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venu



Wine and Food Mecca

Venü Explores Napa and Sonoma 2.0

BY FRED BOLLACI



This past June 2023, the VENÜ Magazine team, including myself, Tracey Thomas, Owner/Publisher, and Matthew Sturtevant, Decorative Arts Editor, made what we foresee to be an annual pilgrimage to America's most renowned wine region—Napa and Sonoma, California.

We would like to extend our thanks to **Visit Napa Valley** for making many introductions and helping us organize our Napa itinerary. I highly recommend reaching out to them or dropping by in downtown Napa. I also want to thank our friends **Monty and Sara Preiser** and **Shari Gherman**, co-founders of **The American Fine Wine Competition**, and **Marla and Geoff Bedrosian**, proprietors of **Domaine de la Riviere**, a boutique winery in the heart of the Russian River Valley for their many excellent suggestions and introductions. Join us for an insider tour as we introduce you to some of the very finest establishments in Napa and Sonoma and the amazing people and stories behind them!

Straight out of the gate at SFO, (shout out to **SixT Car Rentals** for hooking us up with a BMW 4 Series Gran Coupe for our two weeks in wine country), we set our GPS for lunch in Napa.

NAPA

Gott's Roadside We enjoyed lunch al fresco on a breezy 77-degree afternoon at the downtown Napa location adjacent to Oxbow Public Market (a fun food hall worth exploring). Founded by brothers Joel and Duncan Gott in St. Helena in 1999 and recognized as a James Beard America's Classic, Gott's Roadside is known for its modern approach

to creating California-inspired dishes using locally sourced ingredients. My favorite dish at Gott's is the Tuna Burger (sushi grade Ahi) done to perfection. We loved the Mexican Street Corn, the California Burger with a fried egg, Zoe's bacon, and balsamic onions, the Ahi Poke Crispy Tacos with sushi grade Ahi tuna, and seasonally fresh Peach Cobbler with frozen custard. Gott's commitment to local sourcing extends to the glass with a California-centric list of wines and beers, hand selected by Joel Gott. Gott's has expanded to include locations around the Bay Area. In fact, we ate at the two Napa Valley Gott's locations several times in our two-week visit. We may have coined a new slogan, "Gotta go to Gott's!"

Materra Cunat Family Vineyards (Oak Knoll) was our first winery visit. From his days as a young boy working on a Midwest farm, Brian Cunat developed an interest and respect for agriculture and farming that has grown into a life's passion. Brian and his wife, Miki were enamored with their first visit





William Selyem

Williams Selyem (Russian River Valley)

The history of Williams Selyem is indeed a fascinating tale of serendipity and passion for winemaking. Williams Selyem's journey began in the 1970s when a generous grape grower gave Burt Williams several tons of grapes for free. This act of kindness led Burt to discover his love and talent for winemaking. Burt Williams and his partner Ed Selyem shared a love for French Burgundy wines, however, since they couldn't afford them, they were motivated to make their own Pinot Noir. Together, Burt and Ed set a new standard for American-made Pinot Noir, and helped elevate Sonoma County's Russian River Valley to among the best wine growing regions in the world. Williams and Selyem started out as weekend winemakers at Burt's house in Forestville with Zinfandel grapes grown by the Martinelli family on now legendary Jackass Hill. In 1981, they made the leap from hobbyists to legitimate winemakers. In 1987, Selyem "Rochioli Vineyard" Pinot Noir (with grapes from neighboring Rochioli) won the California State Fair Sweepstakes Prize for top red wine, besting 2,136 wines from 416 wineries! In 1998, the founders sold the winery to John Dyson, a pioneering viticulturist and long-time customer. Bob Cabral joined as head winemaker under Dyson's ownership. Dyson bought land in Guerneville and established Williams Selyem's first estate vineyard. They also acquired the Litton Estate vineyard, where they experimented with different Pinot Noir clones using modern genetic

techniques to re-create an Old World-style blend. In 2009, *Wine Enthusiast Magazine* awarded the 2007 Litton Estate Pinot Noir a score of 100 points, making it the first Pinot Noir in North America to receive a perfect score from any major wine publication.

Pedroncelli (Geyserville) For nearly a century, the Pedroncelli family has been crafting exceptional wines in Sonoma County's Dry Creek Valley. During Prohibition, the family sold grapes to home winemakers to sustain their vineyards. Following the repeal of Prohibition, the Pedroncelli family gradually built their winemaking business. In 1948, John Pedroncelli, Jr. became the winemaker, and his brother Jim took over as the sales director in 1955. The winery was officially



Pedroncelli, photo by Marcus Cano

purchased by John and Jim from their father in 1963, and the line of wines continued to grow. The third generation took over in the 1990s, refocusing the sales base to include high-ranking restaurants, casual dining and wine bars, as well as independent wine shops across the nation. The winery and vineyards are located in Dry Creek Valley, an American Viticultural Area (AVA) that the Pedroncelli family played a role in forming. The valley's climate, influenced by marine fog intrusion in the evenings, creates a unique environment for grape ripening. Pedroncelli wines are known for being regionally focused and site-specific. Notably, they have a long history of cultivating Zinfandel, with half of all Zinfandel planted in Sonoma County being in Dry Creek Valley, some of it on Pedron-

celli property since the early 1900s. Winemaker Montse Reece joined the winemaking team at Pedroncelli Winery in 2007 serving alongside John Pedroncelli for seven harvests, being named Winemaker in 2015. Her appointment marked only the third winemaker in nearly 90 years and the first woman. A native of Catalonia, Spain, Montse grew up



Photo courtesy of Jordan Winery

in a culture where wine is considered food and has deep cultural roots. She came to the United States to work first at Gloria Ferrer followed by Rodney Strong Vineyards and Ferrari-Carano before joining Pedroncelli.

