

OCTOBER 2016

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BEER & WINE ISSUE

EXCEPTIONAL WINE
TASTING EXPERIENCES
BIKE DOG BREWING CO.
PHIFER PAVITT WINERY IN CALISTOGA

Sonoma County

EXCEPTIONAL WINE TASTING EXPERIENCES

For most of us wine tasting simply occurs when we stop at a winery, belly up to the bar, and have a few sips. Sometimes the wine tasting room is crowded, noisy and you have to practically elbow your place at the bar to be served. This may be okay for most of us, but there is another way to experience wine tasting that is more exclusive and, as a consequence, more exceptional.

So what constitutes an exceptional wine tasting experience? Patience and planning helps. For example, instead of just arriving at any winery, you might need to make reservations first. Contact the winery ahead of time to see what private tasting experience they might offer. Perhaps food pairing with several different wines hand-picked by the winery chef. An exceptional tasting is typically one where you are seated for the duration of the experience in a private room with a knowledgeable server or in a cave or at terrace table overlooking a beautiful view where you are waited upon. An exceptionally good wine tasting should have a relaxed, unhurried pace and last for 90 minutes or more, if you take the time to choose the right, accommodating winery.

Exceptional wine tasting experiences can include being served only estate or reserve wines or a lineal tasting of one varietal or even a tasting coupled to sensory smells of small vials containing aromas frequently found in the wines. As you can see, we are talking about being pampered, being seated, and well handled by someone with sommelier-like knowledge of wine. Exceptional should be personalized, exclusive (two but not more than ten people), indulgent and luxurious. It's definitely going to be expensive, but well worth the cost for the type of experience you don't normally get at a casual winery stop.

Sonoma County, renowned for its chardonnays and pinot noirs is the perfect getaway for wine lovers and over the past year, we've traversed it numerous times, visiting several wineries. Somewhere along the way, after stumbling across a few, unique and indulgent wine tasting experiences, the idea was born. We planned, we traveled, we tasted and here are our five favorite Sonoma County, exceptional wine tasting experiences:

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Food and Wine Pairing at Rodney Strong



IF YOU GO:

