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CHEERS TO ANOTHER YEAR

Birthday wine-ing in Sonoma

Written by Bridget Williams

As we get older, it seems that there are two types of people when it comes to commemorating a birthday. One prefers little fanfare, while the other likes to mark the occasion with aplomb. As someone who feels she's aging like a good bottle of pinot noir, I fall squarely into the latter. So, for the twilight of my fortieth decade, it seemed apropos to raise a glass to another year in Sonoma, a trip that struck just the right balance of revelry and relaxation.

Having learned firsthand the pitfalls of an overly ambitious itinerary while on a 70th birthday trip to Oregon's wine country with my mother last year, our Sonoma sojourn was limited to two wineries a day. The six I chose were based on the reputation of their wine and the setting offered to enjoy them. As Sonoma County's 19 distinctive American Viticultural areas certainly aren't lacking in scenery, the latter criteria didn't whittle down the list much, but being preferential to pinot certainly helped.

Knowing that we'd be doing quite a bit of driving, we opted for a centrally located hotel. We were initially surprised to see how close McArthur Place was to the main thoroughfare, separated only by a white picket fence and dense landscaping that allowed for stolen glances of Victorian-inspired architecture. However, our fears were allayed as soon as we approached the entry courtyard in this six-acre haven of tranquility.

The low-density property, with just 64 spacious guestrooms and suites, was once a 19th-century working vineyard and ranch. The original home, one of Sonoma's oldest examples of Victorian

architecture, served as inspiration for the other detached two-level buildings that house guest rooms. Blanket-draped Adirondack chairs pulled up alongside strategically placed firepits are populated night and day. Mature landscaping, the intoxicating scent of Jasmine, and meandering paths create a feeling of anticipation as you wander the property. Around every corner are lush lawns punctuated by contemporary art.

Guest rooms are the definition of cool and comfortable California contemporary. Muted earthy colors predominate and are mated with sumptuous textures of stone, leather, and thick tufted plaid carpet underfoot. We quickly adopted a nightly routine of opening a bottle procured from the day's adventure, lighting a fire, and putting our feet up on a bouclé ottoman paired with a swivel bucket chair. Heavenly.

A recent \$20 million overhaul touched nearly every aspect of the resort and reimagined the food and beverage program. Layla, a new three-meal dining destination, is named for Leilani Burris, great-granddaughter of the original property founder David Burris. The menu, utilizing garnishes from the on-site garden, is a happy marriage of California coastal and Mediterranean-style dishes. Farm-to-table dining alfresco here as leaves and candlelight dance in the evening breeze is a peak Sonoma experience. The Bar at MacArthur is a super-chic spot for all-day elevated bar bites and innovative cocktails. We grabbed our morning caffeine fix at The Porch, featuring coffee by Sonoma County roaster Wolf Coffee.

The Jordan Winery chateau



A Chateau block vineyard tasting paired with charcuterie at Jordan.



Maggie Kruse is only the second head winemaker at Jordan since it was founded in the 1970s.
Photo by Marc Olivier LeBlanc.



Glen Ellen Star





Marine Layer tasting room in Healdsburg.
Photo by Gretchen Gause.

Even non-imbibers will savor a trip to the 1,200-acre Jordan Winery in the Alexander Valley to savor the scenery (jordanwinery.com). From its founding in 1970, Jordan has focused on three things: cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay, and hospitality. This laser focus means that they do each very, very well. A long, winding road leads up to a grand château perched atop a hill, a hand-in-glove mate to wines created in the Bordeaux model of estate-grown grapes.

Jordan operates as a certified sustainable vineyard and winery, a practice that extends to preserving large swaths of wild habitat around and between their 12 estate vineyard blocks, creating an ideal environment for the culinary team to forage for wild plants and herbs.

Even the most basic winery tours at Jordan (always by appointment) conclude with a seated food and wine pairing. In addition, throughout the year, they host a handful of themed dinners, lunches, hikes, and other special events. Insider tip: become a Jordan Estates Rewards member at the Gold or Platinum level to gain access to an overnight stay in one of the estate's three guest suites or guesthouse.

Another scenic and sustainable stop is the Benziger Family Winery (benzinger.com), located in the shadow of Sonoma Mountain and a quarter-mile from Jack London State Park (an excellent stop for hiking). The Benziger family has farmed their ranch and vineyards for more than three decades using certified Biodynamic farming methods. As a result, every wine in their portfolio carries a third-party certification of green farming practices. They also use their experience and insight to mentor a network of growers interested in farming in a way that cares for the land while producing quality wine. Benziger's biodynamic tractor tram

tour provides a comprehensive look at their Sonoma Mountain Estate, followed by a tasting of four limited-production wines.

A newbie on the Sonoma winemaking scene, Marine Layer Wines (marinelayerwines.com), founded by Baron Ziegler and Rob Fischer, winemaker at Banshee Wines, has made its mark as the cool kid on the block with a hip tasting room in the heart of Healdsburg, a charming town known for outstanding restaurants, galleries, and shops. Offering a tasting without pretense and accompanied by a scrumptious seasonal mezze plate crafted by Little Saint, Marine Layer would be my first stop with anyone who thinks all wine experts are snobs. Sourcing grapes from some of the best vineyards along the Sonoma Coast, their small-batch, cool-climate wines are complex and approachable.

Because man or woman cannot live on wine alone, we interspersed our tastings by indulging in farm-to-fork cuisine at places like Roof 106 (thematheson.com), a rooftop cocktail lounge and restaurant on the square in Healdsburg, where I'd recommend the local mushroom, burrata, and truffle pizza. After feasting on wood-roasted brussels sprouts and house-made lumache pasta a la fra diavolo at The Glen Ellen Star (glenellenstar.com), a tiny establishment a stone's throw from Benziger Winery, I declared it was every bit as good as my last meal there a decade ago. Following our tasting at Marine Layer, we made a beeline to Little Saint, an ambitious 10,000-square-foot farm-forward gathering place founded by Single Thread owners Kyle and Katina Connaughton, where we hoped to find to-go portions of the mezze we'd just devoured. Coming up short on this mission marked the only glass-half-empty moment during our wine country escapade. **TL**