

SFGate.com

New Livermore vineyard offers homey comforts

Susan Fornoff, Chronicle Travel Editor

Sunday, February 1, 2009



Deer Ridge Vineyards, the 7-month-old new kid on the block of Livermore Valley tasting rooms, bills itself as a "winery, estate & gathering place," and it might as well add "the Lyles' living room."

After all, the two buttery stucco buildings are next door to a residential neighborhood off Arroyo Road, and the hospitality at Deer Ridge suits the homey setting. It's not a dank, cellar-type environment, even on a rainy day - more like an airy Tuscan villa, walls full of colorful paintings by Dominique Caron.

And hands-on owners Carl and Cherie Lyle mix Scottish hospitality and Tuscan style with a surprisingly diverse wine list that includes 85 bottlings, any 26 of which may be poured on a given day. Each seems to come with a story.

It's the antithesis of the polished, machine-style tasting room experience one might find at the big wineries to the north. Which is pretty much the way the Lyles want it. When told that a visitor felt like she was hanging out in his living room, Carl Lyle said, "That's what we hope for."

The vibe: From the outside, golden Deer Ridge looks rather pretentious for a Livermore Valley tasting room - it's obviously new, and the landscaping is still a work in progress. But the cheery inside welcomes visitors to a small curve of a bar where they're encouraged to wander around and see the generous party space and patios as they taste. Peak hours, say the Lyles, are late on Saturday and Sunday afternoons.

The team: Generally, Carl makes the wine and Cherie runs the tasting room - but happen in on a Friday and Carl might be pouring. His pours come with plenty of history about the winery, the wines and the grapes.

The wines: The reserve list of six wines carried a \$5 price tag, waived for wine club members. Among them are the 2003 Fire and Ice Chardonnay from Sonoma, made of grapes salvaged from a burning vineyard, and the classic 2003 Zinfandel from Cherie's Block of vines in the Alexander Valley. A dry Syrah Rose, a Merlot, a Tempranillo and the Bordeaux blend the Lyles call Moonstruck complete the list.

The list of free tastings included seven wines. For either tasting, visitors are asked to select four wines, but this seemed to be loosely observed.

The experience: I was alone in the tasting room on the Friday I visited and so my tasting was customized for my palate. Carl pulled out three Chardonnays for me to sample, and they ranged from a 2007 estate Chardonnay in the grassy style of a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc to a more buttery 2004 Livermore Valley Chardonnay to the smoky, "love-it-or-hate-it" (said the winemaker) Fire and Ice. After that, we were all over the map, unhurriedly, and finished with a comparison of two of his Zinfandels. It was a warm start to a lovely day in the valley - and Carl offered suggestions on where to go later. The only wine club promotion: a brochure handed to me on my way out.

The extras: There's always an art exhibition, and a few gift items for sale in the tasting room. Outside are tables and chairs for picnicking and enjoying a bottle of wine. And a two-bedroom, two-bathroom guest house goes for \$275 a night.

Nearby: Livermore Valley Cellars, 2838 Cellars Drive, Livermore, (925) 454-9463; Thomas Coyne, 51 E. Vallecitos Rd., Livermore, (925) 373-6541; Fenestra, 83 Vallecitos Rd., Livermore, (925) 447-5246.

Deer ridge vineyards

Where: 1825 Wetmore Road, Livermore.

Contact: (925) 292-2222, www.DeerRidgeVineyards.com

Open: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Fri.-Sun. and most holiday Mondays

Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS

- - -

Four Stars: Extraordinary, Three Stars: Excellent, Two Stars: Good, One Star: Fair, Box: Poor

Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous. All expenses are paid for by The Chronicle. Star ratings are based on a single visit.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/02/01/TR1115DP2L.DTL>

This article appeared on page **G - 5** of the San Francisco Chronicle