

On the Road with Nancy Brown: Wicked April Wine Weekends

Travel Writer Nancy D. Brown is torn between two lovers
—Sonoma and Napa Valley wine weekends.



Here in the East Bay, we have the best of both worlds. We can sail on the San Francisco Bay and we can go wine tasting in a variety of appellations, all within the same weekend. But sometimes this access poses challenges. Coming up April 29 through May 1, 2011 are a pair of wine events that will have your taste buds doing cartwheels. Question is: which do you prefer—Sonoma's Passport to Dry Creek Valley or Napa's Vineyard to Vintner festival in the Stags Leap district?

Passport to Dry Creek Valley is more low-key and country while Stags Leap's Vineyard to Vintner is a little bit rock and roll. But both weekends offer formal dinners, delicious tastings, and casual open houses. It's just a matter of choosing which is right for you.

Passport to Dry Creek Valley

More than 45 Dry Creek Valley wineries pour their best bottles paired with a bounty of fresh food from top Sonoma County chefs. New this year, the Gateway to Passport is an elegant dinner at Hotel Healdsburg & Dry Creek Kitchen, with culinary delights from Chef Charlie Palmer paired with small-batch wines. The event is \$150 per person and tickets are limited so snatch 'em fast.

Come hungry and stay late for this Dry Creek food and wine weekend. In my humble opinion, the two wineries with the best food, along with gorgeous settings are Dutcher Crossing and Lambert Bridge.

Dutcher Crossing Winery

I first met Dutcher Crossing Proprietor Debra Mathy at Passport to Dry Creek in 2008. Originally from Wisconsin, Mathy shares my interest in salmon fishing and travel. Mathy and her Winemaker Kerry Damskey, exemplify Dry Creek's friendly pull-up-a-chair-and-let's-talk-wine atmosphere. Not only does the winery churn out stellar, handcrafted wines, it doesn't take itself too seriously. In fact, Mathy offered me a beer on one of my visits!



Part of the winery's charm is its architectural style mimicking barns from the early 1900s. An open breezeway welcomes guests to the gardens and trellised picnic area with views of Dry Creek Valley vineyards. Foodies and wine lovers at Passport will start with barrel samples of pinot noir and zinfandel, continue on to sauvignon blanc paired with coconut shrimp, and end with a 2006 Port with Dutcher Crossing Port ice cream.

Lambert Bridge Winery

Tucked in a grove of California Redwoods, Lambert Bridge is a rustic wood winery that offers Passport guest's pizza baked in the al fresco wood-fire ovens. The winery itself is known for their Bordeaux varietals and small-lot wines. My recommendation: go directly to the Reserve Barrel Room for food and wine pairings.

Most Undiscovered Winery

Save time to visit Gustafson Family Vineyards. The winery is located 10 minutes from Warm Springs Dam on Skaggs Spring Road at an elevation of 1,800 feet with views of Lake Sonoma and the entire Dry Creek Valley. The winery practices sustainable farming practices and provides Passport visitors an escape from the busy valley to explore the rolling hills and taste newly released wines with delicious appetizers.

Stags Leap District Vineyard to Vintner



In its 12th year, the Stags Leap Vineyard to Vintner weekend has changed from a one-day event into a three-day extravaganza. One thing stays the same, however: it's still a cabernet lover's dream. V2V offers a backstage pass to 18 wineries, all featuring Cabernet Sauvignon. This year, Saveur magazine's David Rosengarten will lead a one-hour seminar and panel discussion on Saturday, followed by open houses at member wineries later that afternoon and on Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 pm. Intimate Friday night dinners capped at 45 people have been added to the event.

"My favorite part of the weekend is when guests have that 'ah ha' moment and really get a feel for cabernet sauvignon specific to Stags

Leap District," says Stags Leap District President Allison Steltzner-Sharp of Steltzner Vineyards. "They walk away having tried new wines and having gained an understanding of the area they come from."

Some of the best chefs in the valley will be joining wineries for the Friday night dinner series, including Chef Cindy Pawlcyn of Mustards Grill, Cindy's Back Street Kitchen, and now the Monterey Bay Aquarium's culinary services. Pawlcyn will serve dinner at Chimney Rock Winery. It's always hard to decide where to go first, but each winery offers unique food and wine pairings from sliders and cabernet, to chocolate and cabernet.

IF YOU GO:

Passport to Dry Creek Valley: April 29 through May 1, 2011. Gateway to Passport dinner, Friday April 29, 6:30 to 9:30 p.m., at Hotel Healdsburg, 25 Matheson St., Healdsburg, \$150. Food and wine pairings at more than 45 wineries, 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. A 2-day Passport for Saturday and Sunday costs \$120. Sunday only tickets are \$70. For more information and to purchase tickets, visit wdcv.com/passport.

Stags Leap District Vineyard to Vintner: April 29 through May 1, 2011. Small hosted dinners, Friday April 29, 6:30 to 10 p.m., \$335 per person. Cabernet seminar with Saveur magazine's David Rosengarten, Saturday April 30, 10 to 11 a.m., at Stags Leap Wine Cellars, 5766 Silverado Trail, Napa, \$60. VIP open houses 11 am to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, \$135. For more information and to purchase tickets, visit stagsleapdistrict.com/v2v.

A lifelong resident of Contra Costa County, Nancy D. Brown grew up in Moraga. When she's not traveling, she lives in Lafayette with her husband and teens. Nancy is the Uptake.com Travel Editor, writes the What a Trip blog and is a Contra Costa Times Lamorinda Sun columnist. Horse lovers will find her at writinghorseback.com. Follow Nancy on Twitter at twitter.com/Nancydbrown.