KellerEstate.com

707.765.2117

Sbragia.com

707.473.2992

RodneyStrong.com

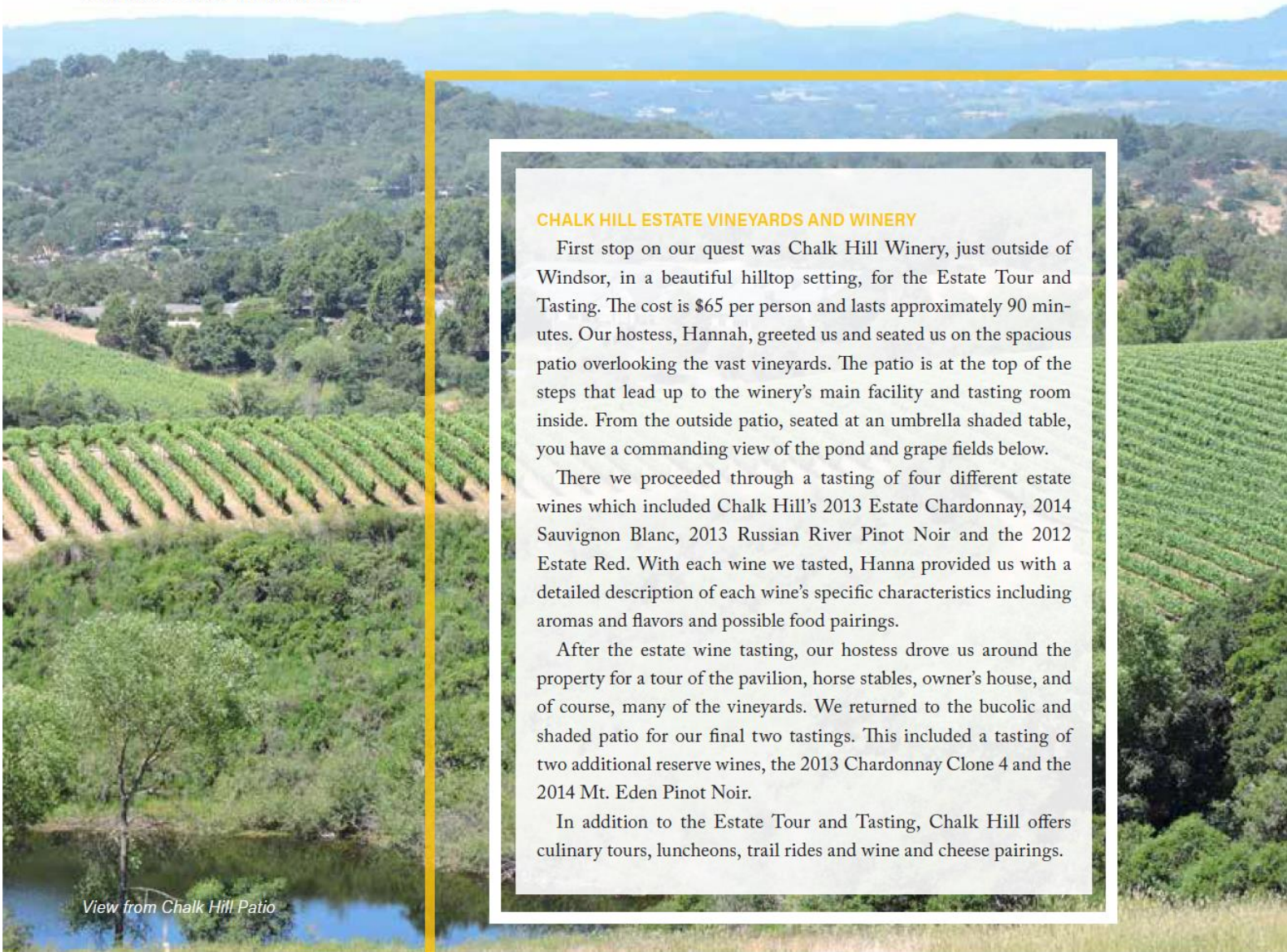
707.431.1533

LaCrema.com

800.314.176

ChalkHill.com

707.657.4837



View from Chalk Hill Patio

CHALK HILL ESTATE VINEYARDS AND WINERY

First stop on our quest was Chalk Hill Winery, just outside of Windsor, in a beautiful hilltop setting, for the Estate Tour and Tasting. The cost is \$65 per person and lasts approximately 90 minutes. Our hostess, Hannah, greeted us and seated us on the spacious patio overlooking the vast vineyards. The patio is at the top of the steps that lead up to the winery's main facility and tasting room inside. From the outside patio, seated at an umbrella shaded table, you have a commanding view of the pond and grape fields below.

There we proceeded through a tasting of four different estate wines which included Chalk Hill's 2013 Estate Chardonnay, 2014 Sauvignon Blanc, 2013 Russian River Pinot Noir and the 2012 Estate Red. With each wine we tasted, Hanna provided us with a detailed description of each wine's specific characteristics including aromas and flavors and possible food pairings.

After the estate wine tasting, our hostess drove us around the property for a tour of the pavilion, horse stables, owner's house, and of course, many of the vineyards. We returned to the bucolic and shaded patio for our final two tastings. This included a tasting of two additional reserve wines, the 2013 Chardonnay Clone 4 and the 2014 Mt. Eden Pinot Noir.

