

Tastings | *Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher*

# At Wineries, Small Is Beautiful

Can you give me any recommendations of the best wineries to visit in the Willamette Valley? Finger Lakes? North Fork? Santa Barbara? Anderson Valley? New Mexico? Do you have any recommendations for wineries that we must see in Italy? Can you offer guidance to visitors to Australia with limited time to visit wine regions? What wineries would you visit in Zurich, Salzburg, Berchtesgaden and Malta?

SEVERAL TIMES every week, we receive the same question: I am going to a wine region; what wineries should I visit? Each question above came from real letters and we could quote hundreds more from readers asking about regions as varied as North Carolina and Turkey. We're delighted about this because visiting wineries anywhere in the world is a joy and excites many people into a lifetime love affair with wine. The regions are so beautiful, the people are so nice, the wine and food are so special—it really brings home the whole idea of wine as a lifestyle, not just a liquid.

All that said, the advice we give to everyone, no matter where on earth they're visiting, is the same: Visit the small winery you've never heard of. You will not be disappointed. That is what we have done all over the world and we pretty much always have a great time, chatting with winemakers (even when we don't speak the same language), tasting wine and enjoying the sights and smells. When people ask us about visiting wineries, we think they're simply looking for someone to meet with intimate knowledge of the wines, some interesting wines to taste and a welcoming environment in which to taste them. This is all most likely to happen at that little winery with the unfamiliar name. (For a copy of our column with some tips on how to make the most of any winery visit, drop us a note at [wine@wsj.com](mailto:wine@wsj.com).)

## Doing a Little Homework

Most recently, we visited the Santa Cruz Mountains south of San Francisco as part of a brief family vacation. It's important to do a little bit of homework on your wine region before you go so you can find a concentration of wineries. Wine regions all over the world, which are eager to welcome tourists, generally have information online. In our case, we searched online for Santa Cruz Mountain wineries and found the Web site of the



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Santa Cruz Mountains Winegrowers Association. There was a handy listing of wineries in the region and a map to download from the site at [www.scmwa.com](http://www.scmwa.com). For an easier-to-use and more-detailed version of the map, we went to the "contact us" page of the Web site and entered our mailing information to receive a printed ver-

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sion. This map became our best friend on the trip because it not only had easy-to-follow driving directions but a list of every winery and whether each was open to the public and, if so, when. If you are going overseas, in addition to whatever official information you can find from the region, we'd urge you to buy a wine book that specializes in the wines of that region or country. If we were going to Italy, for instance, we'd be sure to take along "Vino Italiano" by Joseph Bastianich and David Lynch, even though it is hefty.

There are thousands of wineries all over the world that you've never heard of. They're small, family-run and charm-

ing. Those are the ones we target. While some of the Santa Cruz wineries are well-known, most are more obscure, from Heart o' the Mountain to Clos Tita. Our goal was simply to identify some of these that were open to the public and drop in. (Many wineries are open by appointment only, often because they are small and can't handle many visitors. We prefer to be spontaneous, so we rarely visit those, but they can be quite a bit of fun, too, of course.)

## Enthusiasm Has Benefits

Our first stop was Thomas Fogarty Winery & Vineyards, which is larger and fancier than most (in a gorgeous mountain setting) and a name we know well. It happened to be along our route, so we dropped in. There were two tasting menus: a standard tasting for \$6 and a premium tasting for \$12. We chose the former and split one tasting. (We almost always do this since we mostly smell and spit anyway. We do not identify ourselves as wine writers and we were not recognized.) At most wineries, we find that our enthusiasm inevitably leads to an extra pour of something behind the counter. In this case, the extra pour turned out to be the star of the show: a Barbera that was stunning, with surprising structure and tremendous balance. We loved it so much that we bought a bottle and loved it all

over again back at our hotel.

In any wine region, there are wineries all over the place if you look closely for them (or have a good map). The Beaugard Vineyards tasting room is right on the wharf of Santa Cruz. Sea lions were yelping below us and a sad, confused sea gull actually walked into the tasting room and couldn't find his way out. Storrs Winery is located in a little row of shops in the middle of Santa Cruz. The joint tasting room for Fleming Jenkins Vineyards & Winery and Clos LaChance is smack in the middle of Los Gatos. (That's Peggy Fleming, the figure skater. We've written before about her exceptional rosé.)

Our own favorite visits, however, are the ones where we're surrounded by the vineyards and the tanks. At Burrell School Vineyards & Winery, for instance, we tasted a Chardonnay made from vines that were growing, quite literally, outside the window of the tasting room. That's our kind of winery: small, quirky, friendly and passionate about wine. Hallcrest Vineyards was hard to find, but it couldn't have been a more relaxing, more-pleasant stop, with a knowledgeable young woman behind the counter who was happy to talk about wine all day. She suggested we take a mountain road to Bonny Doon. It was quite a little drive, but, as we would have guessed, the tasting room of this well-known winery was busy and no one had time to talk with us, although they were pouring some very interesting wines.

## Always Something New

Although Testarossa Vineyards is not an obscure winery (aficionados prize its Pinot Noir and Chardonnay) it's an interesting stop in Los Gatos because it's the site of a very old winery and the tasting room is inside a giant cave. There's always something new, even at better-known wineries, and that was the case here, where we tried Testarossa's Syrah for the first time. (It turned out to be our favorite wine of the tasting there.) Most big wineries now charge for tasting, and many small ones do, too, but the smaller wineries are more likely to refund the tasting fee with a purchase or just forget about the fee if you're nice. At Testarossa, where the tasting fee was \$10 for five wines (but where the unusually well-trained and friendly pourer also let us taste a 2004 Pinot, which wasn't on the tasting menu, against the 2005 Pinots on the tasting list), we bought a bottle and she waived the tasting fee.

