



Sunrise and Vines

By Andrew Jefford

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Visitors to the US arrive clutching driving licences as tightly as passports, since viewing the land of the free usually means handcuffing oneself to a steering wheel first. Many relish this prospect. An idealised, uncongested, wind-in-the-hair wheel down the the lonely, arrow-straight interstate highway is the spawn of countless films. The reality can be more mundane: slow lines of traffic ambling between sprawling urban nodes, full of reasonless acceleration and deceleration, redeemed only by the singular appearance and sometimes strange behaviour of those caught in the same drift tide.

What, though, of the landscape beyond? In northern California, the landscape is often beautiful enough to make the car seem like a prison. Smooth, buff hills, round-contoured and undulating; green stretches of vineyard, suddenly rhythmical and disciplined; then thick forest cover beyond, with the redwoods marching up moist folds while tanoaks and madrones filter the light of the higher stands. If you've left your motel early, you'll never forget the interlacing fillets of fog drifting into the valleys, wherever the past million years have left a door open to the cold ocean; better still if you can drive a high road, since then you can gaze down on to the silver vapour, filling the lost floor like a soft tongue.

The fog has its uses, especially for winemakers, as it mitigates summer's morning heat and thereby retains acidity in the grapes. Which is the kind of stuff you can learn on a vineyard walk. Even for professionals, California vineyard visits usually mean a short run of tasting glasses followed by supersized helpings of catalytic conversion, which was why I was so tempted when Allan Wright of Zephyr Adventure Holidays invited me on a Sonoma vineyard walk. I'd always longed to walk those buff hills and Sonoma, with its complex pattern of sub-valleys, was the perfect place to do it from an educational point of view. Maybe I could begin to grasp the subtle differences between Dry Creek Valley and Alexander Valley, and feel the cool of Russian River for myself.

Ours was, in fact, a dress rehearsal for two tours that will be running in August and October as part of Zephyr's Wine Adventures programme, which also includes Europe, South America and South Africa. The idea is to tackle two American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) every day, with short walks through each concluding with a tasting. Lunches are picnic-style; dinners are more leisurely, in local restaurants. The overall base for the trip is the Flamingo Resort in Santa Rosa, where you can swim in a heated pool at any time of day or night as a pink neon flamingo slowly rotates next to the moon in the night sky. Jayne Mansfield was just one of those pictured poolside in years gone by (in characteristically pneumatic pose) at what locals know affectionately as the Flaming O.

The trip surprised me. I had forgotten that the structure of the California wine business is very different from that of Europe. Wineries not infrequently buy all their fruit under contract; indeed wines are often also made under contract, thereby giving rise to the "virtual label", run out of a spare bedroom on a BlackBerry. If you want to understand the fundamentals of California wine, by contrast, you need to visit grape growers such as Richard Kunde and his wife Saralee McClelland-Kunde in the Russian River, whose 500-acre estate sells to no fewer than 50 different wineries, each of which wants something a little different. Russian River is cool, known for its Pinot, Chardonnay and, increasingly, Pinot Gris but even here you'll find California's signature grape Zinfandel. "I'm very fond of Zinfandel," confessed Richard as we sat sipping it at his Lion Ridge vineyard, "but it's so cold around here that we can only grow it ... just over there." He pointed to the small west-facing ridge below us, soaking up the last rays of light, as half the party grumbled about having forgotten to bring their sweaters. We suddenly grasped terroir.



Earlier that morning, I'd had a masterclass in practical economics from vineyard manager Mark Hauser of Alexander Valley Vineyards when I innocently inquired why some of the flat benchland vineyards couldn't migrate up on to the hillsides. The wine might be 30 per cent better, was the gist, but with costs at 60 per cent or higher, no one was going to be dumb enough to make the experiment.

When you leave the car behind, you are with nature at last. No one knew the name of the beautiful, heavy snake, striped with brown and verdigris, that slithered away at our approach but we showed it sudden and silent respect. Rod Berglund of Joseph Swan vineyards taught us not to touch the innocent-looking poison-oak saplings as we slid through woodland. "But this one," he said, tearing out a sapling of pretty, yellow-flowered broom, "doesn't belong here at all." There were no cougars in evidence as night drew on, though we had seen a bald eagle flap by with a steelhead trout in its claws earlier that afternoon. Blue herons and turkey vultures were regular companions and the flowers (wild blue iris, orange poppies and scented chamomile) surged underfoot. California may be one of the US's most populous states but, to European eyes, its emptiness is still vast – and pristine.

The wines we tried on our visit were mixed in quality but included elegant Cabernet, Syrah and Chardonnay from Michel-Schlumberger in Dry Creek Valley and the fresh Russian River Pinot Noir and Pinot Gris of Joseph Swan. The final trip itinerary for later in the year, sensibly includes a dinner at the Third Street Ale Works in Santa Rosa. The microbrewing revolution in the US has produced many flavour masterpieces to match the achievements of the country's greatest vineyards. Indeed, a glass of fragrant IPA from Lagunitas Brewing Company in Petaluma brought me back from the brink of despair after the tour, when back pain turned me from pliant human into a disagreeable object made out of tropical hardwood. The pain was not the consequence of excessive hiking, since the walks are all easy and short. I had, though, worn inadvisably light clothes early one morning and close inspection of a 130-year-old Zinfandel vine at Sausal had exposed spare, bare flesh to an icy Pacific blast. I didn't just understand terroir at that point; it actually stabbed me in the lower vertebrae. I wanted an education, and I got it.

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On the wine trail

This year on August 24-28 and October 26-30 ZEPHYR WINE ADVENTURES (www.zephyradventures.com) is organising two more Sonoma vineyard walks (at \$1,900). Other Zephyr adventures for 2008 include walking tours to Burgundy (June 8-13), and the winelands of the South African Cape (October 10-18), which also takes in a three-day safari in the Kruger National Park. There are multisport tours (which feature a combination of hiking, biking, canoeing, horse riding and river rafting, the exact mix depending on the trip) to Oregon (August 10-14), Spain (September 7-13) and Chile and Argentina (November 8-5); and a "hike and bike" tour to Italy (September 26 to October 3).

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