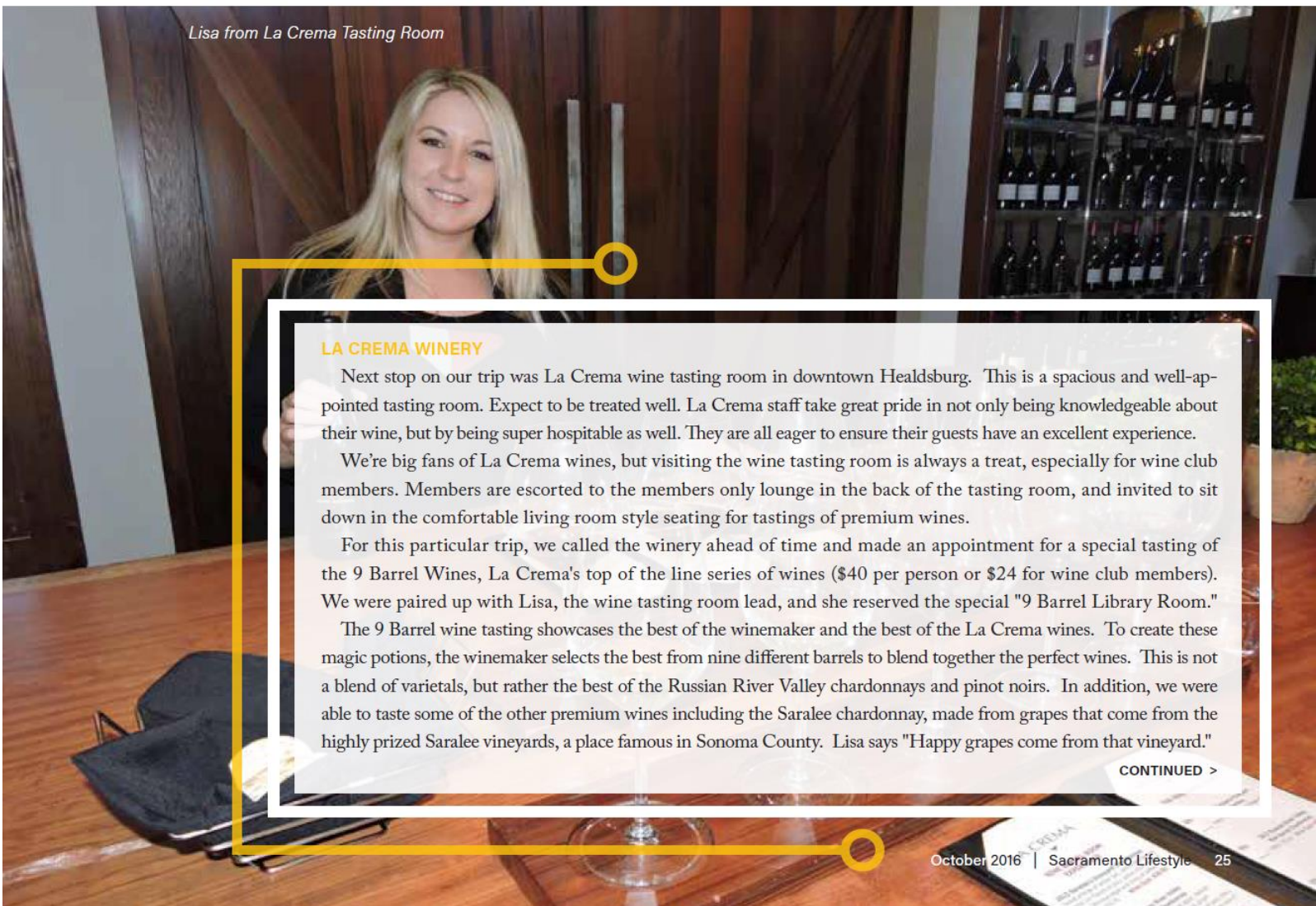
In addition to the Estate Tour and Tasting, Chalk Hill offers culinary tours, luncheons, trail rides and wine and cheese pairings.



