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Touring Suisun Valley - Wooden Valley Winery

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Suisun Valley is a beautiful little AVA (American Viticultural Area) in the North Coast region of California. Within the valley, growth is guardedly taking place and interest is well on the rise.

This always happens as word begins to get out about any hidden jewel, and that's really what Suisun is for me: one of the most charming wine regions in California. I've been very fortunate to be the one entrusted to get the word out on this area; and I do that every chance I can get, most especially within the wine writing community.

I recently accompanied wine writer Ben Weinberg (Rocky Mountain News, Sommelier Journal, along with his business partner Tim Heaton (Wine Strategies), and my partner, Jose Diaz. We toured Suisun Valley for Ben and Tim's own search and discovery. As their travel guide, I was also able to expand my continually growing knowledge base of Suisun. This blog posting is about our visit to Wooden Valley Winery.

Wooden Valley Winery offers the most present day history, along with the Mangels family, in Suisun Valley. These two families are the ones to study for old facts about Suisun, with family stories that lay claim to the land as it relates to then and now.

With the Lanza Family of Wooden Valley Winery, their story begins when Mario Lanza and Lena Carlevaro Lanza met in Oakland, California in 1934, and married in 1937. Their families both came from the small town of Silvano Di Orba, in northern Italy. Mario worked as a partner in the Oakland Scavenger Company, and in 1944, he was badly injured in a workplace accident. In order to heal properly, Mario's doctor recommended that he move from the Bay Area to a warmer climate.



[Wooden Valley Winery has strategically places relics of the past around their property. Pictured above is antique destemmer.]



Mario decided to visit his friend, Salvador Brea, who, in 1933, had founded a small winery in Suisun Valley named Wooden Valley Winery. Salvador could see the end of Prohibition nearing, and wanted to be part of the new wave of California vintners. When Mario visited, he was pleased with what he saw. In 1945, he decided to move north to Suisun Valley, and moved with Lena and their two children, Richard and Marlene. Mario worked full time with Salvador at Wooden Valley, and, by 1946, Salvador offered Mario a partnership in the business. That continued for nearly ten years. In 1955, Salvador married and decided it was time for his wife and him to return to Italy. Salvador sold his interest in the business to Mario, with the understanding that Mario would keep the name of the winery the same. On

SUISUN VALLEY GRAPE GROWERS ASSOCIATION.



a handshake, Mario agreed to continue the business as Wooden Valley Winery.

Today, with that same handshake mentality, the Lanza family continues to carry on the tradition of hard work, humility in all they do, and fostering great partnerships along the way. I know this is why I've come to respect this family so much: each person works within his own core strength, and there are no egos involved in just getting the job done.... Which is making great, affordable, every-day drinking wine.

They've recently stepped into a higher tier wine, and it's as perfect as it could possibly be, if not even better. Wooden Valley continues to exceed everyone's wildest expectations, and they do it the old fashioned way... Only through their tasting room. They've not stepped into the three-tiered system, and yet are able to support every member of their family for three generations, with a fourth one in the offing. They have a remarkable success story, with a very strong fan base.

When Rick Lanza came from the wine cellar after we arrived, he had been hard at work. No pretenses, no getting gussied up for our meeting, just a man who had a job to do for the sake of PR, and was a bit nervous to get it done, as his brother, Ron Lanza, is the family's usual spokesman. That said, Rick's still got all the answers when it comes to his winemaking, so he really was the best person with whom Ben should be meeting on this particular day. It's always so easy to make new friendships with those who are humble... It's their honest approachability. People who visit Suisun Valley are very quick to comment how wonderful the people are who are in the tasting rooms.

It's worth it to quote Liz Thach, Ph.D., Professor of Management & Wine Business at Sonoma State University, who just visited Suisun Valley. Liz has a blog called Wine Travels with Professor Liz.

What she had to say on her blog after a visit to Suisun says it all:

"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." ... She continues... "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."

Her assessment is right on target. This is a Suisun Valley "must visit."

