



Wining and Dining With Friends

Napa Valley's Aviator-Vintners Pop the Cork on a Weekend of Play

"Welcome to our tunnels," says pilot Dan Zepponi. In the gloom a shape appears: 1,200 linear feet of rock hand-chiseled by the same Chinese laborers who built California's railroad, rock that maintains a 58-60 degree environment of 75-80% humidity: ideal. Here the wine has been aged, explains Zepponi – ever since 1877 when well before Prohibition draft horses would brought gondolas of grapes to be crushed, and the nectar of the gods would be bottled.

Fascinating.

It is a little unexpected to find aviator Zepponi showing-off not a swanky hangar or his hot, fast Mooney M20J, but rather the gravity-flow system, the 17-room Rhine House Victorian mansion, and the leafy, expansive gardens of the Beringer Winery in Napa Valley, California. Then again, as Senior Vice President, Winemaking and Operations for the place, maybe not. In fact, aviators seem awfully fond of wine – and wine every bit as enamored of aviators – when considered in the light of the fun to

be had when *Flying Adventures* wings to the wine country to discover their aviators in the most magical of places, sharing with new friends – us – their love of bottled bliss over meals to make even the most food-indifferent pilot howl wow!

Pilot Bo Barrett, Partner and Winemaker of Calistoga's Château Montelena Winery, aviator Tom Shelton, President of St. Helena's Joseph Phelps Vineyards, jet-flying Koerner Rombauer, Founder of Rombauer Vineyards in St. Helena, and Norm Alumbaugh – pilot, aircraft designer and builder and winemaker/owner of the Eagle & Rose Estate in Pope Valley – recently joined Zepponi in opening their wineries to *Flying Adventures* and a few friends for a weekend whirl of private wining, dining and delighting. Hosts with the mostest in terms of lavishing upon their guests – aviators, all, who flew-in for the fun – great heaps of reasons to fall head over heels for the wine country lifestyle, these pilot-vintners kept the wine flowing, the entertain-

The veranda and vineyards of Joseph Phelps (left); wine barrels aging deep within Beringer's cave (above)



ment going, and the fascination growing.

Flying home with a hold full of finds for the cellar didn't hurt the weekend's wonders either.

Imagine: a brilliant blue-sky, sun-shining day in the valley where the pursuit of pleasure is measured in how much delight you can stand. Arriving Friday morning at Napa Airport (APC), *Flying Adventures* and friends, a contingent of three airplanes (a Citation Jet, a Baron and a Turbo-210) carrying four couples, checked into Yountville's oh-so-romantic slice of Tuscany, the Italian-style Villagio Inn & Spa. Known for its dazzling champagne breakfast buffet and warm riverstone massage, this was the ideal pied-à-terre for exploring the wine country glories the aviator-hosts had in store. Soon enough they arrived: With a wonderful welcome to the winery that has been in business since before Prohibition, Zeponi was sharing the joys uncorked by Beringer at a gourmand's idyll of a lunch at its charming Hudson House. "I felt like a queen!" says pilot-guest Lori Garland Parker of the feast which featured such treats as white sea bass, served with Beringer's 2004 Private Reserve Chardonnay, and tenderloin of beef, accompanied by a 2002 Private Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon. "What a spectacular combination of fine reserve wine expertly paired with delicious food. Dan (Zeponi) was so friendly and knowledgeable!" A decadent dessert of sweet peach cake and a glass of deliriously tasty Semillon did nothing to dissuade Parker and the other flying adventurers from accepting the next invitation: pilot Bo Barrett's private reception and tasting at his 1896 Château Montelena.

This is the winery that rocked the world in 1976 when at the famed Paris Tasting its 1973 Château Montelena Chardonnay swept first place in the white wine competition. Owner/Winemaker Barrett, who flies what he laughingly calls a "turbine suburban" (a Cessna P-210 with a Rolls Royce turbine engine), rolled out the red carpet to his lush and sprawling Calistoga

Top: Scenes of Chateau Montelena; bottom: barrel-styled entrance to Rombauer's cave

Shangri-la; here wildlife thrives, lovely Jade Lake is profoundly picturesque, and the wines? Well, the Paris Tasting trend of winning vintages continues in its delicate 2005 Pope Valley Riesling and its utterly luscious 2003 Montelena Estate Zinfandel. After a wonderful time in the company of Barrett and his wonderful wines, guests retired to the Villagio only long enough to rest and dress for dinner at Napa's Bistro Don Giovanni. Here, risotto with scallops enjoyed by the fire, or tagliatelle bolognese (with Sonoma duck ragout) savored on the romantic outdoor terrace revealed to *Flying Adventures* and friends just how seductive a wine country weekend can be.

Honestly, said guest Carli Vandervort, who with pilot-husband John flew-in for the fun. "We had such royal treatment! We felt very, very special."

