

Wine draws fall visitors to Northern California



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Travel

Thomson News Service

The fall is a special time in northern California's wine country.

Throughout the Sonoma and Napa valleys, thousands of visitors are drawn from afar by the aroma of crushed grapes in the air, adding an extra dimension to the peaceful, rural beauty of the region. The region was rattled by the earthquake that created havoc Tuesday in San Francisco, but the Sonoma-Napa area sustained only minor damage.

To the grape-growers and wine-makers of the North Coast, however, this fall had already been more nerve wracking than peaceful, because of a freak mid-September storm that dropped some eight cm of rain on the vineyards, just when they needed warm, sunny weather.

"If you make beer or whisky, it's pretty predictable," a winery owner in Sonoma told a reporter, "but wine-making is very unpredictable, which is part of its beauty."

Good weather during the 1986-88 grape harvests, together with the fat clusters of maturing grapes on the vines during early September, had people predicting a record 1989 grape yield and a vintage wine year.

Now they are reflecting on the unpredictability of Nature and the high degree of risk that is inevitable in any agriculture-based industry.

Nevertheless, most of them are looking forward to next Saturday (Oct. 28) and the annual Champagne and Spirits Ball at the elegant Gloria Ferrer Champagne Caves near Sonoma, which marks the end of the fall harvest.

GROWTH INDUSTRY

The wine industry in Sonoma County has experienced a remarkable growth over the past 15 years. During that period, more than half of today's 110 wineries were launched, usually on a scale so small as to present no competitive threat to the established wineries.

It is those major wineries that, in large part, help to lure some 2.5-million visitors to the Sonoma and Napa valleys annually. These firms offer hospitality in abundance - tours of wineries and their

caves, attractive wine-tasting lounges, shady picnic areas and the like.

Viniculture was brought to the area by Franciscan Padre Jose Altamira in 1823, when he built the mission of San Francisco Solano de Sonoma, and needed wine for sacramental purposes.

The mission is the northernmost of the south-to-north string of 21 Franciscan missions in California, all of which were seized in 1834 by the Mexican government. (The Sonoma mission is now a museum, operated by the state.)

The U.S. in turn seized California from Mexico in 1846. Nine years later, Count Agoston Haraszthy (1812-69) arrived in Sonoma - he was under a death sentence in his native Hungary - to plant a vineyard that he christened Buena Vista.

BUENA VISTA

Today's traveller can drive down Old Winery Road the three km from Sonoma's eight-acre town square to Buena Vista's ivy-covered stone buildings, there to roam through the fragrant cellars built by Chinese laborers who had previously worked on railway construction. (The actual wine-making now takes place elsewhere.)

Ownership of Buena Vista has changed hands several times, and now is held by the German wine firm of A. Racker. Its youthful management team, headed by the German-born husband and wife team of Marcus and Anne Moller-Racker (aged 33 and 27 respectively), took over in 1983, expanded its land-holdings and increased production to its current rate of 140,000 cases a year.

Daily tours of the wine country, including visits to cellars and (usually) lunch, were being offered by the major sightseeing companies based in San Francisco, as well as by smaller firms in the two wine-growing counties.

A more flexible mode is to drive. From San Francisco, it's an hour's drive north over the Golden Gate bridge on well marked highways to Sonoma, a little longer to Napa.

For a free guide, write to the Sonoma Valley Visitors Bureau, 453 First St. E., Sonoma, Calif.; telephone, 707-996-1090.

From San Francisco International airport, a company called Sonoma Airporter (707-938-4246) operates vans directly to Sonoma.

WINE TRAIN

Having arrived in the wine country, visitors now have an interesting new-but-old sightseeing possibility - the Napa Valley Wine Train, elegant successor to a service dating back to 1864. Since mid-September, it has been making two 68-km round trips daily (except Mondays) between Napa and St. Helena.

The train includes two vintage parlor cars and a dining car, all of them meticulously restored and decorated in appropriate tones of burgundy, champagne gold and grape-leaf green.

The project appears to be an adaptation of the "dinner-train" concept that has proved successful in other areas of the U.S. A high-style luncheon is served at \$25 on the first trip of the day, and dinner at \$45 on the second - plus 12 per cent in each case. In addition, the rail tickets cost \$25 per couple for the three-hour return trip.

Founder and guiding spirit of the Wine Train is San Francisco food magnate Vincent DeDomenico, who developed a popular product called Rice-a-Roni and controls the well known Ghirardelli Chocolate Co.

His intention was to stop the Wine Train briefly at a number of wineries along the route of the rails, allowing passengers to visit them. However, the train aroused local opposition (as, one suspects, would anything else that's new), and after a number of delays and the launching of lawsuits, a compromise was reached - the train can operate, but the passengers stay on board.

A QUIETER TIME

Within a week or two, the harvest will be finished in the North Coast wine country and the number of visitors - already substantially reduced from the summer peak - will decline still further.

Local people, whatever their position on the Wine Train and on sightseers in general, seem to agree that the cooler days of November and December are perfect for rural strolls past the vineyards and farms, ranches and forests. As in many other regions, the autumn (which arrives relatively late in this part of

California) is usually ideal for touring - whether on day trips from San Francisco or from a temporary base in the wine country.

On the way from or to the big city, motorists can make an interesting side trip to the non-profit, 160-acre Marine World Africa USA at Vallejo, open Wednesday to Sunday at this season. It's a one-of-a-kind combination of African and Asian wildlife and marine creatures.

Among its absorbing highlights are a whale-and-dolphin show, an aquarium and a butterfly pavilion (where anyone with a few minutes to spare can see a butterfly emerge from its cocoon).

The park can also be reached directly from Fisherman's Wharf (Pier 41) in San Francisco, by catamaran ferry.

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By Glenda Hughes, Sales Rep. 873-0300

In keeping with one of the reasons I write this column every week, to inform you of market conditions and changes, etc. I think it is important to tell any first time buyers, that may be reading this, that they are missing a golden opportunity to purchase, if they are not presently scouting in this market. With the market taking its little vacation from hot to warm, the prices for starter homes is the best we've seen in a while. For instance, townhouses are now selling in the \$145,000 - \$150,000 plus bracket. Single family homes, classified as "starters" have list prices in the mid-\$160,000 bracket for the small ones and then upwards. This price range is quite a bit lower than it was in the early part of the year. With this in mind it is certainly to your advantage to purchase now, for as sure as I write this column, the prices will go up as they sell off again. (The prices I have quoted you are in Georgetown - they are lower in Acton!)

Interest rates are quite good too, with 3-5 year mortgages at 11% per cent, making it fairly comfortable to carry a starter mortgage and make your bank manager happy - to say nothing about worried parents who have an interest in what their kids are buying! So, all in all, while we have this wonderful weather, get out there and hunt down these bargains and get your foot on the ladder to happy home-ownership. Once you have made the plunge, it is only a matter of time until you have built up your equity, and you can move again into something a little more palatial.

If you are at all in doubt, as to what you can afford, you can sit down with any real estate sales representative in town, and they will be happy to go over the figures with you - or if you wish, talk to your bank manager or loan officer, and see what can be done. Between the two sources, you should be able to get a good handle on what is best suited to your needs and budget.

Make sure you are comfortable with the person you are talking to about your finances, for only when all the chips are on the table, can accurate pictures be painted. If you feel uncomfortable giving financial information to one person, perhaps you should try someone else. Don't let your emotions get in your way - for you may be sitting in a position to buy now, before prices swing again, and when they do, you just might be too late.

Happy hunting!

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