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Guest Post: Visiting the Suisun Valley Wine Country

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While Kevin & I are in Alaska, we've asked some friends and colleagues to post on their wine loves, wine experiences and more. For this post we welcome Jen Rizzo. Jen is a freelance motion graphics designer, part-time writer and Cincinnati transplant based out of San Francisco. She is a self-professed beer nerd living in the heart of wine country and spends her free time getting to know the area around her from the saddle of a thirty year old bicycle - she's also a good friend and I miss her. Thanks Jen!

I moved to San Francisco from Cincinnati on Labor Day of 2008 and have made it a point to stay in the area for all the major holidays so I can learn how the city responds to them. I got to see the city empty out for Thanksgiving and Christmas, making it easier than ever to get a dinner reservation or sit at my favorite bar and not have to elbow people out of the way to get a drink. Of course, it didn't occur to me until two days before Memorial Day weekend that I lived in a major tourist destination. It was time to get out of the city.

This poses quite the challenge for me, you see, because I live in the Bay Area without a car. We're surrounded by all of this incredible terrain, and I see it all from behind the handlebars of a bicycle. This is great for being in the city, and it's very easy to ride over the Golden Gate Bridge to get into Sausalito and toward the mountains, but anything beyond about fifty miles is certainly a breaking point for me. So, I consulted the power of the internet, specifically twitter, to decide my destination for me.

I'm not hugely connected in social media, and my twittering is sporadic at best, but I do have a number of wine connections as well as cyclists and San Francisco residents. My needs were simple: I had never been to wine country in the nine months I lived here, I needed to be able to do it without a car, and I wanted somewhere that was going to give me a good day of bike riding. Oh, and I didn't want to spend hundreds of dollars to do it.

Napa was out. The tastings were too high and the hotels were either booked on the night I wanted to be there or astronomically expensive. Plus, my point was to avoid all the Memorial Day nonsense, and a tourist destination was not the place to do that. Our very own favorite wine

blogger Michelle suggested Sonoma, but the bus from the city is really the only way to get there with bicycles, and it was going to take upwards of three hours one way.

Then a friend suggested a winery in Suisun Valley, a place I had never heard of. The hotels would be cheaper, he said, and the winery was only an eight mile ride from the Amtrak station. Upon digging around, I learned that there were in fact four wineries in Suisun Valley, and to visit all of them would be a perfect 25 mile loop from the train station, ending up at a hotel that was less than half the cost of a stay in Napa. Oh, and I could take two trains there in an hour and a half, and it would cost me less than \$20 to get there, and bicycles were allowed the whole way. Sold!

We loaded up two messenger bags, two bicycles, and headed out for our trip. Two trains and an hour and a half later, we arrived at the Suisun/Fairfield Amtrak station.



For a brief moment, it was easy to forget we were in Northern California. It was cold and foggy when we got on our first train in the city, but by the time we arrived in Fairfield it was sunny and about twenty degrees warmer. The longest part of our journey was the first: an eight mile ride to Wooden Valley Winery.

Wooden Valley is a great place to start your journey... their tasting room and

visitor's center is huge. The walls list the story of the Suisun Valley: the brothers that founded the first winery post-prohibition, the families that moved in and made it what it is today. We were invited to taste five of their wines for free - something you'll be much harder pressed to find in the more well-known wine regions of Northern California. I had a full bag on my shoulders and no ability to carry more, so I wasn't able to walk away with any bottles to take home. Lucky for me, it turns out you can order direct from their website, and at a price point of \$10-16, they make great value wines. I particularly enjoyed the 2006 Cabernet and their 2007 Riesling.

SUISUN VALLEY GRAPE GROWERS ASSOCIATION.



From Wooden Valley, we traveled a little north to Blue Victorian, the winery that made me fall in love with the whole area.



In a sharp contrast to the large visitor's center at Wooden Valley, Blue Victorian is a tiny... well... blue victorian. Their winemaking facility is located behind the house, and their vineyard surrounds the property. We were the only ones there, so we had an opportunity to sit and enjoy some fabulous wine with the gentleman that made it. Blue Victorian is one of the newest in the region, and is owned by Vezer Family Vineyards, which would be our next stop.

When we walked up, we met the winery cat, Simon, who is quite possibly the sweetest animal that has ever existed. (A condition of this guest post was that I would get to feature Simon. It wasn't too hard to sell Michelle on the idea.) Simon, the winery cat, came with the house. They simply couldn't bear to move him.

So, accompanied by Simon, we sat at their bar and split a tasting (\$10), which was quite enough for the two of us with their generous pours. They gave us a map of the region and invited us to walk around and tour at our leisure. They have a bocce court on the side of the house, and I've heard during the more popular times of day, the owner occasionally gives bocce lessons! We also took a peek in at their barrel room.

After a few more scratches on Simon's head, we rode over to Vezer Family Vineyard. Vezer was much more crowded than the other two we had visited, but they also have a cafe on site. We were very quickly acknowledged and invited to grab a couple of stools at the end of the bar, where we sat for at least 45 minutes just chatting with the employees and enjoying taste after taste of delicious wine.

They focus pretty heavily on their reds and have won a number of awards for them. Their price point is much higher - ranging up to \$85 for their 2006 La Salette, which of course had to be one of my favorites. I'm a Zinfandel girl, and theirs certainly didn't disappoint. The experience was very friendly and casual - the wine just kept coming while we happily snacked on cheese and salami. Despite being

heavier into their reds, they produce a couple of fantastic whites as well - I particularly enjoyed the Verdelho that we were poured when we first sat down. I believe it was their 2006, though the 2005 was their Double Gold Medal winner.



Our final stop was Ledgewood Creek Winery. They were having a special event that day, so the whole area was packed. They have a large visitor's center with a tasting area in the center. We were able to find two stools pretty easily, and they were having a barbecue so there was lots of free food to be had. I made friends with the son of the original owners, James Frisbie, who gave me his card and wanted me to keep in touch with him on whether or not his distributors in San Francisco were doing a good job.

I really enjoyed our experience here - we also spoke to their winemaker, Larry, who was an absolute delight to learn from. This is a man who knows his wines and has gotten experience all through Napa, Sonoma and Suisun. I don't think we tried a single wine we didn't like. They're at a lower price point than Vezer - around \$10-20. While it isn't normally my thing, I fell in love with their sparkling raspberry. They were selling full glasses outside on the patio for \$4 after the tasting. It might have been the day of riding in the hot sun, but splitting a glass of their fruity, light bubbly and a bar of my favorite chocolate was a perfect end to our afternoon.

It's a very different experience than I hear Napa or even Sonoma will give you, but it was exactly what we needed for the weekend. An hour and a half by train away from San Francisco, and we were able to casually spend time with people who love their area and love their wine. They seemed legitimately grateful that we had made the trek, and we were quite a hit with the bicycles. We were warmly welcomed everywhere that we went, and for the two of us, we spent less than \$200 on the whole weekend including our hotel stay, meals and transit. If you ever make it out this way and want an intimate, completely unintimidating experience with wine country, I sincerely hope you'll consider looking in to what Suisun Valley has to offer.