

Grape Escape—California's Majestic Sonoma County

Written by Story by Melissa Larsen

Wednesday, 21 July 2010 11:50 - Last Updated Wednesday, 21 July 2010 12:26

The best way to spend three days: Swirling, sipping and savoring the beauty of California's majestic Sonoma County and its A-plus wine.



Who doesn't fantasize about packing up, moving to Sonoma County and spending their days sauntering through vineyards and sipping chardonnay? The Sonoma County Grape Camp allows everyone the chance to live out that dream each year during its three-day wine and food experience. This only-happens-in-the-movies adventure includes picking grapes off the vine, lunching with winemakers, pizza bake-offs and a behind-the-scenes look at the winemaking process in the picture-ready Sonoma County. The region, in fact, is home to more than 250 wineries. This year, Grape Camp will take place Sept. 27-29, and the schedule includes a visit to Michel-Schlumberger Estate, wine blending at DeLoach Vineyards and grape harvesting with Ulises Valdez, among other once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. While the Grape Camp lineup changes each year, AFM had the opportunity to take part in last fall's action-packed event. Take a look.

Day 1

The first day of Grape Camp doesn't start until the early evening, allowing campers time to travel and settle into Vintners Inn, the delightful hotel in Santa Rosa that participants get to call home for three days. The intimate 44-room inn truly lives up to its name as it's in the middle of 92 acres of vineyards. Campers were welcomed that evening with a lovely reception—topped off with flowing bubbly—in the Vintners Inn courtyard to meet and mingle with other lucky Grape Camp goers. (There was even the chance to remember all of their names, as the camp is capped at 25 people.)

Later that night, a bus shuttled the campers to Arista Winery for a luxe dinner, overlooking the breathtaking Russian River Valley, with a special appearance by Chef Charlie Palmer. (A bus shuttled campers to and from every Grape Camp destination, allowing participants to sip and savor without worry.) During the Arista repast, participants had the opportunity to taste nearly 40 different reds, whites and dessert wines from all over the Russian River Valley. Campers got to know each other while passing bottles along the lengthy table, everyone sharing their favorite sip—so far.



The next morning, the campers were up with the sun for an a.m. of grape-picking in Carneros with Steve Sangiacomo of Sangiacomo Vineyards. That's right: Campers actually got to pick—and nibble on—pinot noir grapes fresh from the vine. Equipped with heavy-duty gloves and clippers, campers filled their tubs to the brim with grapes. Next up, it was time for sampling out-of-this-world sparkling wine selections from Gloria Ferrer Winery before getting an in-depth tour and lunch at St. Francis Winery.

Lunch was followed by a pizza-making and wine-pairing competition at Relish Culinary Adventures. Dozens upon dozens of fresh produce items, meats, yummy cheeses and a selection of sauces were at the campers' disposal. After a short break at Vintners Inn, it was off to an under-the-stars supper prepared by chefs Josh Silvers of Santa Rosa's Syrah restaurant and Jeff Mall of Healdsburg's Zin restaurant. The setting was as jaw-dropping as the cuisine: Guests dined at Tom Klein's, owner of Rodney Strong Wine Estates, personal residence, his backyard opening up to a vineyard.

Day 3

The final day at Grape Camp called for another morning of grape-picking. This time, the troops harvested malbec grapes. Next on the agenda, campers got to sort and crush grapes at Mauritsen Winery in Dry Creek Valley, as well as sample the mouth-watering grape juice—it tasted similar to that of an apple—before it officially transforms into chardonnay. A tour and a homemade lunch prepared by the magnificent Marimar Torres of Marimar Estate in Green Valley followed. The day ended with a wine-blending session at Stonestreet Winery followed by the greatly anticipated Sonoma County Grape Camp graduation. Not only did campers get to brag to their buds about dining with Charlie Palmer and harvesting their own grapes, but they got a certificate, to boot.



Words of Advice

If you're thinking about spending three days in pinot paradise, here are a few tips to keep in mind.

- * Don't forget sunscreen and bug repellent. Between grape-picking and alfresco meals, you'll be outdoors quite a bit.
- * Comfy shoes are a must. There is the potential for a lot of hilly walking at a few of the winery visits.
- * Snacks are included in the Grape Camp welcome pack. Be sure to keep them on you, as the time between breakfast and lunch can feel a bit long.
- * Bring along an extra suitcase; it's nearly impossible not to visit Sonoma without purchasing some grape "juice."

To Learn More:

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Sonoma County Grape Camp tickets are \$1,750 per person per couple (single supplement is \$150). Ticket prices include hotel stay for two nights at the Vintners Inn, meals, tastings and transportation during camp. www.sonomagrapecamp.com.