

# Sonoma Valley,

rubbing elbows with winemakers and growers at several signature *Sonoma wine country* events



story **Laurie Wallace Lynch** photography **the author and Sonoma Country Wine Weekend**

**T**he slogan for the *Sonoma Wine Country Weekend*, a wildly popular event which happens annually on the last weekend in August is: “The Chefs Serve. The Winemakers Pour. And the Proceeds Matter.”

What the slogan doesn’t say is that this all happens in a lush garden-of-Eden-like setting where the temperature seems to always hover around “perfect” and the air is scented with a hint of roses mingled with pine and the sexy earthiness of sun-kissed fruit. Although the sun seems to shine non stop, there’s a cool

morning breeze from the Pacific Ocean, whilst wisps of ghostly fog linger here and there only to disappear in the mid-morning sun. This, we are told, makes Sonoma the perfect climate for growing grapes.

With over 400 vineyards—from Mom and Pop operations with a few vines in the backyard to multi-acre estates, which have earned a reputation for internationally-acclaimed wines, the borders of Sonoma County stretch from the Pacific Ocean in the west to the Mayacamas Mountains in the east and boast 16 American

Viticultural Areas, or micro-climates. Bordering Napa Valley, Sonoma has a unique personality of its own, and it is one you certainly can’t wait to experience.

## **Sonoma Wine Country Weekend Overview**

The *Sonoma Wine Country Weekend* in August is the perfect opportunity to rub elbows with winemakers and growers at several signature “pinch-me-am-I-really-here” events such as *Taste of Sonoma*, *Sonoma Starlight Dinner* held



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# wine tour

**Sonoma Wine  
Country Weekend**

**Sonoma Starlight  
Dinner**

**Taste of Sonoma**

**Sonoma Valley  
Wine Auction**

**Wineries**

**MacMurray Estates**

**Rodney Strong**

**Gloria Ferrer**

**Francis Ford Coppolla**

**Buena Vista**

**Chateau St. Jean**



at the *Francis Ford Coppola Winery* and the Sonoma Valley Wine Auction. *Taste of Sonoma* is an annual sell-out event which brings together over 200 wineries, chefs, sommeliers and some 2,500 people who flock from across the U.S. to attend this event, held at the MacMurray Ranch, once owned by legendary Hollywood actor Fred MacMurray of *My Three Sons* fame.

"My father fell in love with this part of the country the first time he cast a fly rod into the Russian River," says Kate MacMurray, daughter of the late actor who lives on the ranch and acts as public relations spokesperson for the *MacMurray Estate Vineyards*, now owned by the Gallo ➤



◀ wine family. Kate invited our group of journalists for a private tour of the sprawling 1,500 acre ranch. Our Jeeps climbed to the highest summit of MacMurray Ranch for a bird's eye view of the dizzying rows of vineyards that roll down the hillside almost as far as the eye can see, burgeoning with plump, juicy grapes, their dark purple skins soaking up the noon day sun. We got to taste the nectar of the vine as Kate had thoughtfully prepared a wine testing station on a long picnic table under a shade tree. We sampled six delicious *MacMurray Estate* wines including my favourite, Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley Reserve 2012.

Visitors get a chance to become acquainted with several of the local wine masters and growers whilst touring wineries covering the vast number of growing areas such as the Alexander Valley, Dry Creek, Russian River Valley and the Sonoma Valley. Friendly, knowledgeable tour guides at *Ram's Gate*, *Chateau St. Jean* and many other wineries provide an up-close-and-personal look at the winemaking industry, plus a sample of a variety of excellent wines. I know—tough job, but hey, I had to do it!

### **Rodney Strong Vineyards**

*Rodney Strong Vineyards* is an award-winning winery in Sonoma, named *Wine Enthusiast's* 2013 American Winery of the Year. Proprietor Tom Klein is the honorary wine co-Chair of the *Sonoma Wine Country Weekend* and the former Chair of the *Sonoma County Vintners Foundation*. Over an excellent three-course dinner prepared by Chef Les Goodman, we sampled luscious *Rodney Strong* wines including

2012 *Davis Bynum* Pinot Noir, Jane's Vineyard and 2011 *Rodney Strong* Symmetry, Red Meritage.

