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Kid-Friendly Wineries

By John Beck



(1 of 20) The Noble family from San Francisco, from left, father Jeremy, Evelyn, 7, Ian, 2, mother Elizabeth and Cora, 5, enjoy a picnic in the shade at Preston Farm and Winery in Healdsburg, California, on Sunday, August 13, 2017. (Alvin Jornada / The Press Democrat)

Without naming names, there are more than a few wineries that frown upon kids on the premises. You can tell by the not-so-subtle cringe from a pourer or tasting room manager that reads, “You couldn’t find a babysitter?” It’s almost the same look you get when walking through a casino with kids.

“I’ve definitely seen ‘that look’ many times,” says Shana Bull, mother of a 1½-year-old toddler. By the time he was 1, Ryeson had been to over 50 wineries, breweries “and two cider places.”

“I like wineries that aren’t pretentious,” she says. It’s a crucial part of her job as writer, mom blogger and social media influencer to get out to Sonoma County events, whether concerts or brewery openings or wine festivals. “My entire life is tag-teaming, with my husband watching for awhile and then taking turns. Literally, I think we do say, ‘tag — you’re it.’”

Over the past decade, more and more wineries have begun catering to the total family experience. Sometimes all it takes is a “kids area” decked out with homemade wine-cork boats, like the one at Gundlach Bundschu’s annual Huichica Music Festival. Or even a hot dog cart at a Red Car rosé release. Or a pool to cool off in at Francis Ford Coppola Winery.

Other times, it's a relaxed spread like the Sunday jug-wine picnics at Preston Farm and Winery or the goats and chickens at Truett Hurst or the Wednesday night music and food trucks at Paradise Ridge Winery.

With a little strategy and a designated driver, it's an easy diversion that doesn't beg for a babysitter. And it means that Mom and Dad can finally unwind and partake in one of their favorite pastimes before they had kids.

"I remember a conversation we had at the marketing committee level about a year and a half ago," says Ann Petersen, executive director of Winegrowers of Dry Creek Valley. "Everyone was saying that kids and families at wineries was really inevitable and that rather than fighting it, they were beginning to embrace it — even if it wasn't actually being said in a public way."

After Larson Family Winery co-owner Becky Larson had twin boys in the early 2000s, "our friends that had kids would come to town and we would go wine tasting and worry about the kids kicking up the perfectly immaculate gravel at different wineries." Their solution: Driving an RV from winery to winery "and someone would wait in the motor home with the kids while the others went wine tasting."

It was a creative solution, but one that is no longer necessary. Tapping into a rich family tradition that goes back five generations, Larson says the winery saw a niche opportunity in creating "a place that was family-friendly." Weekend wine tastings at the former Carneros rodeo ring have evolved into a giant family picnic, with farm animals, coloring tables, sidewalk chalk, a large field to roam or ride wagons and tractors — all topped off with juice for the kids and picnic tables. "Our customers and members have watched our family grow up, and we have enjoyed watching theirs," says Larson.

At Paradise Ridge Winery, a larger-than-life interactive sculpture garden has entertained several generations of kids and now inspires thousands of family Instagram moments. "Anybody who walks through it feels like a kid," says co-owner Sonia Byck-Barwick. "When you have kids, you pick up their energy."

Installing the 4-acre exhibition in the mid-1990s, winery founder Walter Byck collaborates with the Voight Family Sculpture Foundation to bring in a rotating cast of world-famous sculptures. Today, the outdoor gallery is named Marijke's Grove, after his late wife Marijke Hoenselaars. "I think interacting with art is very important for kids because often it's something they're taught to look at it, but they can't touch," says his daughter, Sonia Byck-Barwick. "Now they can walk through them and look at them from many different perspectives."

Some of the pieces are wind-powered; others make noise. And David Best's Temple of Remembrance offers a sanctuary filled with prayer flags where visitors can write a note to someone they've lost. "We always encourage parents to take the kids down to the sculpture grove first," says Byck-Barwick. "Let them run around and get a little tired and then they're willing to wait for that half-hour or 45 minutes of tasting."

