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Winterhawk — Backroads Wine Find

By Frank Thorsberg | August 21, 2009

Winterhawk Winery is off the beaten path, but it's worth finding if you want to have fun while tasting some pretty good wines.



Don Johnson and Clive

Winterhawk is in Suisun Valley, an American Viticultural Area near Fairfield in Solano County just north of the border with more-famous Napa. The winery is open to the public on Saturdays for tastings that include live music and free pizza. The Used Blues Band performs this Saturday (Aug. 22) and the blues ensemble Caravan of All-Stars is on stage Aug. 29.

Winterhawk proprietor Don Johnson welcomed me on a recent weekend with a handshake and a grin, his blue eyes sparkling in the summer sun.

Unlike some places in Napa, there's no pretension or snooty attitudes here. The tasting room at Winterhawk is a set of folding tables on the crushpad, adjacent to the vineyards. In line were smiling visitors who were eager to pay \$5 for a taste of everything the winery makes plus a

glassful of whatever wine you liked the best.

The tasting included sauvignon blanc, a merlot rose, a regular merlot, petite sirah, pinot noir and tempranillo plus a sweet late-harvest zinfandel and a semi-sweet orange muscat.

The tempranillo, a Spanish grape not widely planted in California, caught my eye, so I asked Johnson about it. He said he got interested in the grape during a trip to Europe.

"I was on a sailboard in Sicily and I drank a lot of tempranillo and I really liked it," Johnson explained. "So, when I got back home, I looked around for some to plant."

His tempranillo vines are now six years old. The 2007 vintage (\$18) is a lovely little wine that would fit in nicely beside a plate of grilled spicy sausages or even paella.

My favorite of the bunch is the Suisun Valley pinot noir (2007). This is everything a \$20 bottle of easy-to-drink California pinot should be. It's a moderate ruby red color with a nose of fresh cherries and a round finish that invites another sip... and then another... and another.

My second favorite, the 2005 merlot (\$18), really

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came into its own when paired with a piece of vegetable pizza fresh from the winery's wood-fired oven. There's a whiff of bell pepper on the nose with a soft middle palate of cocoa and red fruits that blend together into a juicy mouthful of goodness.
sv_map

Fun Family Farm Days



Suisun Valley wineries, vegetable growers, u-pick orchards and farm stands will open their doors for an end-of-summer celebration called Fun Family Farm Days on Aug. 30. Winterhawk and five other area

wineries, including the Suisun Valley Co-Op (which is home to four micro-wineries Sunset Cellars, Bask, King Andrews and Blacksmith) will have special tastings in connection with this event that will be repeated Sept. 27 and Oct. 25.

For a special treat, check out the locally produced oils from Il Fiorello Olive Oil Co. and the fruits, home-made ice cream and baked goods from 99 Cherry Orchard U-Pick (2627 Rockville Rd, Fairfield). I took home one of their blackberry/cherry pies that was insanely good!

To learn more about wines from Suisun Valley, check out Not Napa, Not Sonoma.