

Far from the
MADDING CROWD

BY SARAH LAVENDER SMITH

Livermore Valley, the "other" Wine Country, produces quality wines in a quiet setting



Wearing nothing but plush terry robes and a look of contentment, Nanette and Daniel Hoile appear to be relishing their 19th wedding anniversary while they pad around a new bed-and-breakfast resort in the Wine Country. They were stroked and swaddled during an afternoon of spa treatments at the inn, and now her face radiates from a facial, his feet unwind from reflexology. Maybe they'll get dressed and visit the tasting rooms of the dozen wineries just down the road, or perhaps they'll lounge around this spacious log cabin for the remainder of the day. Come evening, they might order local wine when they dine at a nearby vineyard that has one of the top restaurants in the East Bay.

The East Bay? That's correct, this couple from San Leandro is nowhere near the Napa or Sonoma valleys. They've gone north to Napa, done that, and through Sonoma to Mendocino, too. This time, Nanette Hoile wanted to surprise her

husband with a weekend getaway to a wine region that many in the Bay Area have yet to explore: the Livermore Valley.

"I thought, 'Wouldn't it be fun not to have to drive two to three hours?'" she recalls. So they set off on two-lane country roads through vineyards in South Livermore, passing several boutique wineries, two championship golf courses, and a couple of Italian-style cafés on their way to the Purple Orchid Inn. And like many who visit this area, her husband was surprised.

"I really didn't expect something so grand here in the Livermore Valley. I love it. It's great," says Daniel Hoile.

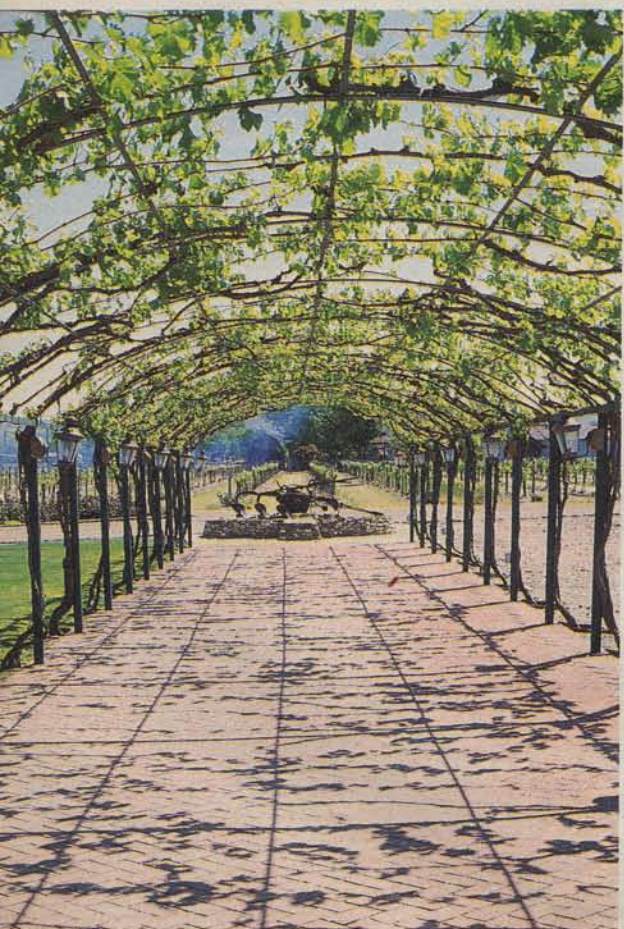
"And more peaceful," Nanette adds.

"That's right, you don't have all the traffic you get on Highway 12."

This is exactly the kind of talk that local winemakers and civic leaders have been dying to hear. They have long trumpeted Livermore as a region that produces distinctive, high-quality wine, but getting people to come and taste it took

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P H O T O G R A P H S B Y F R E D M E R T Z



From the top: The winery at Murietta's Well; the Wenté Vineyard's residence; a shade-dappled walkway at Con-cannon, with vineyards in the background.

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years of careful planning and diligence. The fact that the luxurious Purple Orchid Inn — the Valley's first and only B&B — blossomed in a remote area of Livermore suggests that their efforts can be deemed a success. The wineries reached a critical mass that gave rise to tourist amenities, and now a growing number of people like the Hoiles are choosing to visit.

When they arrive, they discover 17 wineries (three of which are actually closer to Castro Valley and Sunol), whose tasting rooms range from grand to homey. The award-winning Wenté Vineyards Restaurant and Visitors Center, where the Hoiles dined, is at one end of the spectrum. At the other are small-scale wineries that pour surprisingly good wine, such as Retzlaff Vineyards.

On a recent day at Retzlaff's no-frills tasting room, cellar master Noah Taylor, who is the son of the winery's owners, took time to wander in and greet visitors who had come to picnic beside the family's cabernet vines and pepper trees. He uncorked a bottle of his heady, late-harvest zinfandel, laughed as he said it goes well with sweet Texas barbecue, and then spent several minutes discussing his family's estate-grown wine. It was yet another pleasant surprise, finding a winemaker so friendly and accessible.

