

A look at the vineyards of Ferrari-Carano.
Photo courtesy of Ferrari-Carano

Grape Camp

The ultimate gift
of Sonoma County

BY BETH SCHWARTZ
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DON WALLACE

As a youngster, going to camp was always quite an adventure. Your accommodations included sleeping bags and cabins, you were introduced to child pleasing treats like roasted hotdogs and gooey s'mores, and you got to participate in activities like hiking or arts and crafts which mostly involved macramé techniques. And even though it was a bit hokey, it was fun and memorable because it was geared to the things that children love.

Now imagine if there was an adult camp, better yet one custom made just for oenophiles, and it offered luxurious amenities including dreamy sleeping accommodations of feather and down bedding, and just-out-of-the-oven cookies that magically appeared on your pillow each night such as is served at the Vintners Inn in Santa Rosa, California with its quaint cobblestone courtyards and walkways. And let's say every meal was a culinary masterpiece served with the best wine, and suppose the activities included harvesting grapes, blending wine and croquet matches all while tasting your way through the brilliant lushness of California wine country.

Well, imagine no more, such a camp does exist and in late September I was fortunate enough to participate in the inaugural session of Sonoma County Grape Camp organized by the Sonoma County Winegrape Commission.



Day One: September 24

Although the first day of camp didn't start until 4:30 P.M., it was certainly a preamble of the very essence of Grape Camp – a constant cornucopia of gourmet food consistently well paired with the most amazing wines of Sonoma County all while getting a first-hand look at the science of winemaking.

The opening night of Sonoma County Grape Camp was celebrated with an outdoor dinner at sunset in the vineyard of the Hoot Owl Winery catered by Mark Stark from Willi's Wine Bar. Each of our linen-clad picnic tables was overflowing with Sonoma County wines for us to revel in and pair our way through the meal.

We enjoyed a feast that included a raw bar selection of Oysters on the Half Shell and Bloody Mary Ceviche Shooters for hors d'oeuvres, a Chicken Fried Quail Salad, and an entrée of Smoked Tenderloin of Beef and Coffee Barbequed Shortribs with Creamed Greens and Crispy Corn Cake, while getting to know the other 25 campers. Hailing from Michigan, Texas, Virginia, North Carolina, New York, Canada and California; there was a set of newlyweds on their honeymoon, two birthday girls celebrating their 50th, a chocolate mogul, and many enthusiastic oenophiles.

Day Two: September 25

Our day started very early with a morning of grape harvesting at Saralee's Vineyard, which has the largest varietal collection in the Russian River Valley. We were to be part of their 18th harvest. The vineyard's owner Saralee Kunde began by priming us with the most important piece of advice for harvesting. "Be careful that no MOG makes it into the bin," she commanded. She then explained that MOG is "material other than grapes."

Our vines were already leafed making it easier to harvest the fruit. Equipped with work gloves and clippers, we picked our row in what we believed to be a record 50 minutes. That is until we spied the professionals whipping down another row like a host of locusts emptying the vines of their grapes in mere minutes.

In total we picked three large bins of Pinot Blanc fruit that weighed in at 1.125 tons or 2,431 lbs. of fruit. Kunde's pays \$80 per ton with a \$5 bonus for being MOG-free. Just to give you an idea, in 2006 1,800 tons of fruit were harvested in Kunde's vineyard.

"We used to pick by the tub, but now we pick by the ton because it makes for a more efficient picking process," Kunde explained. The Kundes also prefer to harvest at night using light-mounted gators to work through the rows.

Prior to our arrival, they had picked for 27 straight days since August with the exception of Sundays. "A winemaker's biggest headache is weather. We have to beat the weather with next week offering the threat of rain. A good rain can really damage the crop due to the possibility of mildew," Kunde explained. "Each year is unique and you just go with it. You have to be flexible to be in this business."

After our morning harvesting adventure, we were whisked away to Sonoma-Cutrer Vineyards for a tour of their winery. A sea of colorful flowers greeted us as we made our way through their gates and up to the winery where two neatly manicured croquet courts covered their grounds.

To visit Sonoma-Cutrer was quite a treat because the winery is not open to the public. We were met by Director of Winemaking Terry Adams who has completed 26 vintages while at Sonoma-Cutrer. The venerable winemaker has been selected as best Chardonnay on the Best Wines List 16 out of 18 years, and although famous for their Chardonnay they are working on a Pinot Noir.

Sonoma-Cutrer had just finished their harvest the week before so the winery's machines were spick and span. As we weaved through the winery, we passed giant silver tanks, a gargantuan fruit sorter, and presses

that hold 30 tons each. "We get 155 gallons per ton from the first press and 125 gallons from the second press," Adams explained.