Hannah from Chalk Hill



Steps to Chalk Hill Estate Tasting Room



Lisa from La Crema Tasting Room

LA CREMA WINERY

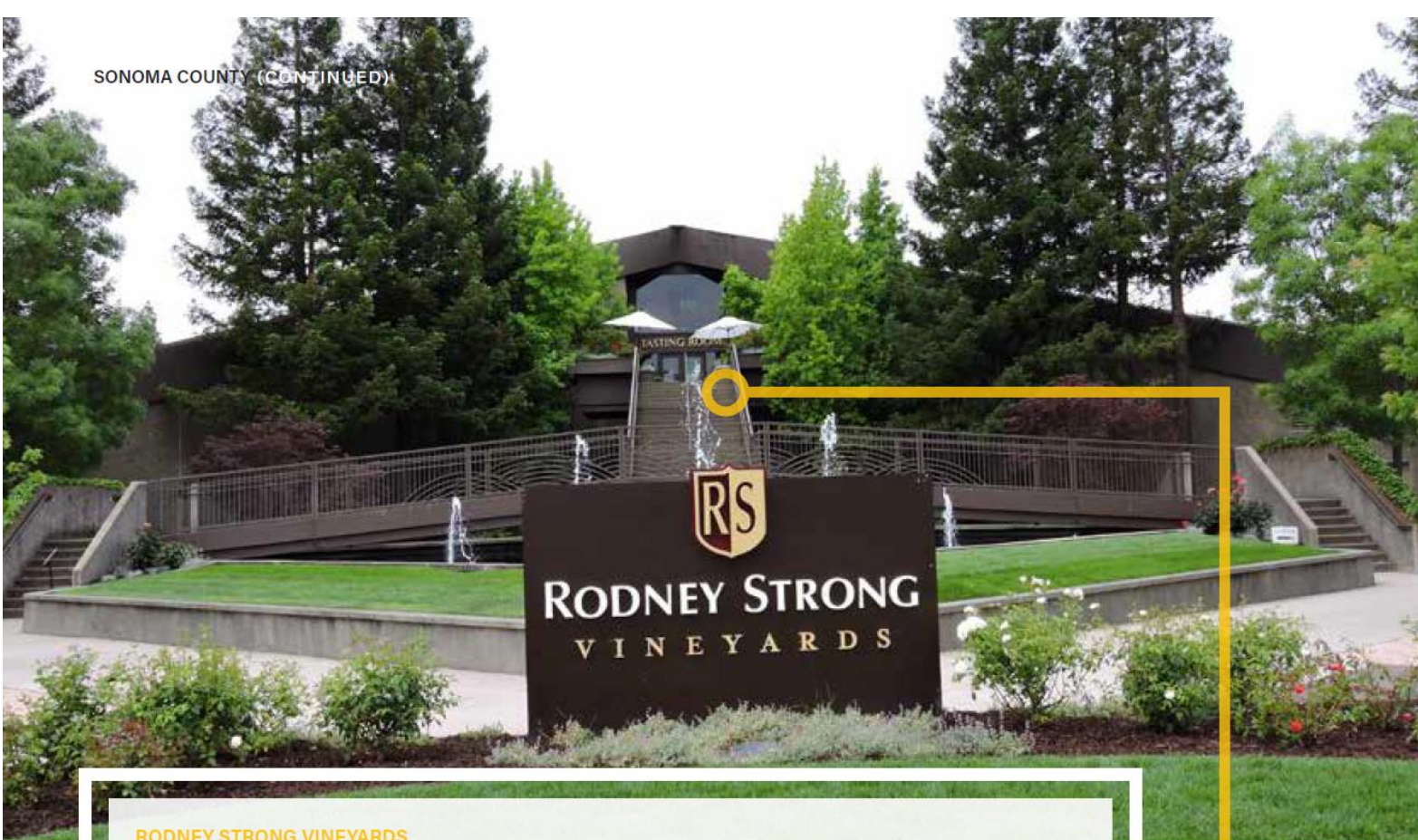
Next stop on our trip was La Crema wine tasting room in downtown Healdsburg. This is a spacious and well-appointed tasting room. Expect to be treated well. La Crema staff take great pride in not only being knowledgeable about their wine, but by being super hospitable as well. They are all eager to ensure their guests have an excellent experience.

We're big fans of La Crema wines, but visiting the wine tasting room is always a treat, especially for wine club members. Members are escorted to the members only lounge in the back of the tasting room, and invited to sit down in the comfortable living room style seating for tastings of premium wines.

For this particular trip, we called the winery ahead of time and made an appointment for a special tasting of the 9 Barrel Wines, La Crema's top of the line series of wines (\$40 per person or \$24 for wine club members). We were paired up with Lisa, the wine tasting room lead, and she reserved the special "9 Barrel Library Room."

The 9 Barrel wine tasting showcases the best of the winemaker and the best of the La Crema wines. To create these magic potions, the winemaker selects the best from nine different barrels to blend together the perfect wines. This is not a blend of varietals, but rather the best of the Russian River Valley chardonnays and pinot noirs. In addition, we were able to taste some of the other premium wines including the Saralee chardonnay, made from grapes that come from the highly prized Saralee vineyards, a place famous in Sonoma County. Lisa says "Happy grapes come from that vineyard."

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RODNEY STRONG VINEYARDS

The following day, we headed to Rodney Strong Winery, which is housed in a striking and dramatic winery. Upon arrival you might quickly draw the conclusion that this is one of those wineries owned by a giant corporation charging \$20 per tasting and drawing throngs of wine lovers to its tasting room. But it's not; in fact Rodney Strong is family owned and proud of it. The winery makes great wine but a visit there provides so much more. During the summer time, the winery sponsors concerts in its outdoor amphitheater and wine and food pairings on the terrace. It was the latter that brought us back to Rodney Strong for another exceptional wine tasting experience.

For \$55.00 per person, the winery offers a leisurely paced food pairing of small, gourmet bites with five different wines. Seated at an umbrella shaded table overlooking the expansive picnic grounds and vineyards, we were offered an envelope with cards describing the menu of soon-to-come food delights and winemaker's notes for each of the wines. The food was prepared by Chef Tara Wachtel and served by Greg, a long-time employee, former home winemaker, jazz pianist, and general expert of our favorite drink, wine. Rodney Strong did not disappoint. Nearly two hours, six courses, and five wines later (plus a few extra tastings), we were feeling thoroughly relaxed and very satisfied. We walked away with a greater knowledge and appreciation for the wines that are produced in Sonoma County and thoroughly impressed with the Rodney Strong staff who made us feel like special friends just visiting for lunch.



