Exploring wine one sip at a time

BY ESTHER MOBLEY

Why is it so hard to figure out where to go wine tasting?

If you live in the Bay Area, the wine regions of Napa and Sonoma counties — those impossibly bucolic, meteorologically favored valleys to our north — are just a short drive away and home to hundreds of wineries eager to open their doors to curious tasters. There could hardly be a better way to spend a weekend.

Yet the difficulty of selecting a winery to visit endures. Of course, you want to taste great wine. But that’s not all you’re looking for in a tasting room. There’s the vista to consider, the educational value, the ambiance, the cost.

Sometimes you want to get in and get out of a tasting room without any fuss or forethought; other times you want a deeply personal, immersive experience. Maybe you’d like to interact with staff who will take the time to explain the effects of soil and climate, or maybe you’d rather be left alone to sip a bottle at your leisure.

So vast and varied are the wineries of Napa and Sonoma that there is something for everyone. We know this, because we’re visiting them all the time. And now we’ve translated that knowledge into a user-friendly collection of independent reviews that will, we hope, help you navigate your next visit to the region.

These reviews were conducted to the same standards that inform all of the Chronicle’s editorial coverage. (For more on this, see our criteria on page 9.) And while we believe each of the wineries in this collection offers something special, we don’t intend it as a superlative list of wineries, nor, certainly, of wines. Rather, it’s a snapshot of what Napa and Sonoma offer today.

We hope you have as much fun visiting these wineries as we did.

Esther Mobley is The San Francisco Chronicle’s wine, beer and spirits writer. Email: emobley@sfcchronicle.com  
Twitter: @Esther_mobley  
Instagram: @esthermob
How we selected the wineries

Depending on how and what one counts, there are about 900 wineries in Napa and Sonoma counties — a daunting number to navigate if it's just you, a car and Google Maps. So Esther Mobley, The Chronicle's wine, spirits and beer writer, created a target list of 200 notable wineries and, with a team of freelance writers — Julie Albin, Carey Sweet and Bryce Wiatrak — visited those over several months. She then selected these 50, roughly divided between the two regions, that offer great visitor experience and good wines. Together they form a snapshot of California's diverse wine industry today: wineries large or intimate, astride hills or in valleys, storied classics or newcomers.
At its core, Inman Family Wines is a one-woman show — and that woman is Kathleen Inman, who planted this 10.5-acre vineyard, on Piner Road in the heart of the Russian River Valley, in 2000 and has been crafting wines of character, mostly on her own, ever since. A Napa native who grew up in a teetotaling Seventh Day Adventist household, Inman founded her estate after many years as a prolific home gardener. How different could grapegrowing really be? She planted mostly Pinot Noir, and she sources fruit from various other parcels around Sonoma. The winery and tasting room abut the diminutive vineyard, and you can hardly avoid strolling through some of the organically farmed rows when you visit.

This Jill-of-all-trades is a fixture of the tasting room, too, which despite its appointment-only policy is a very casual affair. There are vineyard-adjacent tables outdoors, with cornhole boards set up on the weekends; a pleasant indoor tasting bar; and a private room for groups to accommodate a “Meet the Maker” experience — though it’s rare to visit Inman Family and not meet the maker. Take advantage of the opportunity to ask questions, whether about organic farming, sparkling wine production or — one of her favorite topics — the virtues of screwcaps. — Esther Mobley

INSIDE INFO: This winery is progressive: Look at the gender-neutral restroom signs. There’s also a guest house on the property available for rent. If you’re looking for lodging, it’s worth asking about.

FEATURES: Tours Available □ Dog friendly □ Family friendly □ Good for groups □ Wheelchair accessible □ Sustainability focus □ Outdoor area/garden

What to try: The core offering here is Pinot Noir, and Inman’s best is her luxurious, silky Olivet Grange Estate. Look also for the Sexton Road Ranch, the most savory and earthy of her Pinots. There’s also pleasant Pinot Gris from the estate; lush Chardonnay; a zippy, floral rosé; and a Champagne-method blanc de noirs sparkling wine.