

WINE News

Sonoma field trip!



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Sonoma County: A Bounty of Tremendous Wines

By Bryan Brick

One of my favorite trips every year is to Sonoma County, and the trip this year was no exception. My coworkers Mari Keilman, Stephanie Vidales, Keith Palace and Jordan Stone accompanied me on a whirlwind tour of the numerous viticultural regions of Sonoma County.

Over the course of three days we set foot in Russian River Valley, Dry Creek Valley, Sonoma Mountain, Sonoma Valley and Alexander Valley, all the while tasting delicious wines from a tremendous string of recent vintages. No rain or gaggles of wild turkeys were going to stop us—we were on a mission. And that mission was to find some of the best wines California has to offer and bring them back to you, our trusted and loyal customers.

What we found was a bounty of tremendous wines, many of them brand new releases that we should be able to bring you for some months to come. Whether it was bold and flavorful Zinfandel from intense old vines at producers like Ridge and Bedrock, energetic, resonant Pinot Noirs from some of the classic producers of California—think Joseph Swan or Martinelli—or powerful and structured Cabernets from mountainside sites like Laurel Glen and Arrowood, there was no shortage of wowing and show-stopping wines.

Another treat was tasting the 2016 rosés, which were abundant and delicious, made from a number of different varietals and all right on track for the start of warmer weather. There was just way too much good wine to put in this little newsletter, so please check out our [On The Trail](#) blog for more of our thoughts, reviews, photos and anecdotes from our trip. Here are some of my specific favorite wines from the trip:

One of our favorite experiences was visiting the new winery at Reeve Wines. This brand new project is from our friends Kelly and Noah Dorrance, whom some of you may know from their longtime work at Banshee/Rickshaw/Valravn/Averaen. For this standalone project they have spared no expense and are making tremendous Riesling, Pinot Noir and Sangiovese from Sonoma and Mendocino counties. One of the biggest hits of the entire trip, even though it was only bottled three weeks previously, was the **2016 Reeve Mendocino County Rosé of Pinot Noir (\$27.99)**. Made from Biodynamically farmed grapes and whole cluster fermented, this was complex, savory and full of pretty white cherry and sage flavors. Simply delicious for any upcoming spring or summer foray into the sun.

Speaking of sun, one of the biggest surprises on our trip was just how fresh and lovely the wines of Martinelli are. Gone are the days of super-extracted, high-alcohol Pinot and Chardonnay (don't worry, the Zins are still as monstrous as ever), as we found there to be a lot more restraint and overall balance to the wines. A perfect example is the **2014 Martinelli "Bella Vigna" Russian River Valley Chardonnay (\$39.99)**. Pretty, integrated oak plays nicely with milled corn and peach flesh on the nose with good lifting notes of lemon curd at its edges. Weighty but far from dull, this has just the right amounts of butterscotch, orange marmalade and dry honey that snowball and dovetail nicely into the soaring finish.

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In Healdsburg There's a Place Called Kokomo

By Jordan Stone

Kokomo Winery is a personal favorite of mine. It was one of the first wineries that I visited back in 2008 when I started to get serious about wine tasting. The winery at that time was rustic—the tasting bar was surrounded by the winemaking facility. The first time I met Erik Miller, he showed so much passion about the winemaking process that he struck me more as an artist than winemaker. He welcomed my wife and I like we were family and paid us much the same respect.



Erik Miller in Dry Creek Valley.

Erik, a native of Indiana (hence, Kokomo), and his business partner Randy Peters have a great relationship: the winemaker and the longtime grapegrower working hand in hand to bring you better wines with each vintage. Kokomo currently produces over a dozen different varietals and several vineyard designates. Here are some of our faves:

The **2016 Kokomo “Timber Crest Vineyard” Dry Creek Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$19.99)** has great, clear passion fruit flavors with mineral smoothness and a racy acidic core.

If you're looking to fire up the grill, then look no further than the **2014 Kokomo Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel (\$27.99)**. This shows exceptionally well in its clarity of color and flavors: the wine is ruby red, and I can still remember the flavors of red and black fruit, black spice, cola and tobacco, a richness that does not show as heavy in any way, and the long, refreshing finish. The wine was aged 11 months in French and Eastern European oak and has an ABV of 14.1%. If you are a Zinfandel fan, this is not to be missed! **92 WE.**

2014 Kokomo “Cuveé” Sonoma County Red Blend (\$25.99) A blend of 35% Merlot, 24% Cabernet Sauvignon, 20% Malbec, 16% Grenache and 5% Petite Sirah that is mostly grown by the aforementioned Randy Peters and aged 11 months in new oak, this wine is quite charming, and shows a beautiful garnet color, a perfumed nose and great freshness, structure and depth, with black cherry, black pepper and a lush mouthfeel. **93 WE.**

Since my first visit to Kokomo, the wines and the tasting room have shown tremendous growth. I have been a regular at the winery for more than eight years now. Each time I am delighted to see the improvements to the tasting room (expanded in 2016), and the wines show more sophistication and grace each year.