*Food and Wine Pairing
at Rodney Strong*



View from Sbragia Patio

SBRAGIA FAMILY VINEYARDS

Next stop on the tour was Sbragia Winery, north of Healdsburg on Dry Creek Road. The view is beautiful and staff go out of their way to make sure your wine tasting experience is enjoyable.

Sbragia offers a variety of different options including tasting on the terrace with a charcuterie and cheese plate for \$30, a chocolate and wine pairing for \$30 per person (\$15 for wine club members), or a sensory tasting for \$50 per person (\$20 for wine club members). The winery will also conduct customized tastings such as a compare and contrast of one varietal (a chardonnay to chardonnay or vintage to vintage), with advanced notice.

We called ahead and signed up for the sensory tasting. What an experience! Arriving early, we took in the view from the spacious deck overlooking Dry Creek Valley while we waited for our tasting to begin. Our host was Andrew, a wine collector for 20 years who is now working in the wine industry. This man is a wealth of knowledge on everything wine related. Andrew reserved the library for this special tasting, and supplied us with a generous and sumptuous charcuterie board. The sensory tasting is almost a sommelier-like experience where visitors get to learn what aromatics are using the La Nez Du Vin wine aroma kit, along with tasting five different Sbragia wines. The kit contains 54 little jars of different aromas. We used ten, two per tasting, for this exercise.

We started with a sauvignon blanc, then a chardonnay, before working our way into the reds. In a sensory tasting you start smelling and tasting the wine to try and detect the different characteristics. With each wine, Andrew handed us two different vials and ask us to guess what we were smelling. He also supplied us with a wine aroma wheel that separates the fruits in white wine to fruits in red wine, floral scents and flavors, vegetal, oak aging characteristics and even off odors that sometimes show up in a bad wine or a wine with a bad cork.

Each time we tasted, sniffed, and wrote down our guesses. Then Andrew would tell us what the actual scent was and let us smell the vial again. We guessed wrong the majority of the time but the experience was an important step for us in helping develop our palates. After two and a half hours and a sampling of some of Sbragia's other reserve wines, we were done! Because there were only the two of us with Andrew, we really got a crash course on wine tasting, but, we would definitely go back with friends and do it all over again.

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Sensory Tasting at Sbragia

Brunch at Keller Estate



KELLER ESTATE

Last on our tour through Sonoma County and the search for exceptional wine tasting experiences was Keller Estate. Located in the southern part of Sonoma County off Lakeville Highway, this Petaluma Gap winery is open by appointment only (although a quick phone call ahead usually gets you in right away). When you arrive, expect to be seated, not ushered up to a crowded winetasting counter. The feel here is luxurious and the pace of wine tasting is leisurely. Knowledgeable wine servers share information about the winery and serve popcorn popped in the winery's estate produced olive oil, with a side of olive oil for dipping. While this might seem like an unusual pairing for wine tasting, the olive oil is quite delicious and the popcorn and olive oil flavors don't detract from the wines.

Our first visit to Keller was exactly this kind of experience. 90 minutes tasting four wines in the tasting room, overlooking the vineyards and learning about the chardonnays, pinots and the Rotie being poured that day. But our return visit on this trip was so amazingly over the top and indulgent that we heartily recommend it. Called their Serenity and Wine Brunch, this is a three course, gourmet feast paired with estate wines. For \$65 per person or \$50 for club members, this is an excellent way to sample the Keller wines.

Brunch is served on the Vineyard Terrace with sweeping views of the vineyards, olive groves and Mt. Tamalpais. Seating is family style at a long, elegantly set table. Be prepared to get to know your table mates as the wine is poured. And, servings are generous! We started with a crisp, dry rose, worked our way through three different chardonnays, sampled a couple of pinot noirs, the Rotie and ended with a sparkling wine.

We even received a special treat at the end. With temperatures hovering around 100 degrees that weekend, Brian, our host, had set up the wine cave earlier in case we needed to sit inside. While we did enjoy most of our meal on the vineyard terrace, Brian kindly invited us back to the cave to cap off the afternoon with dessert and sparkling wine. We parted ways with our new found friends, purchased some favorite wines, then set off on the road wondering how we were ever going to just be able to walk into an ordinary wine tasting room again and belly up to that crowded bar!

So there, dear readers, is the best of our Sonoma County exceptional wine tasting experiences. It was fun. It was indulgent. It gave us unique and up close opportunities to learn more about Sonoma County wines and sharpen our wine tasting skills. Impress your friends or impress your date. Guaranteed that any one of these five experiences will do the trick!



Patio at Keller Estate