Jordan (Alexander Valley) Jordan Winery is known for its commitment to high-quality wines and its beautiful 1,200-acre estate. Owned by John Jordan, whose parents founded the winery in 1972, Jordan Winery focuses on Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and hospitality. Jordan's wines are made in a European style that allows them to pair well with a broad range of foods with an emphasis on the wine's fruit and acidity. Acidity cleanses the palate and provides balance. Preserving natural habitat and conserving resources are two tenets in Jordan's sustainability efforts. The winery runs almost entirely on solar energy, and the vineyards and winery are certified sustainable. While an accomplished lawyer in Sonoma County with a business background, John stepped away from his law practice in 2005 to run Jordan. A second-generation vintner, John has utilized his business acumen and philosophy to reenergize the winery. From energy-efficient roofs, solar arrays and water recycling to fruit sourcing, extended bottle aging, soil-map-



Ledson Castle Winery

ping studies, and bringing on new Executive Chef, Jesse Mallgren, a Michelin-Star recipient. The highlights of our delicious food and wine pairing were the Truffled Goat Cheese Fondue with White Summer Truffles, paired with the 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon, and the 2021 Chardonnay paired with Brentwood corn, estate tarragon, hazelnuts, and Jordan Chef's Reserve Caviar by Tsar Nicoulai.

**Ledson Castle Winery (Kenwood)
Winner "Best of Class for Zinfandel" at The
American Fine Wine Competition 2023**

The Ledson family's journey, spanning five generations, is a testament to their determination and work ethic in pursuit of their dreams. It began with Barker Ledson, who left England in 1896, along with his brothers Tom and Stanley, to seek adventure in America. Barker worked as a surveyor in the Mojave Desert, saving his earnings to purchase a 600-acre ranch in Yosemite at the age of 22. His brothers joined him in running the ranch. In San Francisco, Barker's determination led him to secure a job with the City Ice Company. Barker Ledson's life took a new turn when he met Edna Cunningham in 1910, and they were married shortly thereafter. The union of the Ledson and Cunningham families marked the beginning of a farming legacy that continues today. They worked cooperatively on ranches in Kenwood and other properties. Fast forward to 1977, when Steve Ledson, Noble Ledson's son, founded Ledson Construction. In 1989, Steve acquired a 21-acre property in Sonoma wine country and transformed it into a vineyard and winery, known as "The

Castle." Ledson Winery released its inaugural vintage in 1997 and opened its doors to the public in 1999, receiving critical acclaim for its wines. Ledson Winery offers a wide range of wines, and their portfolio has grown to become one of the largest ultra-premium wine collections from a family-owned winery in the United States. Steve Ledson is known for his hands-on approach to selling wines directly to customers. In 2003, The Ledson Hotel & Zina Lounge in downtown Sonoma opened, providing a luxurious place for guests to stay and explore the wineries of Sonoma. The boutique hotel and lounge blend Sonoma's rich history with modern luxury. The Ledson family's dedication to winemaking, hospitality, and preserving their farming legacy has made them a prominent

figure in the world of wine and Sonoma's history.

**Talisman Tasting Room (Glen Ellen)
Winner "Best of Class Pinot Noir" at The
American Fine Wine Competition 2023**

Talisman's first vintage was 1993 with 203 cases of Carneros Pinot Noir that were hand-crafted from three tons of Madonna Vineyard fruit. Over the years, Talisman expanded its offerings and refined its wine-making practices. In 1999, they added a Russian River Pinot Noir made from grapes grown on Klopp Ranch. In 2001, a third wine was introduced, sourced from Thorn Ridge Vineyard on the Sonoma Coast. Talisman's reputation for making fantastic wine led to a collaboration with Steve MacRostie, who wanted them to produce a Pinot Noir from Wildcat Mountain Vineyard. This partnership helped market the vineyard's name. By 2017, they were producing 18 wines sourced from 11 different vineyards.

Scott Rich, the founder of Talisman Wine, had a lifelong connection to winemaking, starting from a young age when he observed friends making wine in their basement. His formal education in enology at U.C. Davis and his work with renowned wineries like RH Phillips, Robert Mondavi, Mont St. John, Carneros Creek, and Etude allowed him to hone his winemaking skills and ultimately create the high-quality Pinot Noir and Cabernet wines that Talisman is known for.

Until next time—*Cin Cin, Cheers, Prost, Salud, Santé Santé!* □



Photo courtesy of Talisman