

Overdoing it on the Napa wine trail

8 Jul 2008 by FT but this is a longer version

One of the most difficult questions for a wine writer to answer is which wines should I visit? As in so many aspects of our professional lives, we are spoilt. We casually notice the red carpet being unfurled beneath our feet as we turn up (late) for a personal appointment with the owner or head winemaker.

Napa Valley being the world's most visited wine region, and second most visited California destination after Disneyland, I decided to pose as a wine tourist on a recent trip there to see what sort of options are available to the casual visitor.

The first thing I learnt was how difficult it is to be casual about it. California in general may bring a whole new meaning to the word casual, but the wine tourist has to organise things well in advance. A couple of days before my weekend in the Valley I found myself pleading in a most unseemly fashion on the phone with Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, 'couldn't you just add one person to one of your groups of 10 to 12 people?' No, was the answer. Local authorities certainly do their best to limit visitor numbers to the smaller wineries. There are also sound commercial reasons for making a tour feel like a very personal experience. At Geopline on the Castello Rosso Road, for instance, they find that a remarkable proportion of people who come for one of April Geopline's personal wine tastings come back for their annual harvest wine and music fest.

Napa's more and more Napa Valley wineries are seeking tourism not as the price they pay for inhabiting one of the most beautiful, and accessible, spots on the wine globe but as a valuable way of establishing direct relationships with potential customers in a market where, ever since the Repeal of Prohibition, distribution has been notoriously complex and expensive. The five million visitors to the Napa Valley each year can usefully spend making lists and may well be encouraged to 'join our wine club', or other words sign up for regular purchases. It may be heavy on personal costs to give barrel samples to small groups of wine lovers but the aim is to make them feel they have a very personal connection with the winery and the owners hope, its wines.

Besides, most winery tours themselves generate income. As I quickly found out, the standard fee for a tour is a robust \$25 (considerably more, for instance, than a tour of the Queen's picture) with some wineries charging a good deal more than this. Deborah Khaled, owner of the eponymous Portogallo-inspired winery pictured below, may tell herself as one of those wine collectors who prefers to 'inhale' rather than 'inhale wines for profit', but his special tasting of Dornbusch Napa Valley wines alongside Bordeaux and Burgundy costs \$150 a person.

The Robert Mondavi Winery in Calistoga sets the Napa Valley standard for good taste, and tasting protocol. It is one of the most visible and popular destinations in the Valley – the encroachment of the car parks into the prime vineyard land that surrounds it is astounding – and visitors pay either \$15 for a taste of three wines at one of their two tasting courtyards, or \$25 for an educational tour with 'taster' tasting at the end of it. Ex-Davey president Rich Frank's Frank Family Vineyards in the historic Larkmead winery is unusual in offering tastings free. But then his winery in Calistoga at the most distant end of the Valley from San Francisco, where the buses and trucks full of wine tourists tend to start out from. Every weekend they stream across the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges in search of the Napa Valley experience. The most sobering part of it is often the sheer weight of traffic on Highway 29, the main road through the valley flanked by the most obvious tourist destinations. The single most useful piece of advice I can give to visitors to the Napa Valley is to use instead the parallel but much quieter Silverado Trail – although it is a wander. A designated driver or hiring one of the many San Franciscans who have set up this services for Napa Valley tastings is strongly recommended, particularly since so many tourists and those who come to them seem more concerned with consumption than consciousness. I stayed out at one small winery on the Silverado Trail where my pre-booked \$25 tour got me an enthusiastically libidinous young tour guide all to myself. At 10 in the morning, in the wine caves he glibly claimed were replete, he seemed keener to consume than to sell. "You're real disciplined," he said with some degree of wonder as I prudently sought out somewhere to spit (not a common feature on wine tours in my experience). "Some people spend two and half hours in these caves tasting from barrels."

Caves are a big thing for Napa winemakers and tourists alike. Sturrowing into the hillsides is a thoroughly ecological alternative to expensive cooling systems, and provides visitors with the cover of darkness for their drinking exploits. I told my young guide that next on my itinerary was a \$50 tour at the new Del Dotto Estate Winery and Caves just south of St Helena, the busiest town in the Valley. "Oh Boris, we call them," he said knowingly.

Fantabulous Dave Del Dotto amassed his fortune by way of late night infomercials and his sales technique has not deserted him in the literature announcing what he calls his "wine experience" – although somewhat cynically he assures us that "it will prove to be the ultimate wine tasting in the world". He seems rather "Cubist" define architectural analysis. Let's just say Venice goes to Vegas (see www.del-dotto.com). "Everything you see in here has been brought from Italy," our guide assured us in the marble columned entrance hall at the start of the tour I shared with two couples from Arkansas, adding, "right from the sound system and the discoball." He was at pains to add respectability to this last term by explaining its connection to the etymology of ballroom dancing and at first I was impressed by his erudition. Doubt set in when he told us that the British introduced the Shiraz wine to their colony Argentina. Having established our first names (see above) and bid us a little about the heady introductory Grenache in our generously proportioned but rather thick embossed tasting glasses, he led us to the other side of the heavy velvet curtain and 'terrace portal from 1180 AD' (Dave Del Dotto again) that separates the airy entrance hall from the long, echoing, candlelit tunnels where most of Dave's wine experience takes place. According to the tour guide, "he made world class wines, all of them rated between 90 and 100 points" but although Del Dotto's top wines have indeed been rated highly by America's top wine critics, there was little evidence of them in ten wines we were served in the raucous Caves, even though the rich, oaky style of the lesser wines we were offered was admirably consistent. Dave's Caves is piped at high volume but was drowned out by the two or three other groups of wine tourists who really did sound as though they were taking part in some Roman orgy. "Napa fit" is apparently a well known local euphemism for overdoing it on the wine trail. Nothing towards a fancy-looking dining area, our guide led us about the special privileges accorded to those visitors with VIP status. I was genuinely interested in how you qualified as a VIP. "Very Intoxicated Person", I was told.

That said, I take my hat off to the prevailing Napa Valley habit of offering some superior edible nibbles at the end of a wine tasting. A Del Dotto tasting experience ends with some great cheese, prosciutto and pizza, and usually all the most serious smaller wineries who offer personal, pre-booked tours to small groups will also provide some evidence of Napa Valley's culinary reputation – possibly in the form of co-operation with a local cheesemaker, for instance.

Wine towns might like to know that old hands speak particularly highly of the tours at Farnham, Newton, Frog's Leap and Swanson. The (then) Premier Ray to Napa Valley was the best guide we found to the Napa Valley's 400 wineries and 150 restaurants although unfortunately it is available only as a paper version and only in the Valley itself. See also www.napa425.com