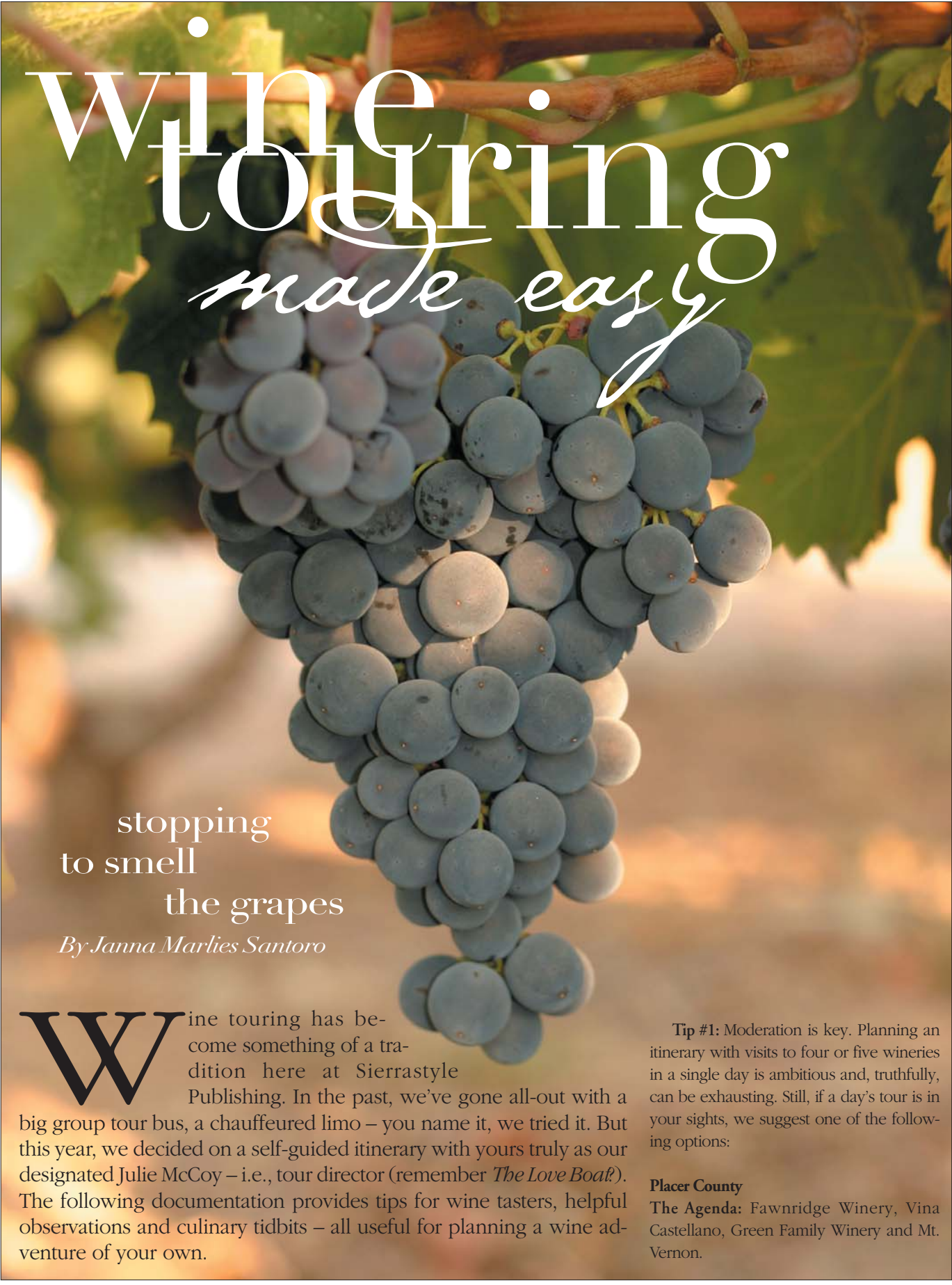




wine touring *made easy*

stopping
to smell
the grapes

By Janna Marlies Santoro

Wine touring has become something of a tradition here at Sierrastyle Publishing. In the past, we've gone all-out with a big group tour bus, a chauffeured limo – you name it, we tried it. But this year, we decided on a self-guided itinerary with yours truly as our designated Julie McCoy – i.e., tour director (remember *The Love Boat?*). The following documentation provides tips for wine tasters, helpful observations and culinary tidbits – all useful for planning a wine adventure of your own.

