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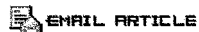
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The Livermore Valley, The New Napa?

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by Bob Souza



Anguishing in line and suffering a delay that seems utterly unreasonable, then elbowing your way to the bar in order to pay an outrageous fee for a smallish taste, followed by another endless lag for a refill – all too common the scenario at Napa Valley wine tasting rooms. What happened to the old days of unconditional free pouring, enhanced with enlightening and engaging wine discussion?

Mostly gone now from that most famous of California wine producing regions, having been replaced by the hordes of eager new wine explorers, and the continuous bloated traffic jams they beget. Enter the new kid on the block: The Livermore Valley with its growing number of quality wine grape growers.

While many of the wineries here are not “new”, there is a fresh burgeoning awareness of this obscured venue, and the delight that accompanies the superb experience and joy of wine tasting. There are over 25 wineries in the area. Certainly worth a peek if you are in the neighborhood.

About an hour southeast of San Francisco, the city of Livermore has a decidedly rural feel, although that has changed some over the past several years as the Bay Area population has begun shifting to the outskirts. There are presently about 70 thousand residents, with most of the wineries just minutes away – a definite advantage if you happen to live there. And you enjoy wine.

The majority of the plants carry a name which is no doubt unrecognizable, but that hardly detracts from the value of the juice, or diminishes the level of service. In fact, it may even help. They know they have to compete with the big boys further north.

Here are some highlights of what you can see in the area, and put to the taste test:

Concannon - Award-winning wines for over 120 years, since 1883. Their specialty is Petite Sirah, and are also well-known for Sauvignon Blanc. Their wines are very reasonably priced, with a large assortment.

Murrieta's Well - A small estate, it has been around since the Gold Rush days. Apparently named after the water well where bandit Joaquin Murrieta parked his horse for a drink. Known for the production of a beautiful Meritage, among others.

Retzlaff Vineyards - Their wines are produced without the use of any fertilizers, insecticides, or herbicides.

Stoney Ridge - Great place to enjoy some lunch and sample their award-winning wines. They specialize in pairing their menu items with one of their wines (naturally).

Wente Vineyards - The best known of the area wineries, it covers some 3,000 acres of vineyards, and includes an 18-hole golf course designed by Greg Norman, and an upscale restaurant. They also bring in top name entertainment for their Summer Concert Series.

For a complete list with more detail, try www.livermorewine.com.

If you get hit with the urge to do the wine-tasting tourist thing, the Livermore Valley should be on your list. Best to see it soon, while Napa Valley overflows, and before the rooms fill up. You'll be quite surprised, and happy you did!

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