Despite these attractions, "world-class wine" and "tourist destination" are labels few people outside the region would attach to Livermore. Mention Livermore, and you might get comments about the heat, the windmills on the Altamont Pass, the clandestine national laboratories, even the annual rodeo.

If wine comes up, it's often spoken in the context of one name, and one name only: Wenté. The Wenté family has made wine in the Livermore Valley for four generations and is at the center of efforts to cover much of the region's pastureland with grapevines rather than housing. They produce around 300,000 cases annually, far more than any other Livermore winery. When Carolyn Wenté, president of Wenté Vineyards, and her brothers took over the company's management, they briefly considered pulling out of Livermore — a move that almost certainly would have caused the Valley's viticulture to shrivel up while suburban development continued unchecked.

"Our belief in the Livermore Valley and the quality of grapes it grows is really what made us decide to stay," Carolyn Wenté says. "We truly believe this region has as great a potential as any grape-growing region in the world." The Wentés also recognized a potential to draw tourists, which they encouraged by establishing a big-name summer concert series at their restaurant and developing a Greg Norman-designed golf course. Within five to 10 years they hope to open a small spa resort next to the restaurant and fairways, Wenté said, and are talking with hotel groups to explore the possibility.

It's no wonder that just about everyone in Livermore bows down before the Wentés and thanks them for their commitment to the region. Outside the area,

however, people are a little less flattering. Wenté Vineyards is dogged by a reputation for producing high volumes of unremarkable white wines — a characterization that makes Carolyn's brother, Phil, retort: "Wenté can certainly show reams and reams of gold, silver, and bronze medals and scores out of magazines that have been as good as others' over time."

It's true they make a wide range of enjoyable wine, including a worthwhile limited-reserve collection. But that's not enough to impress aficionados such as Gregor Dixon, general manager of the North Berkeley Wine Co. "Their reputation for quality is not bad," he said of Wenté, "but they don't have a reputation for making world-class wines. They're more everyday wines." Asked about other Livermore wineries, he and several other Bay Area wine merchants expressed a hohum attitude. "There's no *there* there yet, no personality, nothing to really grab you," says Dixon.

So some experts wrinkle their noses. So what? Despite what they think, word is spreading that there are several wineries worth sampling in South Livermore, and their parking lots sometimes fill up during the weekend.

Such was the case at Iván Tamás on a recent Saturday, where a quintessentially Livermore scene unfolded. Some 20 members of a horsemen's group, who were visiting tasting rooms on horseback, rode up and hitched their steeds next to sports cars parked by the winery's two-story Tuscan-style building. Once inside, they stepped up to the bar to sip a slightly spicy cabernet and a crisp pinot grigio. Then a young couple from San Francisco entered the mix, his black leather jacket and her Doc Martens setting them apart from those in Wranglers and dusty cowboy boots.

"I didn't even know there were wineries out here," said the woman, Jacqui Maher, explaining that she and her friend, Josh Sierles, came across information about Livermore's wine country on the sidewalk.com website.

And what did they expect from Livermore? "The suburbs," said Sierles, with a hint of disdain. "It is the suburbs here, 'til you come down to these streets."

The Iván Tamás winemaker, Steven Mirassou Jr., is one of several Livermore winemakers trying to establish a foothold in the ultra-premium market. Iván Tamás makes up to 65,000 cases a year of likeable, value-oriented wine from fruit grown mostly in the Livermore Valley. Roughly one-third of it is sold as the house chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon for Ritz-Carlton hotels worldwide. Come September, however, Mirassou and his father, who are partners in the winery, will release a Cabernet Sauvignon labeled with their first and middle names, Steven Kent, that will carry a price tag of around \$50 per bottle. The Steven Kent line will branch out from Iván Tamás to become its own winery in a separate facility, if all goes according to their plans.

"It's been my and my father's goal to produce a cabernet that we think rivals any other in the world. We want to create a wine from the Livermore Valley that can age well over time and have a tremendous amount of complexity," said Mirassou. "To be able to

do that from Livermore is very important because it helps bring interest to a region that, frankly, hasn't received the interest it deserves."

A collegial atmosphere prevails among the valley's winemakers, and they welcome news of new and better wines produced locally. "I'm looking forward to the day when a Livermore cabernet can bring 40 to 50 bucks. I think it can," said Earl Ault, owner of Cedar Mountain Winery and past president of the Livermore Valley Winegrowers Association. "The problem is still perception. We still have a legacy of producing sound but inexpensive wines, but people are slowly warming to the fact that our climates and soils are among the best." He and others attribute the favorable growing conditions to a cycle of warm days and cool nights created as gusts of marine air blow eastward. Growers also love the region's gravelly soil, which is often compared to soil found in parts of France's Bordeaux region.

Ault and his wife, Linda, grow 14 acres of chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon at their winery along Tesla Road, where they produce 3,000 to 4,000 cases annually. Their estate chardonnay and cabernet are impressive, but it's their dessert wines that earn accolades. Cedar Mountain's '96 Vintage Port, for example, received a 92 rating from *Wine Enthusiast*. Cedar Mountain also is the temporary home for the valley's newest winery, Big White House, which is focusing on Rhone varietals, particularly syrah and viognier.