Some 50,000 people enjoy wine tours and tastings annually at *Rodney Strong Vineyards*. The Klein family are 4th generation California wine growers who purchased the winery in 1989 and carry on the vision of founder Rod Strong (a celebrated American dancer) of producing world-class wines. Tom speaks passionately about "sweet spots" (where everything is perfect for growing grapes), and says "great wine comes from great sites". Tom and his wife Kate co-Chair the *Sonoma County Wine Weekend* along with Jose and Gloria Ferrer. The entire Ferrer family, including grandchildren, had travelled from Spain to be a part of this weekend.

### **Gloria Ferrer Winery**

The Ferrer story has a similar ring to the Fred MacMurray story. Jose Ferrer's father Pedro was already a successful winemaker in Spain when he travelled to California and vowed to open a winery in Sonoma. Says Jose; "When we first visited Sonoma more than 40 years ago, we immediately fell in love with its beauty, the people and its rich wine history." The 335-acre Gloria Ferrer Winery opened in 1986 and was the first to have hand dug caves to store wine.

### **Sonoma Starlight Dinner at Francis Ford Coppola Winery**

Yet another hilltop in Sonoma was the site of the *Sonoma Starlight Dinner* held at the *Francis Ford Coppola Winery*.



Yes—this winery is owned by the famous movie director. Visitors can tour the winery and museum, which houses several of the director's Academy Awards, along with costumes and props from many of his movies, including the desk used in *The Godfather*. Outside, close to the 3,600 square foot pool, stands an exact replica of the bandstand used in *The Godfather II*. Guests can book tent-sized striped Cabana rooms by the day and enjoy the lush grounds, pool and winery.

#### **Sonoma Wine Weekend gala dinner at Buena Vista Winery**

To truly appreciate the Sonoma County wine story, we ventured back to the Buena Vista Winery, the birthplace of the California wine making industry. Built in 1857, the beautiful stone *Buena Vista Winery* looks like a castle in the French countryside and is the perfect setting for the *Sonoma Wine Weekend Gala Dinner*. Our host is the debonair Jean-Charles Boisset, who is hailed with saving the historic winery from ruin after it was severely damaged in an earthquake. Boisset purchased the property and restored it to its original glory and then added his unique stamp by creating a museum, tasting rooms and a "Bubbly Room".

#### **Sonoma Harvest Wine Auction at Chateau St. Jean Winery**

Vintners, growers and some 700 visitors gather together to raise funds for local Sonoma charities (including a youth literacy fund) at the *Sonoma Harvest Wine Auction*, held at *Chateau St. Jean Winery* as the grand finale of the weekend in wine country. With auction items like an African Safari, the 2014 event—called From Sonoma to Serengeti—raised \$4 million dollars, more than doubling the 2013 amount of \$1.5 million. Sonoma County wine growers and makers raised the bar to new heights in their quest to give back to their community, and after the total was announced, corks were popping in celebration. Although it's great to visit Sonoma County anytime of the year, the *Sonoma Wine Country Weekend* is all about the experience of tasting fine wines, poured by the masters who make the wine, paired with food prepared by chefs, while getting a taste of life in California wine country, at least for a few unforgettable days.

Tickets for annual *Sonoma Wine Country Weekend* are available through [www.winecountryweekend.com](http://www.winecountryweekend.com). Non-stop direct flights are available from Toronto to San Francisco. Rent a car and drive over the Golden Gate Bridge—even that's an experience, for the 2 hour drive to Sonoma. I stayed at the gorgeous *Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn and Spa* which was once home of the *Sonoma Wine Country Weekend* until the event grew so popular that organizers had to move to a larger venue. For more information visit [www.winecountryweekend.com](http://www.winecountryweekend.com) or [www.WeAreSonomaCounty.com](http://www.WeAreSonomaCounty.com) GL

