



The Sacramento Bee

Napa's new twist on tin-roof Sunday



CARNEROS INN

Tin roofs and a corrugated metal fountain belie the creature comforts inside bungalow at PlumpJack's Carneros Inn.

'Labor camp' chic a hit in wine country cabins

By ANNE CHALFANT
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

A visit to wine country should be lush — no pun intended.

But at the Carneros 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

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CARNEROS INN

San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom is part-owner of PlumpJack's Carneros Inn, four miles from Napa.

NAPA: Faux-farm laborer tin roof hideaway

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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 tile 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 tiny match of a roof, I have to wonder — what hath Grape Town wrought?

Odd-looking lodging works

I retreat into the cottage to flinger 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 my bathrobe on a rocking chair and admire the sun rising through a gown of low clouds.

Breakfast is 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.



ERIC HESBERG/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Grape pickers tote bins of pinot noir grapes at Domaine Carneros as the harvest heats up in Napa and Sonoma counties.

IF YOU GO TO NAPA/SONOMA COUNTIES ...

Information

■ **Napa:** For info on lodging, dining, wine tasting, try one of these Web sites: www.napa valley.com, www.napa valley.org and www.napa valleyonline.com ... or phone the Napa Valley Conference & Visitors Bureau, 707-226-7459.

■ **Sonoma:** Lodging, dining, wine tasting — www.sonoma.com, www.sonoma valley.com or www.bestinsonoma.com ... or phone the Sonoma Visitors Bureau, 866-995-1090.

Wineries

■ **Hanzei Winery**, 18596 Lomita Ave., Sonoma; 707-996-3860; www.hanzei.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.hanzei.com and go to "Guests" for the list of tours.

■ **Ravenswood Winery**, 18701 Gehnick Road, Sonoma; 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.thecamosinn.com. The inn, built in 2003, is part of PlumpJack 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; 800-722-1866; www.macarthurplace.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. Also has a small pool and the Garden Spa. A plus is this inn's location a mile from Sonoma's town square, which is surrounded by shops and restaurants.

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 on 27 acres.

Giving credence to the subdivision concept, a little girl spins by on a bike with training wheels. I hadn't thought about 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.

The task: Wine tasting

My day is scheduled for adult activities: visiting two Sonoma County 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. It overlooks the Sonoma Valley, up a winding road that passes vin-

tage oaks and rolling vineyards.

This winery is historic. Its pinot grapes — the first in California — were planted in 1953 by James Zellerbach, who served under Eisenhower as ambassador to Italy.

My tour of the graciously sloped vineyards, followed by the wine cave stacked with French oak barrels. Our guide is Ben Sessions, farm-raised son of Hanzell's first winemaker.

Tasting wine with Ben is not a snooty affair — though plenty of wine writers wax effusively over Hanzell's superb chardonnay (\$65 a bottle) and pinot noir (\$87 a bottle).

Next stop is Ravenswood north of the town of Sonoma. I'm scheduled for a wine-blending session with Peter Griffith. He pairs me with Joel Puglisi of Seattle. Our goal: to temper the robust fruiti-

ness of the zinfandel with the tannins, structure and color of petite sirah and tone down the sugar with the acid of the carignan, 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.

Soon I am back in the snarl on Highway 29, one of the most unbucolic roads anywhere.

And I dwell fondly on memories of the quiet fields around my tin-roofed faux-migrant farm laborer hideaway.