

## SUISUN VALLEY GRAPE GROWERS ASSOCIATION.



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# Spend a Saturday in Suisun Valley

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Since I am fortunate enough to live in Sonoma County, I have had the opportunity to visit hundreds of wineries in Sonoma and Napa over the past 8 years. However, it wasn't until yesterday that I visited the very charming and friendly Suisun Valley. Situated only 20 minutes south of Napa and only a short 1 hour drive from San Francisco, it is the perfect one-day get-away.

It seems amazing that after exiting I-80 onto Suisun Valley Road that within 5 minutes you are transported back in time to a gentle sleepy valley of vineyards, quaint wineries, friendly restaurants and tempting farm stands in the summer. You won't find the grand chateau and palatial wineries of Napa here – instead it feels like you've been

conveyed back to a simpler and more peaceful time of California wine history. Indeed some of the wine prices are so good; it reminded me of visiting Napa in the early 1980's!



Visiting on a weekend makes more sense, because not all of the wineries are open during the week. However, I would recommend the first stop be the Suisun Valley Wine Cooperative which is the first winery you will see in an old wooden building on the left side of the road. There, more than 5 wineries allow you to sample their wines.

Another required stop – and my favorite visit of the day – was Wooden Valley Winery. I felt embraced by the warm family-run atmosphere the minute I walked into the down-home tasting room furnished in recycled redwood tank wood. Operating for more than 75 years, they are the oldest winery in the valley, and offer some amazing wine prices. Where else can you get a decent Northern California cabernet sauvignon, which is hand-crafted, for only \$14? I also found the 2006 syrah, with lots of dark berry, spice and some pleasing gripping tannins, to be an incredible value at only \$11. They are probably one of the only wineries left in California to offer both a red and white made from the Valdiguié grape – which is also referred to as California Gamay. The white is slightly sweet at 3.5% residual sugar and tastes like drinking strawberry jam – a sure winner for new wine tasters or those who prefer sweet wines. They also offer a sweet Riesling and their Dolce Dorato which is a late harvest sauvignon blanc in a 750ml for only \$9.

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Going from the very pleasant prices of Wooden Valley to the upscale Blue Victorian, in a lovely old house set in the vineyards, was a bit of a jolt. Wine prices start at \$24.95 a bottle and go up from there, but the wines are quite intriguing and made in a very approachable style with smooth tannins and ripe luscious tropical and berry-chocolate fruits. The 2005 Special Reserve Cab at \$54 is quite unique in that it includes zinfandel, merlot and petite sirah in the blend, but it's very long finish and smooth chocolate tannins are very appealing. The old Victorian building itself is a lovely site to see, and a perfect place for photos.

Similar prices can be found at Vezer Family Vineyard Tasting Room just down the road and around the corner (same owners as Blue Victorian). However, the wines here are so unique; it is definitely worth a stop. This is probably one of the only places in California where you can taste 3 different vintages of the rare verdelho grape of Portugal (do not confuse with the verdejo grape of Rueda, Spain). Used in high-end Madeira and parts of the Dao, it is a white grape which Vezer transforms into a creamy pear and tropical fruit concoction with varying degrees of acidity based on the year. I tasted the 05, 06, and 07 – and they were each quite different, though I found I preferred the freshness and more bracing acidity of the 2007 (\$36 per bottle). They also specialize in Petite Sirah, and I found their 2006 to be big, plush, filled with blackberries and possessing a nice long finish (\$60). Their signature wine is called La Salette (\$79) and is made from both zinfandel and petite sirah. It is a hugely concentrated wine of plum, cherries, chocolate and spice with a very long finish.

Another good stop is LedgeWood Creek Winery which has a large modern tasting room in an industrial looking building, but the colorful impressionist vinscape paintings decorating the walls inside and the vineyards surrounding the building make it a very pleasant place. The wines are also well-made and sensibly priced. My favorite was the 3 Clone Chardonnay 2007 (\$16) with apple, lemon, spice, and some complex layers with a long finish. Aged in French Oak for 10 months, it is a good find and a nice value. However, their specialty is Rhone Varietals and they had three different GSM's (Grenache-Syrah- Mourvèdre) , with my favorite being the 2005 (\$16) because it had the largest percentage of mourvedre – making it big, muscular, and mouth filling. They also have a unique dry Grenache Rose (\$10), which are difficult to find in California. It is a heavier style rose that should appeal to red-wine drinkers. Finally, I was also impressed by the cabs, but they are made with Napa verses Suisun Valley grapes. However, for only \$22 per bottle, they were a great value.

Obviously somewhere along the way, you will need to stop for lunch. I'd recommend bringing a picnic and eating at the lovely tables outside of LedgeWood with a sweeping view of the vineyards. However, there are also nice picnic tables at Wooden Valley, the Blue Victorian and Vezer. If you don't want to pack your own picnic food, you can also get take-out at the Vezer Deli, El Tapatio Café or the Valley Café. If you're there during the summer, stop and pick up some fresh produce at the many stands, with Larry's Produce being one of the largest and most famous. If you'd prefer something more elegant, eat at the Vintage Café, Rockville Inn, or the very lovely Vezer Barista Café with both indoor and outdoor dining in a beautiful European style courtyard complete with fountains and flowers.

It was nice to spend a day in Suisun Valley, and I definitely recommend a visit for those who haven't been there yet. It's rather amazing to find such a jewel of a hidden wine valley so close to the big metropolis of San Francisco. And – it makes the perfect one-day get-away for a lazy Saturday or Sunday.