Next we filed into the fermenting rooms where wood barrels were neatly stacked in row upon row, three high. The damp and earthen-floored rooms permeated a sour aroma. Adams offered each of us a taste from a barrel of their Russian River Ranches Chardonnay that had been fermenting 12 days. It had the appearance of pineapple juice and tasted very sour with a grapefruit bitterness and pineapple essence.

"I'm excited about this year's wine. It tastes like wines from years ago, of course, I don't know which years but they were good," Adams chuckled.

We moved into a colder room where the fruit had only been in barrel for five days and is as close as you can get to juice. The taste was cloyingly sweet, almost like apple juice.

"We use French oak because I like the finesse of French oak with its subtle refinement," explained Adams of his barreling choice. "I refined our barreling after my trip to France led me to believe we needed more fruit and less oak."

We moved to a warmer room that was home to their Leap Year Wine, "a dry, dry wine from rocky soil with more minerals and is more austere," said Adams. Paler in color, there was no yeast floating around and it had been in barrel for 26 days. It had a bright, zingy taste of lemon, lime and green apple.

Following our winery tour, we enjoyed a game of croquet before lunch. Two professional croquet players decked out in their whites taught us how to play as we sipped on the winery's Russian River Ranches Chardonnay. It turns out the croquet courts on Sonoma-Cutrer's grounds have actually hosted the World Croquet Championships. (*Writer's Note: I am pleased to report my partner and I won our match.*)

After lunch it was back to Vintners Inn, our home base, for an educational session with Sonoma County food and wine celebrity Chef John Ash, formerly the host of PBS show "From Earth to Table." Ash teaches an advanced food and wine course at the CIA (Culinary Institute of America at Greystone) in the nearby Napa Valley, and he quickly got right to business with our first activity – an Aroma Challenge.

Before we began the challenge, Ash offered a few sensory tidbits. The nose is the most important organ of taste; and he explained that there are actually people who are Super Tasters who are equipped with many more taste buds than is average. These people generally end up becoming sommeliers or make their living in the culinary arena because of their extraordinary tasters.

We were broken down into small groups and given eight wines to identify the most dominant smell using the assistance of a wine wheel which details all the possible tastes and smells. This was a challenging exercise that truly tested each group's skills. Our group was able to identify the most aromas and so we won the challenge.

"Winemakers are ultimately just cooks," Ash explained as we started our next activity – the art of pairing food with appropriate wines. He then went on to identify the six tastes: acid/sour, sweet, salty, bitter, pepper and umami. A concept first developed by the Japanese, umami is glutamine and tastes like aged mushrooms or fermented like Reggiano cheese.

His advice for the six tastes was very simplistic. "If you have three of these elements (in your dish), you will be successful," Ash said. "Any food can do reasonably well with any wine by adjusting the six flavors."

Ash then offered two pairing strategies. The first being that the food and wine should reflect similar flavor notes. For example, fresh salad



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greens served with a young goat cheese and lemon-herb vinaigrette would be best paired with a fresh, crisp, acidic, lemony and herbal wine such as a Sauvignon Blanc or a non-oaked Chardonnay. And the second strategy is to go for an obvious contrast such as the classic pairing of Stilton cheese with port – a rich, salty, fungusy cheese matched to a sweet, syrupy wine.

Once our seminar with Ash ended, we hurried off to change for our Paella Party and the chance to put into practice everything we had learned about pairing food and wine at a sumptuous meal of paella and Pinot Noirs on the banks of the Russian River. Part of the group learned to sabre a bottle of champagne under the tutelage of Camp Director Larry Levine while the rest of us watched as Chef Gerard Nebesky demonstrated the proper way to behead shrimp before we snacked on hors d'oeuvres of Manchego cheese with Membrillo and Sauteed Garlic Shrimp. We then enjoyed a Spanish green salad and Chef Nebesky's famous seafood and chicken paellas. Two of the group's favorite Pinot Noirs of

the evening included the 2003 Martinelli Pinot Noir and 2005 J Pinot Noir.

Day Three – September 26

Again we found ourselves up early to harvest grapes at Montemaggiore, a small winery in Healdsburg, with owners Lise and Vince Ciolino. Montemaggiore only

The entrance to the grounds of Ferrari-Carano. Photography courtesy of Ferrari-Carano.



produces 2,000 cases of wine a year from 10 acres of grapes. Their flagship wine is a Syrah called Pablo's Vineyard and they produce a Cabernet-Syrah blend as well. Additionally, they produce olive oil from 800 olive trees.

The Ciolinos had left the rocky hilltop

of their vineyard for us to harvest. Again we donned our gloves and got to work gathering the Pinot Noir grapes. It was a little trickier harvesting the fruit at Montemaggiore because the vines were lower to the ground and so we had to bend over the whole time and the vines had not been leafed. However, we persevered.