A Century of Synergy: Zinfandel and Field Blends at Ridge

By Keith Palace

One of my favorite parts of the Sonoma trip was our visit to the ancient Zinfandel vines at Ridge's Lytton Springs and Geyserville vineyards. To me, these old plots of Zinfandel field blends are the true legacy grapes of Northern California. Nowhere else on the planet will you find Zin vines that are over 100 years old and still producing extremely complex fruit like they do here.

Walking through the vineyards you get a real sense of what the vines have been through, and I find it fascinating to look at the vines up close. Their present-day shape is based on pruning decisions that the farmers made 100, 75 and 50 years ago. These vines have truly adapted to their home in the Dry Creek Valley as best they could, and you get a real sense of what the valley has to offer from this historic spot.

We came across some Petite Sirah, Carignane, Alicante Bouschet and other overlooked grape varieties that are planted throughout the Lytton Springs vineyard. Historically termed “mixed blacks,” this particular combination of varieties is often found—in varying amounts—in the old Zinfandel vineyards of California and helps to produce darker, more complex and interesting Zinfandel-based wines. To me, this style is the true expression of California wine.

Ridge offers us two wines that show off Zinfandel and this distinctly Californian association of grapes. The first is the **2015 Ridge “East Bench” Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel (\$Inquire)**, made from 100% Zinfandel grown on the far eastern edge of the valley. This is a big, smooth wine with a lot of underlying weight and lush cherry notes. It is fresh and agile with a nice, long finish. Please note: this wine will be in stock in April.

The second wine, **2014 Ridge “Lytton Springs” Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel (\$37.99)**, is composed of 69% Zinfandel, 18% Petite Sirah and the rest Carignane and Mourvèdre, and aged in 20% new American oak. The wine has an intense plum and blackberry aroma jumps out of the glass. The Lytton Springs has a bigger tannin structure than the East Bench due to the relatively high concentration of Petite Sirah grapes, yet I find this wine surprisingly easy-drinking for being so complex and deep. Both of these wines will age well over the next few years or more. **94 VN, 91 RP, 91 CG.**



Grassroots Sonoma Wines from the Brothers Bilbro

By Mari Keilman

Sonoma County has and will always continue to have a special place in my heart. This bucolic region of narrow valleys and rolling hills has always resonated with a sense of home for me—a sense of family, a sense of feeling secure and being welcomed into a community full of camaraderie, brotherly (and sisterly) love and mutual support. I could never pinpoint why Sonoma elicited this feeling of home until I had the opportunity to spend an afternoon with the Bilbro brothers, and that feeling manifested itself over an afternoon spent with some food on the grill, great wine in our glass and stories being shared.

Spending the afternoon meeting the Bilbro brothers, Jake, Scot and Sam, felt like an afternoon of hanging out with friends I had known for ages. There was no pretension, no sibling rivalry, no one-upping each other. Each one of the brothers will tell you that they're the best of friends, and it shows—not only in their friendship and love for one another, but in their support and respect for each other's wines.

Started in 1978 by their father Chris Bilbro, Marietta Cellars is the nucleus of all the family's growing endeavors. While all of the brothers have had their hands in making wines at Marietta Cellars at one time or another, Marietta is currently Scot's winery to lead. Scot has his hands full, because not only does Marietta Cellars do everything in-house, from farming over 300 estate acres to producing and bottling all their own wine, Scot must also oversee the extensive blending process. Marietta produces non-vintage red blends, making an unconventional choice to focus on a consistent style instead of individual vintages. And while non-vintage wines are sometimes synonymous with lower quality in many consumers' minds, it is exactly the opposite with the Marietta wines. Scot and the Bilbro boys have been able to keep their wines honest and unadulterated. While the non-vintage **Marietta Cellars "Old Vine Red Lot #65" California Red Blend (\$11.99)** is their trademark wine, the real highlight of their blending skills is the non-vintage **Marietta "Armé Lot #3" Sonoma-Mendocino Counties Bordeaux Blend (\$19.99)**. The Armé Lot #3 is classically aromatic with notes of licorice, black currant, cherry, violet, sweet earth and savory herb. The multi-vintage influence is evident in the full-body, crowd pleasing palate and the multi-dimensional finish that is chock full of cocoa spice. Don't be fooled by the price, this wine over-delivers and then some! **90 RP.**



Sam's venture, Idlewild Wines, may appear to be the most alternative out of the three, but don't call it hipster. Idlewild focuses primarily on Italian varietals from high-elevation vineyards in Mendocino County.



