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WINE WORDS

A day trip discovery

by Millie Howie



There are only two wineries with tasting rooms in the Suisun Valley Appellation, but those two are worth the trip. Besides, once you discover this verdant, peaceful strip of farm country – eight miles long and three miles wide – you will be able to find your way back when, as Roger King, president of the Suisun Valley Grape Growers Association promises, there will be at least seven more wineries and a cooperative tasting room to welcome visitors.

The two existing rooms are handsome and welcoming. The roads are quiet and traffic minimal even though thousands of travelers, driving up and down Highway I-80 pass this agricultural heaven every day and have no

idea what lies just past all the malls and big box stores parallel to the freeway.

In this quiet valley, 44 growers tend 3,000 acres of grapes which are blended by a growing number of outstanding winemakers into wines praised by the number-givers and saluted with gold and silver medals at major competitions up and down the length of California.

Suisun Valley is no newcomer to the wine grape industry. It was recognized as an American Viticultural Area in 1982, just a few months after the Napa Valley Appellation was granted. Its oldest winery, Wooden Valley Winery, was bonded in 1932 and in 1944 Mario Lanza (no, not the tenor, whose name was not really Lanza at all) became a partner in the winery, and 10 years later became the sole owner. Today, Mario's son, Richard, and his four sons operate the beautiful and efficient Wooden Valley Winery, which produces about 20,000 cases of wine a year from their 600 acres of vineyard. An excellent map and concise directions to the winery are available on line at www.woodenvalley.com.

The tasting room and gift shop are airy and spacious. The gleaming redwood bar that

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stretches the length of the back wall was created out of a thousand-gallon redwood tank once used to ferment hearty red wines. Open hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday. There is no charge for tasting.

Prices of Suisun Valley wines are modest in the extreme, which is not a reflection of quality or worth, but simply that promotion of the grapes and wines has not caught up with the excellence of the fruit. That is changing. Not quite three years ago the grape growers of Suisun Valley banded together to form the Suisun Valley Grape Growers Association. With the assistance of funding through the Suisun Valley Fund, created in 1974 by joint agreement between the Solano Irrigation District and the city of Fairfield to preserve agriculture in the Suisun Valley, the association has as its objective the development of brand recognition for the Suisun Valley appellation. As one of the first steps towards its goal, the association has launched a website: www.svgga.com offering the public a history of the area, facts about the growers and wineries, a map and a collection of testimonials from winemakers who produce wines from Suisun Valley grapes.

The second winery tasting room is at LedgeWood Creek Winery. Winemaker, Larry Langbehn uses about 10 percent of the estate grapes to make his wines, for a total annual production in the neighborhood of 10,000 cases. The rest are sold to long-time customers in Sonoma and Napa. The 400-acre ranch has 330 acres planted to chardonnay, merlot, cabernet sauvignon, sauvignon blanc, mourvedre and grenache. Dean Frisbie, owner with his wife, Bunny, started the winery in 2002 with grapes from the 2001 vintage.

There is no charge for tasting at LedgeWood Creek and open hours are 11 a.m. until 5 p.m. seven days a week. The tasting room has tall, wide windows on three sides offering breathtaking views of vineyards, orchards, and the rolling hills to west, north and south.

LedgeWood Creek Winery is located at 4589 Abernathy Rd., Suisun Valley. Phone 707-426-4424 for directions. Wooden Valley Winery at 4756 Suisun Valley Road, Suisun Valley may be reached at 707-864-0730. Visit them both, stop for a picnic and pick up fresh locally grown fruit from the roadside stands to enjoy with your newly discovered Suisun Valley wines.