To help pass the time, there are coloring books in the tasting room and a picnic area nearby. But occasionally she has to point out what might seem obvious to most parents. "Some people will come drink wine and relax and let their kids run. When they do that, it can distract from other tasters. We love having kids, but they still have to be watched." The Wines and Sunsets events every Wednesday often turn into kiddie dance parties, with live music and food trucks.

Benziger Winery marketing manager Carley Burns has two young children and “likes to know which wineries we’ll be welcome at.” One of their favorite spots is Truett Hurst Winery in Dry Creek Valley, where the goats, chickens and sheep are celebrities on par with the winemaker, and Dry Creek runs through the back of the property. “There’s also a nice grassy open area where you don’t feel like you have to take your kids into the tasting room,” she says.

It’s a similar vibe at Benziger in Glen Ellen, where 45-minute tram tours lead families up a hill on an educational adventure that includes a cave tour. “We definitely encourage people who bring kids to do the biodynamic tram tour,” she says. “It’s kind of fun for everyone.”

Along the way, you can see hawks, quail and jack rabbits, stop off at an insectary garden to see plants that encourage helpful insects, check out lemon, apple and cherry trees, ogle heavy machinery at the crush pad and walk through the wine cave. At the end, while parents taste wine, the kids sample the grape juice.

Often the most important tip for parents is to do your homework before stopping off at any winery. “Check out their personality on social media,” says Shana Bull, who highly recommends the Benziger tram rides, too. “You can tell pretty quickly if you go to their website or social media accounts if they’re buttoned up and stuffy. And if you still can’t tell, don’t be afraid to call or email them.”

Martin Ray Winery near Santa Rosa, for example, doesn’t allow anyone under 21 on tours. Whereas Coppola Winery in Geyserville encourages kids and families to jump in the pool and roll around in a teepee stocked with board games. According to family lore, Francis Ford Coppola saw so many kids asking their parents if they could jump in the water fountain at his Inglenook Winery in Napa, that he decided it was finally time to build a winery pool for the kids. “It’s always good to know ahead of time,” says Benziger’s Burns. “You wouldn’t want to be the Mom and Dad bringing your kids and getting the dirty looks.

Paradise Ridge Winery: Wines and Sunsets parties offer an easy family escape every Wednesday night, with food trucks and live music through the end of October. Food truck offerings range from oysters to tacos to tri-tip. Tickets: \$10, kids 6 and older need a ticket. 4545 Thomas Lake Harris Drive, Santa Rosa. prwinery.com.

Larson Family Winery: Reserve outdoor tastings and picnic tables daily from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. for \$15 per adult. The annual Harvest Hoedown on Oct. 22, features horse-pulled wagon rides through the vineyards, pony rides, grape stomps for kids and adults and a jumpy house. 23355 Millerick Road, Sonoma. Larsonfamilywinery.com.

Benziger Winery: 45-minute tram tours roll through biodynamic farming country, ending with wine caves and tastings (grape juice for kids). \$10. Tip: Normally the sheep are not visible on the tram tour, but in the wet and woolly months of January-March, there’s a good chance you’ll see sheep and their lambs. 1883 London Ranch Road, Glen Ellen. Benziger.com.

Francis Ford Coppola Winery: The pool is open until Oct. 28. You can reserve a “cabine” and lounge chairs for 4 people for \$170-\$215, depending on the day of the week at francisfordcoppolawinery.com/en/visit/pools-andcabines. And just in case you were wondering if you can leave your children at the pool while you go wine tasting, the answer is: “No, children must be accompanied and supervised by a parent or guardian at all times.” 300 Via Archimedes, Geyserville. Francisfordcoppolawinery.com

Preston Farm and Winery: Every Sunday, Lou Preston busts out the Jim Guadagni jug wine for a laid-back family picnic that you can cobble together from the farm's homegrown olive oil, baked bread and fresh and pickled vegetables. Farm tours are available at 11 a.m. every Tuesday-Saturday. \$30 for walking tour and tasting. 9282 W. Dry Creek Road, Healdsburg. Prestonfarmandwinery.com.

Truett Hurst Winery: Kids might not know much about malolactic fermentation, but they know they love goats, chickens and sheep. And they know a nice open space to run around in when they see one. Added bonus: Peer from the banks of Dry Creek at the ongoing salmon habitat restoration. 5610 Dry Creek Road, Healdsburg. truetthurstwinery.com

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