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WINE TRAIL TRAVELER NEWSLETTER

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California Wine Caves

by Terry Sullivan

What do you picture in your mind when you think of caves? Spelunking or perhaps crawling on all fours to fit through a small space? Perhaps the experience of absolute and complete darkness, the degree of darkness so dark you can't see your hand in front of you? Maybe you imagine more sinister things such as spiders, cobwebs or other imaginable things in the dark. Caves evoke different ideas and feelings to many people. One idea is that of an ideal environment to age fine wine in oak barrels or age a sparkling wine in a bottle.



Caves at Del Dotto Vineyards,
Napa, California

Caves have been used for thousands of years for aging wines in different parts of the world. In our recent trip to Sonoma and Napa Valleys in California, we experienced different caves. Chinese workers built some caves in the late 1800's after their work was completed on the railroads. These

workers built miles of caves with the use of picks, axes and shovels. In contrast we also experienced caves built with modern technology such as a Welsh mining machine. The walls were then covered with shotcrete, a mixture of sandy cement and pea gravel.

Some of the caves were very clean and lit by electric fixtures whether they were overhead bulbs or elegant electric wall sconces. Other caves were darker and lit by candles or lanterns giving a romantic glow to the oak barrels lining the

Visit these Wineries

Maryland

Fiore

Virginia

Pearmund Cellars

The Winery at La Grange

To find information about these wineries visit the [website](#).

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sidewalls. Other caves showed lichen growth hanging several feet from the ceiling. One wonders why they were never cleaned with a broom or vacuum. We observed thousands of bottles, showing dust resting quietly for years.

Early winemakers who came to the Napa and Sonoma regions from Europe were familiar with the use of caves. We trekked through two cave systems dating from the 1800's.

One advantage of caves is temperature control. The cave temperature is often constant yearlong and varies very little. It doesn't matter if the outside temperature is 110 degrees F or 10 degrees F, a cave system can maintain an even temperature often between 57 and 64 degrees F. This cool even temperature provides an ideal aging environment for wine. This constant temperature also provides economic benefits for a winery. Fewer resources are spent on heating or cooling a cave than a building. Often the land above a cave can be planted with grapevines.

A second advantage of caves is darkness. Light can harm wines and caves are dark. This darkness is a particular advantage to sparkling wines undergoing aging in glass bottles.

Humidity control is a third advantage of a cave system. Oak barrels breathe. Some of the wine evaporates. If the humidity is high, less wine will evaporate. In some cases caves have reduced the amount of evaporation from 6% to 1%. This also is an economic bonus for a winery since less wine is

needed to top off the barrels.



Caves at Schramsberg,
Calistoga, California



Caves at Pine Ridge,
Napa, California

Although the lichen hanging from the ceiling looked eerie at one winery we visited, it actually helps to filter the air in the cave.

Some wine caves have an area that can be used for special events. The atmosphere can provide a rewarding experience. All of these advantageous led to an interest in constructing new caves during the 1980's. Expect to see more wine caves constructed in the future.

St. Patrick's Day

Are you looking for a special way to celebrate St. Patrick's Day this year? Here are three suggestions you might like to try.

Visit a Winery!

St. Patrick's Day is on Saturday this year, so you will have plenty of time to visit your favorite winery or explore a new winery. Some wineries have special St. Patrick's Day events.

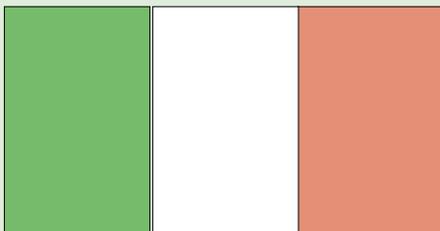
St. Patrick's Day Dinner

Corned beef is a traditional part of celebrating St. Patrick's Day. What wine would you want to offer? Perhaps a red wine - Merlot or Cabernet Sauvignon.

Suggested Menu

Coleslaw
Corned beef
Colcannon
Lime gelatin mold
Irish soda bread
Key Lime pie

Decorate with a St. Patrick's Day theme, green colors, shamrocks, leprechauns and green carnations.



St. Patrick's Day Wine Tasting Party

First decide on what wines you want to taste. For St. Patrick's Day, white wines may be preferred. Decide if you want to taste varietals of white wines, or the same varietal from different areas of the world. Limit the selection to six different wines.

Along with the wines, you will want to serve: green grapes, a variety of white cheeses and an assortment of crackers. These additional foods will bring out more of the wine nuances.

To make this even more fun, you can put the individual bottles in bags, so that your guests don't know which wine they are drinking.

Provide a questionnaire to each participant, asking your guests to decide what wine they are tasting or if using the same varietal what area of the world the wine came from. Give a gift to the one with most correct responses, perhaps a bottle of wine.

During a wine tasting, music should be subdued, not loud. This permits the sense of taste and smell to concentrate on the wine.

Lights should be bright so the color of the wine can be observed.

Most important is to enjoy the friendship, food and wine.

Happy St. Patrick's Day!

What's New on the Website

We visited thirteen wineries in California during the last week of February. Our Wine Trails section of the website divides these wineries into four trails that follow certain California highways. We visited two wineries in Carneros, three wineries in the Alexander Valley region of Sonoma Valley, four wineries in the Napa Valley Route 29 region and four wineries off the Silverado Trail in Napa Valley.

To read the articles written on the wineries we visited, see the [Wine Trails](#) section of the website.

We visited Copia in Napa and added an article about the center to the Wine and Culinary Centers section of the website. Visit the [Centers](#) section of the website to read about Copia.

Reader's Write:

We love to hear from our readers. If you have a question that will be of interest to our readers submit your question to kathy@winetrailtraveler.com.

Dear Wine Trail Traveler,

I think that Champagne and sparkling wine are the same thing. But the caterer for my wedding says, I should serve Champagne. What do you say?

Go with a different caterer! Great sparkling wine is produced all over the world. Champagne is sparkling wine produced in Champagne, France. According to international policy, sparkling wines made outside of Champagne, France cannot be labeled Champagne.

Wine Fun

See if you can answer these questions. For the answers check the Wine Trail Traveler wine forum.

1. How many states in the United States have at least one winery?
2. What event caused the French to begin to take California wine seriously?
3. In the United States what historical event caused the decline of wine production and set the wine industry back many years?

California Wine Journey

Our trip to California was a great experience and we hope that if you haven't been there before, you will think about making a trip to Napa and Sonoma Valleys.

February is a great time to see the architecture of the grapevines. You can easily observe the different trellising techniques and pruning. The wineries are not crowded and normally the wineries are very inviting, you may even experience the warmth of a fireplace. The wine servers have time to talk about wine as you are tasting the samples.

The week we were in California the weather was ambivalent. One minute it would be raining and the next a bright, blue sky with sparkling sunshine. We wore lightweight coats as a heavy winter coat was not needed.

California is a great place to visit, but plan well in advance, as there are hundreds of wineries and not possible to visit them all.