

Build it in Napa — they will come

Wine country offers lots of new twists for tourism boom



THE INSIDE of a room at the Cameros Inn, top, features fine linens and a deep-soak tub, while the "agri-chic" of the exteriors, above, is deceptively low-key.

By Anne Chalfant
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A VISIT TO WINE country should be lush — no pun intended. But at Cameros Inn, Napa's newest and largest resort, "lush" is not the word I would initially use to describe the crackerbox cottages. With their tin roofs, front porch rocking chairs and cattle troughs set about as if Bossy would trot up at any moment, the 96 cottages sit on a barren hill devoid of shading oaks and walnut trees that typically grace wine country.

What is this place, I wonder — "Grapes of Wrath" meets oenophile chic? I step inside my board-and-batten 450-square-foot cottage, circling it like a wary cat, noting a change from down-home comforts to uptown splendors. The bed is an ode to soporific bliss, billowing with white Italian linens and fluffy duvet. Beneath my feet, Brazilian cherry floors glow warmly.

This cottage is certainly not something Steinbeck's 1930s farm-laboring Joad family would have experienced — not that their grape-picking muscles didn't deserve the deep-soak tub in this bathroom much more than today's wine drinkers whose muscular workout is limited to lifting the wine glass.

And for us wine country visitors, there will be no cold chills in

the morning on this green slate bathroom floor. The floor is heated, with a thermostat on the wall for perfect tootsie temp. More toastiness can be cranked out of a stone fireplace in a wintry chill. Today, the sun floods in faux-paned windows, warming with a farmhouse-friendly air.

I'm wowed. But I hesitate again out on my patio, now dubious about the corrugated steel fence around it. Between that and its tinny match of a roof, I have to wonder — what hath Grape Town wrought?



I retreat into the cottage to finger the bed's fluffy pillows, flip on the plasma TV and down a glass of pinot noir. I begin to feel more at home, if not downright tickled. It occurs to me that besides offering more privacy and quiet than anywhere in Napa Valley, this place also delivers the message that no matter how wine gets played for snob appeal, in this setting you won't forget that it's about the agriculture, baby.

I step back on my deck to watch the light go soft and dusky over the farm fields with the Mayacamas mountains in the background. Now it's all beginning to work for me. The next morning, I am relishing my front porch, where I can sit in

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Wine

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my bathrobe on a rocking chair and admire the sun rising through a gown of low clouds.

Breakfast is just down the hill, at the Boon Fly Cafe. The same "agri-chic" theme persists, with zinc-topped tables and, reminiscent of a silo, a central corrugated steel oven— from which emerges my flatbread topped with melted cheese, eggs and Hobbs Smoked Applewood bacon— locally produced in Santa Rosa.

Carneros Inn's spa offers tempting treatments, including a warm goat butter massage. But I skip the spa in favor of a walk around the resort's "subdivisions," groups of cottages with little apple orchards located on 27 acres. Giving credence to the subdivision concept, a little girl spins by on a bike with training wheels, her parents close behind. I hadn't thought about people bringing kids to wine country, but Napa Valley is so internationally famous, people do come from afar and stay for a week— and apparently some bring the kids.

Off to the vineyards

But my day is scheduled for adult activities: visiting two Sonoma Valley wineries— one high-end, and one selling wines I regularly set on my table.

Hanzell Winery is the first stop. Hanzell produces fine chardonnay and pinot noir wines, and is located overlooking the Sonoma Valley, up a winding road that passes vintage oaks and rolling vineyards.

Besides having a lovely setting, this winery is historic. Its pinot grapes were planted in 1953 by Ambassador James Zellerbach, who served under Eisenhower as ambassador to Italy. Zellerbach planted the first pinot vineyard in California in 1953.

My visit includes a tour of the graciously sloped vineyards, followed by the wine cave stacked with French oak barrels. Our guide is Ben Sessions, friendly, farm-raised son of Hanzell's first winemaker, Bob Sessions. Easy-going Ben offers footnotes, such as the fact that growing up on this farm, he knew good weather only in terms of "weather that's good for the grapes."

Tasting wine with Ben is not a snooty affair— though plenty of wine writers do wax with elite effusiveness over Hanzell's superb chardonnay (\$65 a bottle) and pinot noir (\$87 a bottle), which are bottled wholly by Hanzell vineyards.

Next stop for me is Ravenswood, another Sonoma Valley winery located north of the town of Sonoma.

I'm scheduled for a wine-blending session with Peter Griffith. He sets up Joel Puglisi, of Seattle, and me to blend wine, and we look like a couple of mad scientists, using calibrated pipettes to drop measured portions of wine into our glasses.



ANNE CHALFANT/TIMES

JOEL PUGLISI of Seattle experiments with wine blending at Ravenswood Winery in Sonoma.

IF YOU GO

Wineries

■ Hanzell Vineyards, 18596 Lomita Ave., Sonoma, CA 95476. 707-996-3860, www.hanzell.com. Chardonnays, \$65; pinot noir, \$87. The Heritage Winery tour and tasting I took costs \$25 until Nov. 1, when the price changes to \$45. Other tours, including one with vintage wine tasting, are also offered. See www.hanzell.com and go to "Guests" for the list of tours.

■ Ravenswood Winery, 18701 Gehrncke Road, Sonoma, CA 95476. 707-933-2332; www.ravenswood-wine.com. Tasting room open 10:30 a.m.-4 p.m. daily; no reservations required. A daily 10:30 a.m. tour does require reservations. The wine-blending session I took costs \$35 per person, and requires reservations.

Lodging

■ Carneros Inn, 4048 Sonoma Highway, Napa. 707-299-4900; www.thecarnerosinn.com. The inn,

built in 2003, is part of Plumjack Resorts, one of whose owners is San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom. Carneros Inn is currently expanding, so you're greeted by a fleet of construction vehicles and churning earth as you arrive. Summer rates are \$355; fall and winter, \$455 for a garden cottage. The inn has an infinity pool, the Hilltop Dining Room and the Boon Fly Cafe, plus a spa.

■ MacArthur Place, 29 E. MacArthur St., Sonoma, CA 95476. 800-722-1866; www.macarthur-place.com. Summer rates start at \$275; fall and winter start at \$325. Rooms at MacArthur Place are pleasant and set in small buildings clustered around central gardens, which are a walkable sanctuary. Also has a small pool and the Garden Spa. A plus is this inn's location a mile or so from Sonoma's town square, which is surrounded by shops and restaurants.

Our goal: to temper the robust fruitiness of the zinfandel with the tannins, structure and color of petite sirah and also tone down the sugar with the acid of the carignon, an old-world wine.

It's fun playing winemaker and experimenting with proportions. There's plenty of laughter and no snooty wine-speak, such as how the bloom of this wine reminds one of the scent of rain-refreshed lilacs.

Once you strike the magic formula, Griffith helps you cork the bottle using a mechanical bottle corker. It's then dipped into melted wax to seal, and voila— your own custom wine to impress your friends.

Bottle of wine tucked under my arm, it's time to head back to Carneros Inn to pick up my lug-

gage and drive home.

Commuter-time traffic is heavy, and as I turn into the inn's gate, I note that when I try to leave, I face the left turn from hell— a fact confirmed by the bellboys. "Fifteen minutes," they say, and suggest a right turn route that will take me back to Highway 29.

It works, and soon I am back in the snarl on Highway 29, one of the most un-bucolic roads anywhere.

And I think fondly of the quiet fields around my tin-roofed faux-migrant farm laborer hide-away.

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