

HAVE SOME MADERA, M'DEAR

Story and photos by John Blanchette



Quiet lanes flow through the Madera Wine Trail

It was the July 4th weekend and I was headed into the Central Valley to visit Madera County and one of California's oldest wine growing areas.

The San Joaquin Valley can be blistering hot this time of year and I certainly wasn't disappointed. Temperatures soared to 105 degrees.

As my car drove on Route 99, slicing through this wide, flat and fertile plane that stretches over 200 miles between Bakersfield and Stockton, crops and livestock passed my window like an expanded grocery market. Table grapes, sugar cane, corn, tomatoes, citrus, peaches, plums, apricots, strawberries, watermelons, pistachio, pecan,



Cattle range in the shadow of Giant Eucalyptus

almond, pomegranate and walnut trees, pigs, cattle, sheep, and dairy cows, etc. in abundance.

One farmer told me that the topsoil is unlimited and all they need is water to grow their crops. And that's a major problem. The current draught has caused some farmers to let their fields go fallow.

The city of Madera, located 38 miles from the geographic center of California, derives its name from the Spanish word for wood, which was harvested in the Yosemite Valley foothills and shipped from Madera to build San Francisco and other area communities in the 1800s.

The Madeira wine produced on the Portuguese island made famous by the bawdy English tune "Have Some Madeira, m'Dear" is just a coincidence. However, the area does make some of the best fortified, sweet and port wines in the world.



Vineyards run to the mountains

I was off to confirm this as I explored the Madera Wine Trail, composed of 12 wineries that I visited over the weekend. Most have tasting rooms and only Chateau Lasgoity has a fee (\$5 applied to purchase).

First stop was Quady Winery. I have a history with Quady. Back in 1982 at a dinner party in San Francisco I tasted my first great dessert wine and it was Essensia by Quady, made of Orange Muscat grapes. The golden-orange color swirled in my glass as I tasted the nectar of apricots and oranges.

The scent and flavor returned like Proust's madeleines, as I drove through a lane bordered by Orange Muscat grapes, up to Quady's tasting room to meet the man who had opened my eyes to great sweet wines, Andrew Quady and his wife Laurel.

After genuflecting, I went through a full tasting, from the sweet and dry vermouth Vya, the sherry Palomino Fino, the table wines of Viognier and Visao, Deviation, which infuses scented Geraniums



Quiet rural setting reflects two centuries of farming

The 1800s was also the time when immigrants from Italy, France, Spain, Armenia, which has its largest American population located in the Central Valley, came to farm and raise crops, especially wine. Before the turn of the 20th Century wines from Madera County were shipped worldwide.

During prohibition the area shifted to producing raisins and table grapes and many wine vines were replaced. After prohibition wine returned, but in bulk form. Swiss from Ticino established Italian Swiss Colony and other bulk producers like Gallo, Boone's Farm and Paul Masson gathered grapes from the area.

It is only within the last 35 years that world-class wines have again been produced on the County's vines.



Along the quiet lanes of Madera Wine Trail



Orange Muscat grapes bunch in the warm July air

into Essensia adding a honeysuckle/rose element to the wine, and my favorites, the dessert and after dinner drinks.

They make a black Muscat wine called Elysium, several port-style wines they whimsically call Starboard, and the light alcohol Muscat blends of Electra. The wine called Purple is sinful and tastes like liquefied grape Jolly Ranchers.

They invited me to dinner at their home next to the winery and we sat al fresco on their patio overlooking the vineyard, sipping their wines and the prize-winning Quady North vintages produced by their son Herb in Oregon, as the early evening breezes brought relief from the warm day.

This is what is unique about the Madera Wine Trail. You meet the owners and growers and they have time to socialize and introduce you to their family and their wines.

Other stops along the trail included Ficklin Vineyards,

which does some excellent port-style wines. Wine maker Peter Ficklin poured me his 20-year-old Tawny Port that was full of fig and raisin flavors.

Further north in the Central Sierra Nevada foothills at an elevation of 1,800 feet, I met with Ray Krause of Westbrook Wine Farm, one of the pioneers in the area. He was in the first Oenology class at Fresno State and began making wine in 1964. He makes some beautiful Bordeaux-style wines, a fruity and crisp Viognier and nice dry Riesling. But his 2007 Petite Sirah stole my heart, and it was still in the barrel! You must make the pilgrimage to O'Neals, CA and make an appointment to taste and purchase this gem.

Even further north, near Lake Bass and about 15 miles from Yosemite is the Idle Hour Winery at the Queens Inn. The tasting room and vineyard are run by Anna Marie dos Remedios and Deb Payne. The Inn also offers a beer garden for those who want a break from wine.



Winemaker Ray Krause is one of the pioneers of the new world-class grape plantings in Madera

Birdstone Winery owners Tony and Kimberly Kirk are native Maderans and became interested in the wine business while students at Fresno State, going on to study at Davis and Cal Poly. Their tasting room is in Madera. Try the Chardonnay.

Other vineyards on the wine trail include Mariposa Wine Company, Pacific Crest, Golden Valley Wine, Oak Hollow Winery and San Joaquin Wine Company, all in Madera and Vineyard 208, which is near Westbrook.

IF YOU GO:

There are two excellent restaurants in the area. Chris Mariscotti, owner of The Vineyard Restaurant & Bar in Madera is a fountain of information on area wines and vineyards. He's been open for 31 years.

The comfortable restaurant is dedicated to wine and features old kegs, a wood-beamed interior and grape vines growing on the roof. On the day I visited several vintners and local agricultural people were enjoying the menu, which features steaks, ribs, pastas, fish, homemade breads, award-winning desserts, and wine by the glass.

The other great restaurant is 30 minutes from Yosemite in the town of Oakhurst, the five-star Relais & Chateaux Estate by the Elderberries. This is a spectacular inn, spa and restaurant with only 12 rooms. Owner Erna Kubin-Clanin has given her name to the restaurant, Erna's Elderberry House.

Everything here is elegant including the food prepared by chef Karsten Hart. My heart has a soft spot for elderberries. My grandfather was French and refused to eat dinner without a glass of wine. He arrived in Boston during Prohibition and began making his own wine and continued doing so his whole life. As a young boy I can remember picking wild elderberries till my hands (and mouth) were blue, providing fruit for his sweet port-like wine, smelling of blueberries and black Muscat grapes.

Chef Hart makes good use of the elderberries grown on the property, incorporating them in his meat sauces and desserts. Try to make it to an Elderberry Harvest Dinner this summer, but call for reservations, 559-683-6800 and ask for the delightful manager, Deja Marrone.

Other places to stay include the Springhill Suites Marriott, Holiday Inn Express and the Hampton Inn, all in Madera.

For information on the Madera Wine Trail and Madera County contact KC Pomeroy at 800-613-0709, www.maderavintners.com. All other information is available online. Anyone for some Madera, m'dears?



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