Bilbro brothers left to right: Scot, Jake and Sam.

And while Sam has a grassroots, natural approach to his wines, there are no gimmicks or trends here—his wines are a pure expression of Italian varietals that resonate with a sense of place. His straightforward, Old World approach results in wines with both balance and beauty.

The **2016 Idlewild "The Flower-Flora & Fauna" Mendocino County Rosé (\$19.99)** is mind-blowing. Dolcetto, Nebbiolo and Barbera are all co-fermented for this savory, yet vibrant rosé that has the fresh wild berry and sweet tangerine palate that is essential in every rosé, while finishing with an astonishing savory spice element that elevates this rosé from a simple porch pounder to one that requires a whole meal made around it.

Limerick Lane is home to eldest brother Jake Bilbro and his world-class Zinfandel and Rhône blends. Jake has an honest, down-home sensibility to him that shows in his wines. What you see is what you get—and what you get is great wine. He makes small production, estate, single appellation wines that just happen to be highly rated, but that is not why he does what he does. The **2014 Limerick Lane Russian River Valley Syrah-Grenache (\$44.99)** is an ode to Jake's laid-back approach. The Syrah-Grenache blend isn't obscured with fancy winemaking or obnoxious use of new oak. Instead, expressive aromatics of cedar, pink peppercorn, black cherries and blackberries along with vibrant lift on the palate are a response to the cold, foggy mornings, but the luscious, seamless texture is a nod to the warm Healdsburg afternoons. A bottle of this is definitely getting tucked away in my cellar! **90 RP.**

While all three brothers have their own distinct wineries and ways they choose to make their wines, they all end up at the same place. Inspired by their father, yet achieved through different practices, the Bilbro brothers' wines convey a sense of family and a sense of place.

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One of our staff's favorite Pinots every year, the **2013 Joseph Swan "Saralee's Vineyard" Russian River Valley Pinot Noir (\$38.99)** is sublime. Incredibly floral with wild iris and wisteria tones, backed by warm spice and energetic and lip-smacking red fruits, this is one

complex Pinot Noir. What really separates it from so many others we sampled is its almost complete weightlessness. This is somehow packed with flavor yet never bogs down in pitchy weight or unnecessary ripeness. My final note on this wine is not suitable for print—it included a lot of exclamatory excitement and maybe a few joyous curse words!



Chardonnay Shines at Sonoma Valley's Historic Hanzell Vineyards

By Stephanie Vidales

Day two of our Sonoma trip began at Hanzell Vineyards, a fascinating and historic site where phenomenal Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are being grown and made. After driving up a steep and winding, single-lane road for quite some time, we finally made it to the top of the property, which lies in the Mayacamas mountain range. The 46 acres of vines on the estate have been family owned ever since Ambassador James D. Zellerbach established the estate in the 1950s, and they are farmed with a philosophy of "generational sustainability." Deep-rooted in two-million-year-old volcanic rock, some of the original vines are said to be the oldest continually producing Chardonnay and Pinot Noir in North America. Hanzell's first release was in 1957, and we had the opportunity to see those bottles on display on the walls of their library room accompanied by bottles from every vintage they've since produced.

An innovative winery, Hanzell was the first to create temperature-controlled stainless steel fermenters and isolated a malolactic bacteria that is still used today, there and in wineries worldwide. With a focus on quality and vineyard expression in the bottle, the team at Hanzell are making wine that is true to the winery's great legacy.

The first wine we were poured was the **2014 Hanzell "Sebella" Sonoma County Chardonnay (\$31.99)**, which is made predominantly from the younger Chardonnay vines on the property. Beautifully crisp with zippy acidity, this Chardonnay is fermented in stainless steel and does

not go through malolactic fermentation. The wine is finished in used barrels for three to six months before bottling. The nose is full of Meyer lemon, honeysuckle, grapefruit and wet stone that carries over onto a palate that's creamy and rich, with vibrant acid creating outstanding balance. This is a Chardonnay that's more Burgundian in style and would be a wonderful match for sushi and shellfish.

The next wine we were poured was probably one of the best California Chardonnays I have ever tasted. The **2013 Hanzell "Estate" Sonoma Valley Chardonnay (\$64.99)** is made with fruit from older vines on the Hanzell property averaging about 34 years old. This wine has a beautifully expressive nose showing lemon curd, fresh mango, lime zest and brioche notes coming from the lees stirring during the fermentation process. About a fourth of the wine went through malolactic fermentation, creating a full, rich texture on the palate while still retaining balancing acidity. Drinking fabulously now, this wine also has amazing cellaring potential and can be enjoyed ten or more years from now. **90 WS.**



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