The Livermore Valley is poised to attract additional grape growers and winemakers, and not just because the market and climate are ripe for more. Over the past decade, the city and Alameda County — with a big push from the Wentes — created a forward-thinking plan to expand the valley's viticulture, preserve its rural character, and promote wine-related ventures.

The city and county adopted what's known as the South Livermore Valley Plan, which creates an urban limit line and allows no more than 1,350 new homes on the city's southern edge. What's more, new vineyard planting is a condition of that limited housing development. Under the plan, an acre must be planted in South Livermore for every house built and for every acre

developed. Hundreds of acres of new vineyards consequently took root in the valley over the past year or so, as a drive down Tesla or Vallecitos roads reveals. The number of vineyard acres in the

region has grown from around 2,000 in 1997 to at least 3,500, according to Wentes. An agricultural land trust, which the plan also established, aims to permanently protect as much of that

acreage as possible.

The plan also allows landowners in rural areas of the South Livermore Valley to carve their property into 20-

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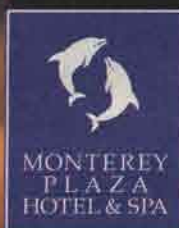
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acre "vineyard estates," each with space for a large home or winery, if the parcel has at least 18 acres of grapevines or another crop. A handful of affluent couples with a desire to live in the country and get involved in the wine business have snapped up some of these 20-acre estates.

What the region has not been able to do, however, is lure a big-name winery that would make heads turn toward Livermore. It almost had a great catch in the form of Randall Graham, winemaker and owner of Bonny Doon Vineyard in Santa Cruz, whose maverick personality and innovative wines have made him a figure to follow in the industry. Graham announced in 1996 that he would plant 100 acres and relocate to the historic Ruby Hill Winery, just over the border from Livermore, in Pleasanton. But he backed out of the deal late last year after a *feng shui* master he hired to "read" the property picked up bad vibes. An unresolved water dispute with a neighbor also played a role in turning him away, he says.

Graham hasn't completely soured on the area, saying it has the potential to produce excellent fruit. "I'd still love to purchase grapes from the Livermore Valley, if I could find a grower to grow oddball grapes there — not merlot, not cabernet," he said.

Perhaps time will show that the Livermore Valley didn't need Graham after all. It already has creative winemakers who are earning recognition and respect. Tom Lane of Concannon Vineyards is a case in point. Concannon is the valley's second-largest winery, and it and Wente were the only 19th-century Livermore wineries to survive Prohibition. (Wente now owns 50 percent of Concannon, along with 50 percent of Iván Tamás and Murrieta's Well.) Lane is building on the success of Concannon's petite sirah by introducing a line inspired by the Rhone area of France. His new offerings include a viognier, a syrah, a couple of blends made with obscure Rhone grapes, and even a "righteously Rhoneish rosé."

Other Livermore winemakers to watch are Thomas Coyne, who specializes in merlot and Rhone-style wines; and Sergio Traverso of Murrieta's Well, who often receives good press in wine trade publications. Unfortunately, Murrieta's Well management closed its tasting room on Mines Road, in part due to light foot traffic. Wente said the company has refined its marketing plans and intends to reopen the tasting room in the year 2000.

Chances are none of the Livermore wineries will have to worry about light foot traffic for long. In fact, in the more crowded future, they and their neighbors may look back on this

moment in Livermore's evolution with nostalgia — as a time when visitors felt they had found a quaint wine region that's relatively unknown, a place where they don't have to elbow their way past others to grab a glass at a tasting room. In short, a destination that's different from what the North Coast appellation typically offers.

As Earl Ault put it, "The fact that we're not Napa Valley shouldn't be held against us. We're an undiscovered gem out here." ☉

Sarah Lavender Smith is a Kensington-based freelance writer.



The picnic area at Concannon Vineyards.

WHEN YOU MAKE THE TREK:

Cedar Mountain Winery, 7000 Tesla Road, (925) 373-6636

Concannon Vineyard, 4590 Tesla Road, (925) 456-2505

Iván Tamás Winery, 5443 Tesla Road, (925) 456-2380

Retzlaff Vineyards, 1356 S. Livermore Ave., (925) 447-8941

Thomas Coyne Winery, 51 E. Vallecitos Road, (925) 373-6541

Wente Vineyards Estate Winery, 5565 Tesla Road, (925) 456-2305

WHERE TO STAY:

Purple Orchid Inn, 4549 Cross Road, (925) 606-8855

WHERE TO EAT:

Garré Vineyard & Winery, 7986 Tesla Road, (925) 371-8200

Stony Ridge Winery, 4948 Tesla Road, (925) 449-0660

Wente Vineyards Restaurant, 5050 Arroyo Road, (925) 456-2450

For more information, contact the Livermore Valley Winegrowers Association, (925) 447-WINE www.dnai.com/~lwva.