Tip #1: Moderation is key. Planning an itinerary with visits to four or five wineries in a single day is ambitious and, truthfully, can be exhausting. Still, if a day's tour is in your sights, we suggest one of the following options:

Placer County

The Agenda: Fawnridge Winery, Vina Castellano, Green Family Winery and Mt. Vernon.

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PLACER EXCURSION

Fawnridge Winery
5560 Fawnridge Road, Auburn
530-887-9522
www.fawnridgewine.com

Vina Castellano
4590 Bell Road, Auburn
530-889-BULL (2855)
www.vinacastellano.com

Green Family Winery
3420 Pine Ridge Lane, Auburn
530-888-8866
www.greenfamilywinery.com

Mt. Vernon
10850 Mt. Vernon Road, Auburn
530-823-1111
www.mtvernonwinery.com

RESOURCE

Placer Winery Association:
www.placerwineandgrape.org

The Excursion: In the hills of Placer County, just outside Auburn, we discovered some little known winery gems. My tasting partner in crime – a.k.a. my boss, Wendy – and I zipped off to our first destination, as we were running a touch behind schedule and got lost on the way.

Our route, as recommended by Teena Wilkins at Vina Castellano, began at **Fawnridge Winery** where the owners, Stewart and Stephanie Perry, poured our wine. A young winery in its second year, Fawnridge produces a relatively small selection of wine: Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Barbera and Port. According to Stephanie, “the Barbera is yummy and smoother than most, and the Port is dreamy.” An excel-

lent first stop, to be sure.

At Vina Castellano, we found ourselves in the hospitable hands of the aforementioned Teena Wilkins. Staying true to their heritage, Teena and her family (the Mendezes) grow Spanish grape varieties. For Teena, watching her *abuela* (Spanish for grandma) make wine while growing up was a regular occurrence – a tradition she now continues with her husband and parents. She introduced us to Tempranillo wine, and we agree with Teena that it is a perfect food wine. This was reinforced when we indulged (well, when I did, at least) in a second tasting that accompanied our lunch of ham and Swiss cheese sandwiches with pasta salad, olives and artichoke hearts. Dining al fresco on the vineyard dock, surrounded by grapevines and a cool pond breeze that lifted the heat momentarily, only enhanced this lovely combination.

At the Green Family Winery, owner and winemaker, Charlie Green, regaled us with stories of his nautical past in Southeast Asia as he poured wine into an eclectic collection of stemware. “Uncle Charlie’s” specialties are Barbera and Syrah. He calls his Barbera zippy, lively and the perfect accompaniment to Italian food – too true. Our favorite, though, was Uncle Charlie’s Barrel Select Syrah. One sip of this delectable spirit, and you just might finish off a bottle before realizing it.

Thankfully, the last stop of the day found us in the air-conditioned tasting room at Mt. Vernon Winery, which proudly offers wines that feature the likeness of the breast cancer postage stamp, from which a portion of each sale is donated by the owners, the Taylor family, to CureBreastCancer, Inc. From an extensive list of wine samplings, we chose the Roussanne, the Petite Syrah and the Vintage Port, thus ending the day on a sweet note.

The Verdict: A unique and intimate tasting experience. The extra effort that was required (such as scheduling appointments as opposed to simply arriving at leisure during tasting room hours) to visit several of the Placer County wineries is well worth the trouble.

Tip #2: Be flexible. Running behind schedule and getting lost is part of the adventure. Take



C.G. Di Arie

David Girard

Fawnridge



in the scenery and enjoy yourself, your company and the journey.

El Dorado County

The Agenda: Sogno Winery, lunch at Z Pie, Venezia Winery, Gold Hill Winery and David Girard Winery.