Saturday dawned blazing and blue in classic Napa fashion. After being pampered by a champagne breakfast buffet, the fly-in wine lovers to their joy were again in the hands of an aviator-vintner eager to share his treasures. Host Tom Shelton, President of Joseph Phelps Vineyards is a Cirrus SR-22-flying friend who warmly welcomed the group to the storybook estate set on a knoll in bucolic Spring Valley. While the Mayacamas Mountains to the west afforded a vision of Eden, corks were popped. Cabs full of plum, pinots of cherry, and a stellar 2002 Insignia estate blend (*Wine Spectator's* #1 wine of the year in 2005): these and other Phelps fantastics awed and thrilled the guests while Shelton's remarkable featured entertainment – wine expert Claude Leruitte – intrigued with his enthralling taste tests and lessons. In identifying the characteristics of a wine, what is the difference between its aroma and its bouquet? Only Leruitte can explain, which he did, to the group's delight. It was great, says Parker, to learn the basics of wine in such a non-threatening environment. "A good wine is one that you like. *That* lesson impressed me," she adds. The afternoon grew long and lazy on Phelps's beautiful terrace under the Wisteria-covered trellis. Still, the day was young! And the pleasures of this private tour would continue on and on and...over at Rombauer Vineyards, where winemaker-pilot Koerner Rombauer



Dear Pilot Michael:

We've often waxed enthusiastic about sailing and then been asked what type of boat we sail which requires the embarrassing answer.....don't have a boat but we're GREAT passengers!!! We often do the same about wine... extolling the pleasing virtues of a recently consumed bottle but later have to admit we know NOTHING about wine but we're GREAT wine drinkers! Well those days are over!!

There is still lots to learn about wine....but now, having been with you on your *Flying Adventures* trip to the Napa Valley, we all came away with more than we ever expected and certainly enough to keep us out of trouble with the local sommelier. Would you have known that it is recommended when drinking a "young" wine to eat cheese beforehand to "age" the taste? Well neither did we. But since you arranged for us to be received by pilot winemakers, sommeliers and CEO's at several of the best wineries in Napa, including Phelps, Beringer, Rombauer and others, and since they escorted us on private tours of their vineyards, wine caves and to private tasting rooms where we were fed exquisite gourmet selections to accompany their wines and tantalize our taste buds...well, we know now. We were taught many amazing things in a friendly, non-intimidating atmosphere that addressed the needs of the most inexperienced to the most experienced wine consumer. The food, the wine, the conviviality, the accommodations....everything about the trip was unforgettable and this participant highly recommends it to all wine aficionados. No matter what level of your experience you will gain great information. We look forward to the next *Flying Adventures* trip!

Many thanks,

Suzanne and David Burke
Agoura, CA

Pleasures of the Palate



Dan Zepponi



Koerner Rombauer

– whose Citation Jet CJ2 is painted red, white and blue – would graciously open his cave, his private tasting room and, most memorably, a chardonnay that knocked off all socks present. “I’ve always liked chardonnay, but it was here I also really learned to appreciate reds,” says Parker. With daylight left, it seemed a shame to take leave of Rombauer and his wonderful welcome. But aviator Norm Alumbaugh, whose Eagle & Rose estate in Pope Valley

has a landing strip right down its middle, was expecting *Flying Adventures* and friends. Friends don’t keep friends waiting.

Having taught himself to read at age five so he could build model airplanes from the kit instructions, Alumbaugh got into wine in 1995 and today not only flies a Mooney M20F Executive, but also bottles Skyhawk label pleasures that reflect precisely the guiding motto that were his grandmother’s words: *Anything worth doing is worth doing*

well. The Eagle & Rose estate is on grounds that once were the world’s largest parachute-training facility. Tastes of Alumbaugh’s cabs and merlots and marvelous viognier proved to his guests that this jet-builder’s foray into wine has absorbed well its *terroir* of exciting adventure.

As if there were more. But yes! Far be it for this weekend whirl to slow now, not before an evening at La Toque. Said to be the quintessential wine country restaurant, celebrity chef Ken Frank’s Rutherford table awaited. Expected: a palate-dazzling show of culinary artistry. Delivered: long, laughing hours in the company of one another over a memorable meal where wine country magic worked its wonder on the minds and hearts and palates of the flying adventurers – by now fast friends – who had only further delights to discover. Indeed, after another overnight at Villagio, and “the best ever breakfast buffet,” says Parker, *Flying Adventures* and friends turned Sunday (a no-tasting day for those scheduled to fly) into a fine, relaxed time in one of the world’s most wonderful valleys. Napa’s resident aviators, at least those who call themselves vintners as well and hosted the weekend whirl of great wine, great food – great times – would send them off from APC with cases of their tastiest wares and wishes that the next time they or their friends fly in it will be for a longer stay.

With this sort of gracious hospitality plus the privilege and fun promised by each winery’s invitation to a private visit, why (*Flying Adventures* and friends want to know) wouldn’t we all wish instead to stay forever? Well, maybe at least until it is time to re-stock the cellar at home. ✕

Join Us!

Want to rove around the wine country – any wine country, from Napa to New Mexico, Paso Robles to Temecula, Oregon, Washington, Italy, Chile, France...whatever your dream? Want to meet wine country aviators – many of whom are winemakers – who love nothing so much as opening their estates, tasting rooms and caves for private luncheons, tastings, dinners, receptions, and educational presentations exclusively designed for us, and you, our honored guest? Want to live the wonderful wine country lifestyle for a few event-packed days among new aviator friends you absolutely will make?

Great!

Join *Flying Adventures* magazine on one of its ongoing wine country excursions. It doesn’t matter who you are, wine-lover, wanna-be wine lover, learner-about-wine, wine snob, wine pro or wine neophyte: these rambles are the perfect opportunity to steep yourself in the culture of wine country, learning, laughing and sharing with new aviators friends who are your fellow *Flying Adventures* readers the fun of a getaway filled with pleasures and adventures of fine wine, wonderful dining and fly-in great times.

Where shall we fly next? Contact us at:

winecountryfun@flyingadventures.com (626) 618-4000

and let us know your interest. We will put you on the invitation list. And the next time an excursion gears up, expect our invite to two amazing days of wine world fun. Hope to see you in Santa Barbara! Or will it be Walla Walla Valley? Bordeaux?