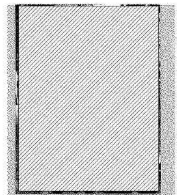




wine appreciation

Touring and tasting
during the 40th anniversary
of Wine Road Northern
Sonoma County

By Carey Sweet



wine country

I knew I was in the right place when Freddie Mercury came galloping up to me, batting my knees with a stuffed green alligator clutched in his jaws. I wasn't even in the Mercury Wine tasting room yet, but the 5-year-old black Labrador retriever met me on the sidewalk in the Sonoma County hamlet of Geyserville (population about 1,000), proudly coaxing me to meet his guardian: shop owner and winemaker Brad Beard.

Winery dogs are common in California wine country—where in addition to greeting visitors, they may help to discourage gophers and grape-eating birds—but Freddie is an especially good ambassador. I am now more inclined than ever to step in, and I'm doubly happy I've done so when Beard brings out his 2014 Heritage Oak Alexander Valley Chardonnay. I'm a fan as soon as he describes its provenance from prized Wente-clone vines—origi-

nally created as grafts in 1912 from French cuttings—and I taste the Chardonnay's sunny splash of pineapple, guava, melon and a touch of green pepper.

Mercury Wine (mercurywine.com), which opened in 2009, is one of the 200 wineries in the **Wine Road** association of wineries and lodgings (wineroad.com), which is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. With self-tour and guided-tour information, maps, recipes and Wine 101 tasting tips, Wine Road showcases northern Sonoma County's Alexander, Dry Creek and Russian River Valley American Viticultural Areas (AVAs). These acclaimed AVAs are three of Sonoma County's 17 total AVAs, which together boast more than 425 wineries, and hundreds of award-winning wines.

The Russian River meanders through or near all three Wine Road AVAs, where numerous microclimates and soils yield an impressive diversity of premium varieties—from Pinot Noir to Chardonnay to Zinfandel to Dolcetto—



COURTESY MERCURY WINE

Brad Beard and his dog, Freddie Mercury, welcome visitors to Mercury Wine.

according to the Wine Road. Early viticulturists included 19th century Italian immigrants, whose influence is still evident in some of the vines and wines at sites such as **Simi Winery**, founded by brothers Giuseppe and Pietro Simi (simiwinery.com) at the northern edge of Healdsburg in 1876.

Today, visitors to Wine Road routes will find an intriguing mix of historic wineries such as Simi, large modern wineries such as **Kendall-Jackson** (kj.com) and **Ferrari-Carano** (ferrari-carano.com), and small, artisanal producers such as **Mercury Wine**.

It's hard to think of a better way to spend a sunny day than touring the unique towns and vineyards of wine country, and things get even more fun at Mercury Wine when Brad's brother and tasting room co-host and artist, Grady Beard, joins us. He jokes that his first job interview was with Freddie, who had to give the OK for Brad to hire Grady.

While enjoying the humor Grady brings to the tasting room, Brad is very serious about his wine, which is one of the reasons he specializes in European-style varieties and blends, with production limited to as few as 50 cases a year, crafted from grapes the winery grows in its 5 acres of Alexander Valley vineyards, and also sources from other vineyards in the Alexander, Dry Creek and Russian River valleys.

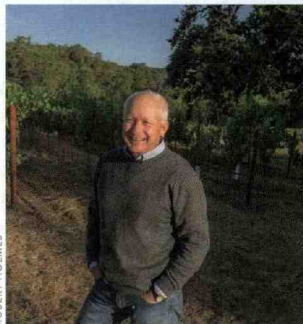
After tasting the Chardonnay, I savor a new wine, Mercury's first Sauvignon Blanc, a 2014 that sings with citrus, melon, easy balance, and a bright, crisp finish. The tasting

notes explain that the blend is 98 percent Sauvignon Blanc plus 2 percent “proprietary.” I earn a “ding ding ding” from Grady when he steers me toward German grapes and I guess Gewürztraminer.

Then he pulls out a 1,000-milliliter jug—a swing-top growler, really—filled with a blend of Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot. The \$29 jug is refillable for \$25 from a tap system “filling station” near the bar. Grady explains that the idea is to replicate the swagger of an unpretentious Italian table wine. I find it delicious, in an everyday, mouthwatering, berry-violet-plum kind of way.