The Excursion: **Sogno Winery** in Shingle Springs was a logical starting point. Sogno means *dream* in Italian, and the dreamy wines did not disappoint. Larry, the tasting room manager, pours with a complementary stand-up comedy show – no joke. He urges tasters to reject what he calls “cork-dork” tendencies and to find wines that evoke the “yum-yum dance.” With Sogno’s exhaustive wine list, there’s no doubt that you can find a few. Our favorites? The Primitivo, the “sexy Italian cousin of Zinfandel;” the Aglianico, a B.A.R. by Larry’s definition (you’ll have find out from him what B.A.R. means); the White Zinfandel (don’t worry – this is a sweet wine, but not your typical sissy wine); and the Summer Gold Orange Muscat, to which all I can say is yum.

Z Pie for lunch was a perfect choice. A cool California salad and any pie selection (there are several, including Italian Sausage, Thai Chicken, Steak and Cabernet, and Veggie Chili)

EL DORADO EXCURSION

Sogno Winery and Vineyard
3046 Ponderosa Road, Shingle Springs
530-672-6968
www.sognowinery.com

Z Pie
3182 Center Street, Placerville
530-621-2626
www.z-pie.com

Venezio
5821 Highway 49, Pilot Hill
530-885-WINE (9463)
www.venezio.com

Gold Hill Winery
5660 Vineyard Lane, Placerville
530-626-6522
www.goldhillvineyard.com

David Girard Vineyards
741 Cold Springs Road, Placerville
530-295-1833
www.davidgirardvineyards.com

Hooverville Orchards
1100 Wallace Road, Placerville
530-622-2155

RESOURCE

El Dorado Winery Association:
www.eldoradowines.com



CHAMPAGNE

GOLD HILL



DESSERT VIOGNIER



UNCLE CHARLIE'S BARREL SELECT SYRAH

GREEN FAMILY



ROUSSANNE

MT. VERNON



CHARDONNAY



MERITAGE

VENEZIO

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Fawnridge Winery



Vina Castellano

curbed our appetites and left us eager for more wine tasting. If pot-pies are not your slice of life, Placerville makes for the ideal wine tour lunch intermission, as there are several delightful restaurants and cafés from which to choose.

Drive down history lane from Placerville to **Venezio Winery**. Highway 49 winds past the American River and through historic Coloma, where gold was first discovered “in them thar hills.” As for the wine at Venezio, we recommend the Zinfandel (my favorite variety regardless) and the Meritage. A quick aside: a wedding party was preparing for the ceremony while we were there, and we must admit that exchanging vows among the grapevines is really quite

charming.

Gold Hill Winery and Brewery is another fabulous wedding location, if you're looking. In the tasting room, we discovered that drinking in the view from a deck overlooking endless rows of vines was equally as delightful as sipping the wine. We didn't forget to make selections here, however: the sparkling wine, Zinfandel and dessert Viognier are all marvelous thirst quenchers on a hot summer afternoon.

Newly opened **David Girard Vineyards** is quite the find. The facility itself – Old World Tuscany combined with contemporary style – sets the scene for an elegant social engagement. Just one year old, David Girard released its estate wines this past June. Of this batch, Wendy and I were particularly taken with the Grenache, which Amanda, the tasting room manager, graciously let us taste although it hadn't actually been released when we visited.

Heading back toward Placerville, we immediately veered off the road in search of **Hooverville Orchards** when we saw the sign that read “Fresh Pies.” After the peacocks loudly greeted us, we happily scarfed up the peach, peach berry and cherry pies at this family-owned farm. What do you know? We managed to end this day on a sweet note, too.

The Verdict: Again, we tried, rather ambitiously – for the sake of our readers and editorial integrity, of course – to visit five or six wineries in one trip. Alas, we only made it to four – but a fantastic four, indeed.

Tip #3: Be spontaneous. Who knows what you'll find along the way? Cherry pie, anyone?

Amador County

The Agenda: Lunch at Amador Vintage Market, C.G. Di Arie and Sobon Estate.

