge our presence—even though we were the only ones in the room—so be it).

Remember that you're there to have fun, try some interesting wines and meet some interesting people, and that's more likely to happen at the less-famous places. If you walk in and no one really cares whether you're there or not, leave. There are so many other wineries where you're genuinely welcomed.

We visited the wineries with our daughters Media, 16, and Zoë, 9, and we didn't identify ourselves, so we received no special treatment. When we were finished, we narrowed our list to five wineries in each county. It wasn't easy. Many wineries are convenient. But, in the long run, we would give friends. All are an appointment.

When he saw the kids, he disappeared for a minute and returned with a ball of fluff. That's the kind of place it is.

There's just a big garage and [illegible] loves talking about his wines [illegible] and the Pinot Noir [illegible]

Rutherford Grove Winery. By tasting four or five wines in a row, you can decide whether you like that wineries' wines. Here, the woman behind the counter was happy to talk and pour for hours—and every wine was consistently excellent.

Rutherford Grove Winery Petite Sirah $22.50
1997 (Spring Creek Vineyard)

Petite Sirah, which is different from Syrah but also a deep, red wine, is back. You'll be seeing more of them soon. This one is remarkable: a deep, dark fruit bomb, like blackberry wine, but with a "finish" that's so clean and light that it keeps the wine from going over the edge. Great winemaking.