Mercury Wine has also taken an unconventional approach to the physical space in which it presents the fruit of its vines. The tasting room, located not far from a tractor store in the tiny farming community, displays edgy style, with bare concrete floors, floor-to-ceiling cubbyholes stocked with wine bottles (there used to be jars of homemade jam and pickled vegetables in the cubbies, too, but Grady tells me he ate them all), and antique doors repurposed into bar tops.

Off to one side, a turntable spins actual vinyl records such as hits from Queen, led by singer Freddie Mercury, although the winery actually took its name from the quick boom-and-bust years of mining ore for quicksilver from 1873 to 1875 in the now nonexistent town of Pine Flat. But you can choose your favorite inspiration from objects around the tasting



ROBERT HOLMES

Right: **MacRostie Winery's handsome new tasting room.** Below: **Owner Steve MacRostie.**



KATHRYN MACDONALD

room: the Mercury dimes displayed in a jar, Mercury the comic-book hero starring on T-shirts, Mercury the planet peeking off the edge of the 2010 Russian River Pinot Noir label, Mercury the winged messenger stylized on another wine label (and in fabric wings attached to the back of Grady's sneakers), or the Project Mercury space program that's honored via blueprints on The Rocket red-blend label.

Whatever. All I really need to know is that this Mercury orbits all around fine wine and fun.

Napa Valley
St. Helena



the St. Helena AVA, in the heart of Napa Valley.

St. Helena is a warm area, protected by western hills, with heat radiating off those hills and less fog or wind than many more-southern areas, making it perfect for wines such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Syrah, Zinfandel and Viognier.

Wine-touring options are outstanding and varied, including the following examples:

California wine country also includes Napa Valley, which was designated California's first AVA in 1981, and within its borders lie 16 sub-appellations, including

Cairdean Estate (cairdeanestate.com): This site, including a restaurant, deli and retail, and an arts collection, is nearly a village, located next door to the 50-acre winery complex.

The estate includes 17,369 square feet of wine caves, and there are two tasting rooms—one a luxury public lounge, the other a by-appointment Winemaker's Den. Visitors enjoy pours such as the 2012 Acquaintance Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon, whose dark fruit and cherry flavors mingle with spices and herbs.

Freemark Abbey Winery (freemarkabbey.com): It's the 130th anniversary of this historic property, which has just emerged from an extensive renovation that retained the beautiful stone facade while updating

the tasting room, library and lounge. Specializing in Cabernet Sauvignon, the winery partners with longstanding top-tier growers up and down Napa Valley.

Ehlers Estate (ehlersestate.com):

The 1886 stone-and-wood palace is now offering a novel by-appointment-only “Start Your Day” tasting that begins at 9:30 A.M., with a tour of the 42-acre organically farmed vineyard, samples direct from the barrel, sipping in the luxury tasting room, and fresh-baked croissants from Yountville's famed Bouchon Bakery.

Toast with a creamy, crisp, dry 2015 Estate Sauvignon Blanc perfumed with lime, grapefruit and lemon blossoms. Ehlers wine sales support international cardiovascular research. —C.S.

wine country

MacRostie Winery & Vineyards, and Estate House

Winery owner Steve MacRostie is a legend in Sonoma County, having founded his winery in 1987; he released his first Carneros Chardonnay that same year with grapes from land where the San Francisco Bay meets southern Napa Valley and Sonoma County. But for a long time he was a man without a real tasting room, operating a small winery out of a bare-bones industrial warehouse just southeast of the town of Sonoma.

Samples were tasted at a picnic table on asphalt, yet the wines were outstanding, eventually featuring grapes from his own 58-acre Wildcat Mountain Vineyard—planted in 1998 in the Carneros AVA, on the border of the Sonoma Coast AVA—and from legendary Sonoma County wine-growing families such as the Duttons and Sangiacomos.

As I walk to the front door of his new estate winery and tasting room (macrostiewinery.com) on Westside Road in the Russian River Valley AVA, I'm impressed. Designed by noted architect Doug Thornley, the modern wood-and-glass building is gorgeous, nestled into a hillside in the Healdsburg region. Opened early last year, it's finally the fitting tribute to MacRostie's art, and is surrounded by his own 13-acre Thale's Pinot Noir vineyard, named in honor of his wife.