Here's the point: All of the wineries we've mentioned here were chosen randomly, because they happened to be open and along our route. We're sure we would have had an equally good and interesting time at any of the smaller wineries on the map. There is a story behind every winery in every part of the world. Just stop in. What winery would we recommend during your visit? The one we could never recommend because we've never heard of it.

*Melanie Grayce West contributed to this column. You can contact us at [wine@wsj.com](mailto:wine@wsj.com).*

## A Bumper Crop of Wine Events

This is the perfect time to visit wineries because it's harvest time. Here are some of the many harvest events around the country. We have chosen these simply to show that they're happening everywhere, including someplace near you. To find an event close to you, look for the Web sites of associations that represent an entire wine region. Often, those Web sites will have regional calendars that list all the events for the area. For example, the Web site [californiawineevents.com](http://californiawineevents.com) is a good place to start if you want to find an event in California.

—Melanie Grayce West

**Von Stiehl Winery Wet Whistle Wine Fest.** Algoma, Wis. Sept. 22-23. Tickets are \$6 for the weekend; children under 12 free. Sample wine, tour the underground limestone caverns and winery facility. Live music, grape stomp and a "Salute to Sausages" breakfast hosted by a local non-profit group. Special wine-and-food pairing event for \$20 at the winery tasting room. Children welcome, but best for adults. [vonstiehl.com](http://vonstiehl.com); 800-955-5208



Grape stomping at the Wet Whistle Wine Festival

Von Stiehl Winery

**Wiederkehr Village Weinfest at Wiederkehr Wine Cellars.** Wiederkehr Village, Ark. Sept. 29. Tickets are \$25 in advance and \$27.50 at the door. Ticket price includes dinner. Tram rides through the vineyard, cellar tours, German and American bands, stone- and log-toss contests, grape stomp and polka dancing are free during the day. About 4,000 to 5,000 people usually attend. [wiederkehrwines.com](http://wiederkehrwines.com); 800-622-9463

**The Winery at Eagle Knoll Harvest Festival.** Eagle, Idaho, Oct. 14. Free. Music, food, grape stomp and tastes of new releases. Also fun for kids. [thewineryateagleknoll.com](http://thewineryateagleknoll.com); 208-286-9463

**Chrisman Mill Vineyards and Winery Sip to Soar Harvest Festival.** Nicholasville, Ky. Oct. 6. Tickets are \$12 in advance and \$15 at the door; children are \$5 in advance and \$6 at the door. Fee includes a barbecue lunch and wine tasting. Live music, winery tours, birds of prey exhibit, cooking demonstration, arts and crafts, clowns, petting zoo and rescued horses for adoption. [chrismanmill.com](http://chrismanmill.com); 859-881-5007

**Basignani Winery Harvest Saturdays.** Sparks, Md. Saturdays throughout September and October (except tomorrow). Free, but call ahead to RSVP. Help the winery pick grapes from 9 a.m. until about 1 p.m. and then enjoy a complimentary lunch of Italian dishes. Children welcome. [basignani.com](http://basignani.com); 410-472-0703

**Spicewood Vineyards Blessing of the Harvest Luncheon.** Spicewood, Texas, Sept. 23. Tickets are \$25 and include buffet lunch of seasonal foods. Glasses and bottles of wine are priced separately. Give thanks for the harvest by participating in an ecumenical blessing of the wines. Blessing, tour and a \$2 basic wine tasting is open to all visitors, but an RSVP is required for lunch. [spicewoodvineyards.com](http://spicewoodvineyards.com); 830-693-5328



A vineyard at Les Bourgeois Winery

**Les Bourgeois Vineyards Crush Festival.** Rocheport, Mo. Sept. 22. Free for all the events and for wine sampling, but a special \$8 "B.E.S.T. tasting package" allows you to taste from barrels and sample more wines. Live music, amateur wine-making contest, grape stomp, cork crafts and food to purchase. Kids can learn to fish and tie knots at the fishing derby and there will be several winery tours during the day. For \$5, get a bird's-eye view of the vineyard in a hot-air balloon. [missouriwine.com](http://missouriwine.com); 800-690-1830

**Rebec Vineyards Virginia Wine and Garlic Festival.** Amherst, Va. Oct. 13-14. Advance-purchase tickets are \$18, which includes tasting and wine glass (\$23 for both days); \$14 general admission (\$19 for both days); \$4 for children (\$9 for both days). Wine tastings from six vineyards, five stages of live entertainment and music, garlic king and queen contest, garlic cook-off, petting zoo, clown, magicians and arts and crafts. About 20,000 to 25,000 people usually attend. Fun for kids. [rebecwinery.com](http://rebecwinery.com); 434-946-5168

**Maryhill Winery Harvest Celebration.** Goldendale, Wash. Oct. 13-14. Free. Watch the grape harvest and the winemaking team. Free wine tasting, live music and grape stomp. Bring a picnic or buy a barbecue or dell lunch on site. [maryhillwinery.com](http://maryhillwinery.com); 877-627-9445