

SAHMmelier

STAY AT HOME MOM, LOVER OF WINE

OFF THE BEATEN PATH: DRY CREEK VALLEY

If you've ever been to the wine country in Northern California, you've likely driven along the Silverado Trail in Napa or up Highway 12 in Sonoma. You've probably recognized many of the names as ones you've seen on store shelves, interspersed with new names, smaller producers. But if you head further north, beyond the Russian River Valley, things may begin to look a little different: a little more spread out, a little less crowded, equally beautiful.



As you approach Healdsburg, you enter Dry Creek Valley. This AVA is small, sixteen miles long, two miles wide, but don't let its size fool you. What it lacks in quantity of production, it makes up for in quality. And when I refer to small production, I mean small production. Generally, under 8-10,000 cases per year is considered small production. Some winemakers are doing around 600, while the average for the region 4,750 cases. The valley boasts approximately 9,000 acres of vines and 70 wineries, 150 growers.

The region began producing wine in the second half of the 19th century, but like most regions, Prohibition took its toll on production. When Prohibition ended it was down to only 4 wineries, including Pedroncelli which is still producing lovely wines. It wouldn't experience a resurgence until the 80s when it received its AVA recognition.

There has been a trend among wine lovers of late to seek out the smaller producers, the boutique wineries. The idea is that if you maintain a smaller level of production, you can keep a better handle on the quality of fruit and the wine production. This isn't always the case, but if what I tasted at a recent dinner is any indication, Dry Creek producers are doing this very well.

I was invited to a media dinner with the people from Winemakers of Dry Creek Valley at Justine's Brasserie here in Austin. Because most of the wineries do not produce enough to be widely distributed, they need to come together to support the region, one another, and garner the attention they deserve. The group consisted winemakers, the Executive director, the President of the Board, winemakers, local representatives, owners, and the Public Relations team. We sampled Sauvignon Blanc to Cabernet

Sauvignon, dined on deliciously paired courses, and were given opportunities to speak with each representative. From each person, I gained a unique perspective about the region, the dedication to the industry, the camaraderie and history of the region.

We sampled Sauvignon Blanc from [Dutcher Crossing](#) and [Fritz Underground Winery](#)(as mentioned for [SB day](#)). We had Grenache, Cab, and the region's flagship, Zin. We tried larger producers like Ferrari-Carano and the smaller ones, (like 55 cases small) [Estate 1856](#). These wines were honest, balanced with depth. They were as diverse as they were delicious.

We each took home a bag which included a bottle of wine. My bag included a 2010 [Ferrari-Carano](#) Zinfandel. This was a thoughtful, delicious Zin. California Zins sometimes have a reputation of being fruit bombs. This was nothing of the sort. Bright, alive in the glass, great acid and complexity without being heavy. I told my husband it was like a dark chocolate covered cherry, dusted with espresso and black pepper. Once I tasted it, I adjusted our dinner slightly: we were already having grilled steak but I added goat cheese mashed potatoes with lots of black pepper. It worked beautifully.

So often, the people, the stories, the connection is what makes one wine or region stand out from the others. Dry Creek Valley stands out. The event was meticulously planned, but always felt warm and comfortable. The people were sharing their lives, their families' histories in a glass. It was a wonderful evening.

When we drove through the valley last summer on our way to the Redwoods, we only made one stop. I had made an appointment at Ridge Lytton Springs. It was a wonderful experience with great wines, but I had no idea what was ahead. As we left Geyserville in the morning, we passed sign after sign. It was too early to stop, but I found myself quickly looking up all of the unfamiliar names. At that time, I knew we needed to go back to that region. And now that I've gotten a taste of the Winegrowers of Dry Creek Valley, I only want more.

Many thanks to Michelle McCue of McCue Communications and Ann Peterson of WDCV for the invitation.

Thank you Clayton Fritz of WDCV and Fritz Underground.

Thank Nick Briggs and Dutchers Crossing.

Thank you Rachel Schmidt and Estate 1856.

Thank you Kim Pettit and Ferrari Carano.

Thank you Dashe Cellars for sharing even though you couldn't be with us.

Thank you Justine's for the wonderful food and pairings. Well done.

{I was invited to this event as media. The only compensation was the food and wine served. The thoughts and opinions are my own.}

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