Before I can take it all in, a "wine ambassador" greets me in the parking lot with a glass of 2013 Sonoma Coast Chardonnay, a blend drawing from MacRostie's partnership with 30 area Chardonnay vineyards. Every guest gets such a welcome, the host explains, so as to savor the delicate floral aromas, and notes of lemon, peach stone, pie-crust spice and candied orange peel as we walk past the entry gardens.

The interior of the building also brings a taste of luxury to Sonoma County, from the polished concrete floor to the leather chairs, chandeliers with glass globes, landscape abstracts on the walls and gleaming oak tables.

wine country

I'm here for the Elevated experience, which includes vineyard, barrel-room and fermenting-room tours, and a seated tasting of five wines, with a lavish charcuterie board featuring regionally sourced delights such as blue cheese from Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Co. and olive oil-sel gris (sea salt) flatbread from Rustic Bakery, alongside prosciutto and Spanish Marcona almonds.

WINE FLIES FREE

Check your first case of appropriately packaged wine free of charge for flights from Santa Rosa on Alaska Airlines; for details, see alaskaair.com/wine and sonomacounty.com/wine-flies-free-when-visiting-san-francisco-wine-country.

I take a seat on the tasting room balcony, basking in the sun with a 2013 Wildcat Mountain Chardonnay, a weighty but unusual jewel boasting crushed-gravel notes kissed with lemon and honey.

The winery's ambassadors are equipped with presentation boards to show the various vineyards and climates of Sonoma County and highlight the vineyards MacRostie relies on. It's marvelous to taste the 2013 Russian River Valley Pinot Noir—exploring its distinctive black cherry, blackberry, tobacco and bergamot spice nuances—while learning that the wine features an array of fruit from Thale's Vineyard, the neighboring Flax Vineyard on Westside Road, and two vineyards in nearby Green Valley.

The ambiance is upscale yet pastoral. Cows and sheep graze on hillsides in the distance; guests relax on couches with their dogs at their feet; and at one point, winemaker Heidi Bridenhagen pops in with her 6-month-old niece to greet everyone.

Steve MacRostie, onsite as he usually is, makes the rounds, too. "I've always been a

To page 84

wine country

From page 30

wine hobo," he says with a laugh, clearly admiring his new palace. "It's good to finally have a home."

Papapietro Perry Winery

You'd never guess, based on the simple set-up of Papapietro Perry Winery's tasting room and winery (papapietro-perry.com), in the large Healdsburg region, which includes part of the Dry Creek, Alexander Valley and Russian River Valley AVAs, that this label is highly coveted by Pinot Noir and Zinfandel lovers. The tasting room is hidden away in a small, red, barnlike structure within a villagelike group of buildings at the Timber Crest Farms collective.

But Papapietro Perry is one of the gems of the Dry Creek Valley, with old-school-style wines crafted by Ben Papapietro, who owns the winery with his wife, Yolanda Papapietro, and Bruce and Renae Perry. Both men had grandfathers who made wine for their families. When Ben started producing wine in his garage more than 25 years ago, he invited his wine-aficionado friend Bruce to join him. In the 1990s,

Award-Winning

In 1976, a Chardonnay by **Chateau Montelena Winery** (montelena.com), in Napa Valley's Calistoga AVA, bested—in blind tastings—nine other Chardonnays, including some very prestigious ones from France, in what became known as the Judgment of Paris, after the city in which the competition took place.

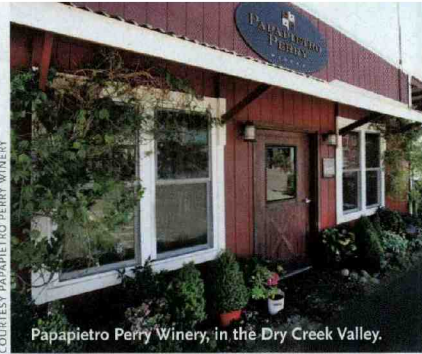
The winery's achievement, along with a win among the competition's reds by the S.L.V. Cabernet Sauvignon from **Stag's Leap Wine Cellars**, also from Napa Valley, forever changed Northern California's standing in the wine world, and on May 24, the 40th anniversary of the competition, Chateau Montelena and Stag's Leap Wine Cellars are each hosting an open house with special tastings, displays and activities to celebrate the Judgment of Paris. —C.S.

after their “garagista wines” were competing favorably with premium California Pinot Noirs, they moved into a winemaking facility and officially launched their Papapietro Perry company. Renae is the CEO, and Yolanda oversees distributor relations.

