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Learn from Top Winemakers at This Luxe Sonoma Festival

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While there are many wine festivals around, few offer the access to winemakers and intimate tastings that Passport to Dry Creek Valley in northern Sonoma County, Calif., boasts.

"I love this event because it is so connected to our guests," says Bill Smart, Vice President and General Manager, Lambert Bridge Winery in Healdsburg. "[Passport] connects wine and food in a very approachable, yet high-end sort of way. The entire experience for guests is about connection and relationships and I think that is what keeps people coming back."



Just two miles wide and 16 miles long, scenic Dry Creek Valley has 9,000 acres of vineyards.

Or perhaps it's the chance to sample wines that are only available through wine clubs or cellar door sales. Smart notes that Lambert Bridge, like many of the other 44 participating producers, will take the opportunity to trot out some special tastes. "We always have a surprise or two up our sleeves for Passport," he says. "We like to surprise our guests with wines that generally aren't sold to the public, along with large formats and library vintages." While their luscious brambly zinfandel is not to be missed – after all it's a signature grape of Dry Creek Valley— Lambert Bridge produces 13 different wines, all in limited quantities.

Mounts Family Winery also likes to pull out all the stops each year – perhaps in part because David and Lana Mounts had been dating for only one week when David invited Lana to attend her first Passport, back in April 1997, then proposed a year later at Passport weekend 1998. To top it all off, their first child Jacob was born Passport weekend 2000.

“We want our Passport guests to experience a true family operation,” says Lana Mounts, co-owner. “You will meet our parents, siblings, children and closest friends who come out specifically to help us out during this joyful, unique festival.” All the while tasting small bites crafted from family recipes representing the couple’s Italian and Russian backgrounds.

For visitors, Dry Creek Valley is a charming mixture of small properties like Mounts and Lambert Bridge and more well-known names like pioneer Seghesio Family Vineyards, which has been growing zinfandel in Sonoma since 1895. Many festival-goers like to start their day at Seghesio to enjoy some classic wines paired with hearty Italian food.



Geek out on wine production or just indulge in tasty tipples at Passport to Dry Creek Valley

Insiders know that a few stops may be off the radar, but are well worth the time. Talty Winery, where winemaker Michael Talty crafts incredibly unique, lean expressions of Zinfandel, is generally only open by appointment, but during the Passport event, guests can talk to the man behind these cult favorites, and taste them this year paired this year with duck and cherry tacos.

And at DaVero Winery, visitors will get a rare opportunity to taste the vintner’s flagship sagrantino – a big-bodied tannic red wine seldom grown outside native Umbria that retails for \$125 per bottle.

While Gustafson Family Vineyards is Dry Creek Valley’s most remote winery, located at 1,200 feet elevation in the mountains, it’s worth the drive for spectacular views in a relaxed environment not to mention tastings of all-estate wines, including Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Rosé, and Zinfandel, along with food pairings by Baci Restaurant, and a visit to the cellar for barrel tasting of Estate Petite Sirah.

To get even closer to the source, several wineries are offering intimate vineyard tours this year– first come, first served on Saturday and by reservation on Sunday. Saturday, make sure to arrive early (tours start at 9:30) to get a peek at the amazingly steep and rocky Owl Hill Vineyard, home to four of the eight Rhone varieties that are produced in small batches at Frick Winery—named by Daily Meal as one of the Top 100 Wineries in the World for 2015. Sunday, reservations are necessary but worth it to tour Pritchett Peaks, one of Mauritson Family Winery’s most unique vineyards. This high-elevation site is popular with area winemakers, and Kokomo, Dutcher Crossing, Seghesio, Bella and Mauritson Family Winery each will share wine they’ve crafted from grapes grown in different blocks within the vineyard.



Food pairings are as varied as the wine.

While there are plenty of opportunities to geek out on wine production, Passport is also a really good party – each stop on the 45 winery trail offers up unique food pairings, some crafted by Michelin-starred chefs, with live music and some lawn games, inviting guests to linger and enjoy. At Mauritsen Family Winery, for example, visitors can try small bites from celebrated chef Charlie Palmer of Aureole New York and Dry Creek Kitchen. Or celebrate farm-to-table cuisine, country western music, dancing and games – not to mention the luscious Chardonnay —at Sbragia Family Vineyards.

For a more formal and exclusive experience, buy a ticket to the Prelude to Passport – a selection of three-course luncheons and dinners held the day before. The meals are hosted in a variety of unique venues, from wine cellars to vineyards formal gardens, often attended by multiple generations of winemakers, offering a vivid peek into the life of the vine. Collier Falls, for example, which makes elegant, beautifully structured red wines favored by top chefs around the country, is presenting a vineyard tour followed by a garden to table luncheon overlooking the pond at Palindrome Vineyard, accompanied of course by a selection of Collier Falls wines presented by owner, Barry Collier. It's an experience Collier himself will likely savor as much as his guests. "Passport is an intimate and personal experience with a chance for consumers to meet owners and winemakers," Collier says. "Drinking great wine, with the perfect food pairings and with views that match Tuscany is hard to beat."

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