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Much More Than Just Zin

Today the wineries of El Dorado County are flourishing, producing a vibrant collection of intriguing wines.

Sasha Paulsen

The wineries of El Dorado County aren't readily apparent to the casual viewer, but like its fabled gold mines they are well worth seeking out.

Wineries in these ruggedly beautiful foothills are not new. As mining camps were springing up in 1849, Italian immigrants were also planting vines. Today the wineries are flourishing, producing a vibrant collection of intriguing and enjoyable wines.

Just off Highway 50, between Sacramento and South Lake Tahoe and centered around the historic Gold Rush town of Placerville, are some two dozen wineries that are a throw-back to a former time in another way as well. Evoking the pioneer spirit of those who revitalized the wine industry in the 1960s and '70s, these are mostly small, relaxed, family-owned wineries that welcome visitors casually—no tasting fees, just enthusiasm for the adventure of making wines “at a higher level.”

“Everyone seems to equate this area with zinfandel but it does equally well with syrah or cabernet,” said John McCready, the owner and winemaker of Sierra Vista Vineyards & Winery. Sierra Vista

Located in the Pleasant Valley region just below Placerville, Sierra Vista is a great starting point for a visit to El Dorado's wine country. Pleasant Valley Road winds past farms and forests to bring a visitor to the winery where it's readily apparent how Sierra Vista got its name. From ridge-side vineyards there is a breathtaking view of the snow-capped Sierra Nevadas. The winery is a plain wood building. The tasting bar is a polished plank balanced on wine barrels. The staff is friendly and knowledgeable about the wines that are produced almost entirely from estate-grown grapes. The lanky, easy-going winemaker is equally adept at overseeing bottling, fixing plumbing—and serving as an advocate for the El Dorado's Rhone varietal wines, which are increasingly garnering attention.

McCready, an electrical engineer from Yuba City, said when he and his wife, Barbara, decided they wanted to “stay in one place” he began to

look at the possibility of growing grapes in the foothills. “UC Davis had done a study of the region and thought grapevines could do well there.”

After purchasing his land in 1972, McCready planted sauvignon blanc and cabernet sauvignon. A couple of years later he added syrah—the grape that makes the intense red wines in the Northern Rhone Valley in southwestern France. The region, named for the Rhone River that runs from the Swiss Alps to the Mediterranean, is divided into northern and southern sections. Each has made decidedly different but equally memorable wines for centuries.

“I looked at a map of France,” McCready said, explaining how he got the idea that the grapes that thrive in the foothills of the Alps might also do well in the foothills of the Sierras. McCready went on to become one of the three founding members of the Rhone Rangers, a group that promotes Rhone varietals. Grenache, roussanne, mourvedre, marsanne and viognier may not be as familiar as chardonnay and cab, but the wines they produce are by turns elegant, intense and lush. “One person told me, ‘I never order viognier because I can’t pronounce it,’” McCready said. “So you have to persuade them to taste it.”

Today Sierra Vista—also known as the Northern Rhone winery of California—produces award-winning wines in an astonishing variety of small lots, including syrahs, rousannes and viogniers. The grenache rosé is a favorite as is the spectacular Fleur de Montagne, a blend of syrah, grenache, mourvedre and cinsault. It’s a dark garnet color and wonderfully food-friendly.

Near Sierra Vista are Holly’s Hill and Narrow Gate wineries, which also produce Rhone varietals. For those looking for a place to dine in the area, Zachary Jacques on Pleasant Valley Road is a highly recommended French-style auberge.

Rhone varietals are also getting notice further south on Route E16 from Pleasant Valley. Mount Aukum Winery, at an altitude of 2,615 feet, offers a panoramic view that sweeps from Sacramento to the Sierras. The mountain terroir is evident in its intense wines. Particularly noteworthy is En Fuego, a heady blend of syrah, grenache, petite sirah and mourvedre. Also worth a visit is Perry Creek Vineyards — its Zin-Man wine is an award winner, but don’t overlook its viogniers and syrahs.

On the north side of Highway 50 above Placerville, a short drive brings a visitor to Boeger, Lava Cap, Jodar, Coulson, and Madroña wineries. At an elevation of 3,000 feet, Madroña Vineyards, established in 1973, is one of the highest in California. It’s named for the ancient madroña tree that stands in the middle of the vineyard. In addition to its Rhone varietals, Madroña also produces Alsatian-style wines, including gewurtztraminers and rieslings; especially memorable, however, is its

Melange — French for “mixture”—a white wine that’s a balanced blend of marsanne, roussanne and viognier grapes. The Reserve Melange usually sells out, but is worth a search. Madrona Vineyards

Finally, on Highway 49 north towards Colma are three more El Dorado wineries to put on any exploratory itinerary: Gold Hill, Venezia, and David Girard Vineyards. Girard Vineyards specializes in Rhone varietals and produces two stunning wines called Coeur de Terroir (heart of terroir). The white Coeur de Terroir blends marsanne, viognier, grenache blanc, rolle and roussanne, while the red is a mix of mourvedre, grenache, syrah and counoise. Try them both.

The El Dorado Winery Association publishes a complimentary map to the region that serves as a useful guide. Contact the group at info@eldoradowines.org; 1-800-306-3956, or visit www.EldoradoWines.org. Whatever direction you head, a day or more exploring the refreshing world of El Dorado wine country will have you pronouncing those strange French varietals with zeal—and just a bit of a mountain accent.