The team sources and personally manages fruit from superb, carefully chosen, long-time-partner vineyards, including Pauline's Vineyard, directly across the street from their winery, and the Timber Crest Farms vineyard right outside Papapietro Perry's front door.

I'm looking at a wall of shirts emblazoned with cute sayings such as “Lush & Lively,” but there's also a spectacular glass-and-metal-embossed wine barrel in the center of the room, on display as part of the **Art of Oak** celebration for the Wine Road's 40th anniversary.

My tasting host explains that Wine Road invited 40 local artists to create original art from recycled wine barrels, to be shown at Wine Road wineries through May 10. The barrels will then be auctioned off for private



enjoyment or permanent public display.

The winery branched out to a Zinfandel in 2004 and added its first Chardonnay in 2007. I'm sipping the 2012 Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel from elegant Riedel stemware, charmed by the wine's complexity. It's a sumptuous choice—glittering dark garnet, with flavors of brambly blackberry, blueberry and cracked black pepper, plus a hint of tobacco and plenty of spice. Usually Zin is quite a big-bodied, bold wine, but this one has a wonderful gentleness to it, with lots of juicy ripe berry.

My host tells me why: Papapietro Perry uses many of the same winemaking techniques for its Zinfandel as it does for the Pinot Noir for which the winery is best-known. That means cold-soaking the grapes for three days, then hand-punching them down in open-top fermenters, a method not commonly used with Zinfandel. The juice is then aged in French oak for 15 months, providing a toasty oak underlayer. “It's Zin for the Pinot lover,” my host says.

To me, it's a delicious bit of Sonoma County heaven, on a deck that also sparkles, thanks to an awning hung with lights, and the ambiance of stacked aging barrels. I raise my glass and toast the vines, just steps away, that delivered the beautiful Zinfandel in my glass. ■

Carey Sweet lives in Sonoma County.

Alaska Airlines (800-ALASKAAIR; alaskaair.com) provides regular service to the Sonoma County city of Santa Rosa, which is also the most convenient air gateway to Napa Valley and Mendocino County wine tasting. Visit wineroad.com/events to see the fun and educational events taking place each month during this 40th-anniversary year.

Beyond Wine

Sonoma County offers numerous ways to round out a wine-tasting vacation, including hiking, bicycling and golfing, along with attractions such as the following:

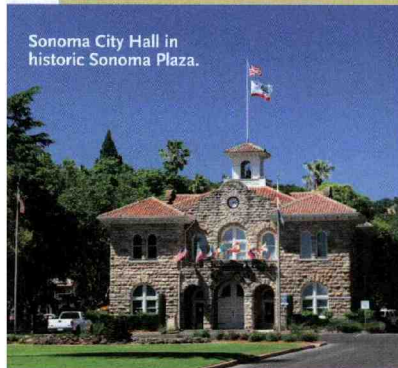
Charles M. Schulz Museum (schulzmuseum.org).

Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve; Jack London State Historic Park; Sonoma Coast State Park, including Bodega Head; and **Sonoma State Historic Park**, including Mission San Francisco Solano (www.parks.ca.gov).

Graton Resort & Casino (gratonresortcasino.com).

Green Music Center (gmc.sonomoma.edu) at Sonoma State University.

Luther Burbank Home and Gardens (lutherburbank.org).



Sonoma City Hall in historic Sonoma Plaza.

RM, USA / ALAMY

More information:

To learn more about Sonoma County wineries, activities and attractions, see sonomacounty.com, and see sonomawinegrape.org for information about wine. Also visit sonomavalley.com for information on attractions (including Sonoma Plaza, a National Historic Landmark) in the southeastern part of the county. Sonoma Valley is often considered the birthplace of California's wine industry. For information on Napa Valley (16 AVAs, 400+ wineries), go to visitnapavalley.com; for Mendocino County (10 AVAs, 100+ wineries), see visitmendocino.com.