It was at Montemaggiore that we saw first-hand the fruit make its way up a stepped elevator into a de-stemming machine and onto a sorting belt where we had to diligently pick out any green fruit, leaves, and missed stems. The fruit was then sucked through a tube and deposited into an enormous vat where the fruit would cool for three days.

It was during this stop that our two birthday girls fulfilled their "I Love Lucy" fantasy of grape stomping. Upon finishing trampling the grapes they triumphantly declared yet another dream had come true.

Next, we headed to Ferrari-Carano to blend wine. We were ushered into an Italian styled tasting room complete with a bar and grotto extravagantly accented with marble, stack stone and wrought iron for our lesson.

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Ferri-Carano has two winemakers - one for their reds and one for their whites and has two separate facilities for making both. Ferrari-Carano's Red Winemaker, Aaron Piotter, was brought in to coach us on the intricacies of blending wine using Merlot, Malbec, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Our wine blending seminar felt a lot like junior high chemistry class but with adult beverages. Using a 10 ml pipet we dabbled with the different wines, taking a bit of this and a bit of that to create our blends.

My partner and I created three different blends and sadly we found them all undrinkable. Then using the recipe for Ferrari-Carano's Trésor we recreated it and finally found something that was tasty. My partner and I mutually decided the art of winemaking is not nearly as easy as it is to just uncork and savor it with a really good meal.

We then lunched in Ferri-Carano's private villa. The villa featured an ornately carved bar for wine tasting, grand fireplace, piano and a case of porcelain figurines. While sipping on Fume Blanc we traipsed about the winery's grounds exploring a ravishing Italian style garden full of pumpkins, fall flowers and a rustic wishing well.

Surrounded by Roman pillars and lush greenery, we dined al fresco on Chef Eduardo Conteras' three-course menu of Heirloom Tomato Soup with a dollop of Burrata Cheese and Chiffonade of fresh Basil paired with a 2005 Alexander Valley Chardonnay; Smoked Chicken Risotto with a 2004 Merlot; and Chocolate Sorbet with Biscotti paired with a 2005 Eldorado Noir.

Following our lunch at Ferrari-Carano, we were off for a lesson in cheese at Redwood Hill Farm and Creamery where the cheese is farmed bio-dynamically, which means that it is made according to the moon cycle. We started with a tour of the Creamery for a behind-the-scenes look at the cheese-making process and then were treated to four of their finest artisan cheeses.

First up was the Red Hill Farm Crottin, a lactic cheese, which brought out the sweetness of the Hanna Sauvignon Blanc from the Russian River Valley with which it was paired. Next was a good and runny Redwood Hill Farm Camellia paired with Benziger Chardonnay. Third was a smooth and velvety Redwood Hill Farm Bucheret paired with Marimar Torres Pinot Noir from the Sonoma Coast. And finally, a Redwood Hill Farm Chevre-Plain was served with Preston Zinfandel from the Dry Creek Valley.

Our entire Grape Camp experience culminated with our graduation at which we received our participation certificates and naturally celebrated with an assortment of wines and hors d'oeuvres at John Ash & Co. restaurant on the grounds of Vintners Inn.

The final celebration dinner, also at John Ash & Co., featured grape grower Ulises Valdez and vintner Paul Hobbs. Along with their insights into the world of winemaking, we enjoyed an appetizer of Prosciutto Wrapped Wild Gulf Prawns with a mango-mustard sauce paired with 2006 Valdez Sauvignon Blanc, Sonoma County; a first course of New World Risotto with roasted vegetables and a carrot corn broth accompanied by 2005 Paul Hobbs Chardonnay, Russian River Valley, Ulises Valdez Vineyard; and a second course of Roasted Potato, Beet and Onion Salad with Laura Chenel goat cheese paired with 2005 Paul Hobbs Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, Lindsay Estate Vineyard. For our entrée we had Grilled New Zealand Venison and Point Reyes blue cheese polenta, roasted portabella mushrooms and a bacon and peppercorn reduction served with 2005 Paul Hobbs Syrah, Sonoma County, Kick Ranch Vineyard. For dessert we had Ricotta, Honey and Fig Tart with blackberry gelato and shaved Scharffenberger chocolate paired with 2004 Valdez Zinfandel, Rockpile, Rockpile Road Vineyard.

And so after two-and-a-half days of delving into the very essence of winemaking, I was sad there weren't more lessons to be imparted. But as Grape Camp concluded and I was left with only my many fond memories of the 2007 Harvest and all that I had learned about the intricacies of one of my greatest passions, I suddenly had a cheery thought: I wonder if there is a Chocolate Camp?

Editor's Note: The 2008 Sonoma County Grape Camp is scheduled for September 29 thru October 1 and promises a whole new slate of wineries to tour and taste your way through. For more information, visit www.sonomagrapecamp.com or contact Larry Levine at 707-522-5863. □