The Excursion: We started the day with lunch at **Amador Vintage Market**. Sierrastyle's assistant managing editor, Kelley, and I played the old double-date card and made it a day



ROUSSANE



FIDDELTOWN ZINFANDEL



PRIMITIVO



SUMMER'S GOLD



SYRAH ROSE



TEPRANILLO

SOBON

SOGNO

VINA CASTELLANO



Gold Hill Winery



C.G. DiArie



Hooverville Orchards



David Girard

with our eager escorts, Chris and Collan. Since it was nearly noon by the time we arrived in Plymouth, lunch was definitely first on the menu. We recommend any of the market's sandwich selections, especially the Amador Turkey Cobb, the Italian Club and the Miner's Reuben. Truly, anything served on grilled focaccia simply should not be missed. As an added bonus, we've heard that Amador Vintage Market will deliver lunch to certain surrounding wineries.

Though not technically in Amador County, **C.G. Di Arie**, part of the Shenandoah Valley wineries, proved to be worth the hunt (literally – five or six jaunts up and down Shenandoah Road did nothing for a passenger's stomach, namely *mine*). As owners Chaim Gur-Arieh and his wife, Elisheva, were out of town, the four of us were wine and dined, or should I say toured, by Steve Winter, the winery's vice president of sales. A virtual haven for wine and art, the establishment incorporates the passions of both Chaim, an inventor who created the technology for the cereal Cap'n Crunch®, and Elisheva, an accomplished ballet dancer and artist.

To say that learning about the winery and its owners was interesting would be an understatement. In the short hour that we spent there, it was obvious that Chaim, Elisheva and Steve all take pride and enjoyment in what they do. With his Ph.D. and extensive background in food science and chemistry, Chaim develops his wines with great care, and it shows. We certainly relished all of the wines that we tasted. Though the winery doesn't have an open tasting room as of yet, weekend tours are available and are well worth the time. By the way, all the wines we tasted were fabulous, especially the Southern Exposure Zinfandel and the Syrah.

Near the town of Plymouth on Shenandoah Road, **Sobon Estate** provides a quaint and rustic wine tasting experience. If you can hit this winery when it's less crowded (we arrived along with a bus tour), grab some wine and stay for a while at the picnic tables in a shaded grove area. We recommend the Roussanne or the Fiddletown Zinfandel.

Stonehouse Wines and Bray Vineyards would have also made opportune additions to the tour, as they are both located just down from Sobon Estate on Shenandoah Road on the way back toward Plymouth. Stonehouse, in particular, again combines wine and art with its Thomas Kinkadee gallery and several Zinfandel labels (again, my fave).

We did, however, stop once more at **Amador Vintage Market** where Kelley and I partook of gelato and the boys indulged in beer – beer on a wine tour, I know! But what can you expect? At least there was, yet again, sweetness all around.

The Verdict: Admittedly, after getting such personal attention at C.G. Di Arie, we felt so spoiled that we decided to call it a day – not to mention the fact that it took us more than an hour from Plymouth to find this place (a drive that would ordinarily take about 20 minutes or so, if one actually knows the way!). Needless to say, we were also slightly exhausted in the 100-plus degree weather. The wine did help, though.

Tip #4: Designate a Julie McCoy (and a driver, of course). This can make or break your day as far as your schedule, destinations and, ahem, directions. By the way, turn onto Di Agonisti Road from Shenandoah Road to find C.G. Di Arie; and, no, you haven't gone too far. ●

AMADOR EXCURSION

Amador Vintage Market
9393 Main Street, Plymouth
209-245-3968, www.amadorvintagemarket.com

C. G. Di Arie
5200 di Arie Road, Mt. Aukum
530-620-6500, www.cgdiarie.com

Sobon Estate
14430 Shenandoah Road, Plymouth
209-245-6554, www.sobonwine.com

Stonehouse
10861 Shenandoah Road, Plymouth
209-245-6888, www.stonehousewines.com

Bray Vineyards
10590 Shenandoah Road, Plymouth
209-245-6023, www.brayvineyards.com

RESOURCE

Amador Winery Association:
www.amadorwine.com