

# ESTHER MOBLEY ON WINE

## Laid-Back Dry Creek Tasting Tour

Sunday, October 30th

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## SONOMA COUNTY

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# Laid-back Dry Creek tasting tour

A trek through northern Sonoma County is a study in microclimates. One moment, you're engulfed in a veil of fog on Westside Road, and the next you emerge into Dry Creek Valley's relentless sun. A few hundred yards in Healdsburg can be the difference between Pinot Noir country and Zinfandel country.

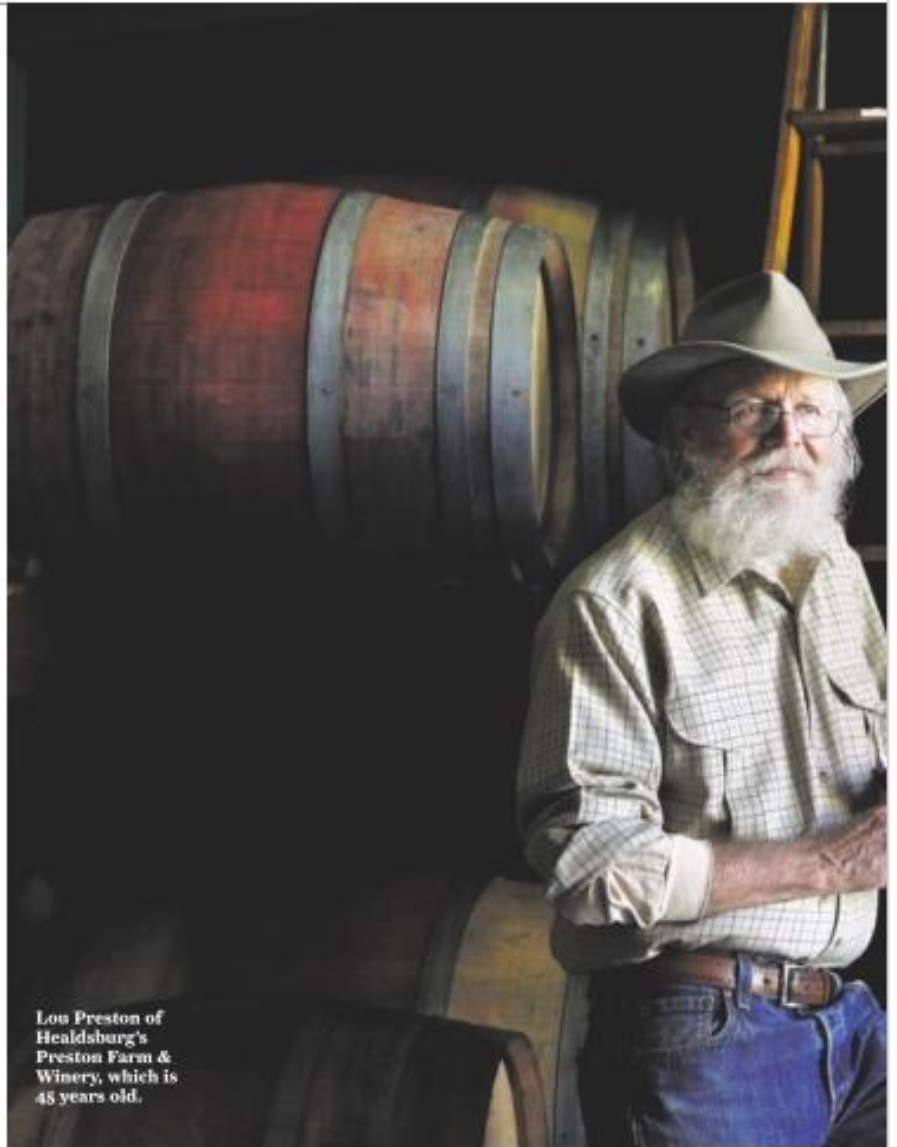
While Russian River Pinot, and Westside Road, claim much of Healdsburg's wine-tourism glory, Dry Creek Valley's diverse tinkering with Zinfandel, Cabernet, Sauvignon Blanc — not to mention some compelling plantings of Cinsault, Montepulciano, Roussanne and Mourvedre — offer a more laid-back, and possibly more exciting, route for the Wine Country visitor.

Tiny by American Viticultural Area (AVA) standards, Dry Creek Valley is longer (16 miles) than it is wide (2 miles), bisecting both the Russian River and Lake Sonoma. Dry Creek Road, running parallel to the epony-

mous creek, is the main thoroughfare connecting this area's wineries to downtown Healdsburg.

But if you cross over the creek at Lambert or Yoakim bridges, you'll find yourself on West Dry Creek Road, where the speed limits are slower, and the turns more winding. You're more likely to encounter bicycle traffic than tour-bus traffic. Virtually all wineries are open without appointments. It's a reminder that not all of Wine Country has been mined for \$50 tasting fees.

I'd be remiss to direct you to West Dry Creek without imploring you to stop at the Dry Creek General Store: for a coffee and blueberry scone in the morning, a sandwich at lunchtime or a beer at the end of the day. Overpriced Sonoma County memorabilia notwithstanding, the store offers a palette of local colors not likely to be glimpsed in the boutiques or bistros of downtown Healdsburg. It's classic Dry Creek.



Lou Preston of Healdsburg's Preston Farm & Winery, which is 45 years old.

### Preston Farm & Winery

Down a bumpy road off the already-bumpy West Dry Creek Road is Preston, 125 verdant acres of vineyards,

other crops and animals. Lou and Susan Preston have made their living off this land since the 1970s, and it's hard to imagine a more bucolic setting. The tasting room is casual, designed for standing at the bar or grabbing a glass (or

bottle) to bring outside. There are bocce courts and picnic tables, so plan accordingly. A farm store next to the tasting room sells produce and meat from the farm; you could do worse than a loaf of Preston's sourdough and olive oil,



Preston Garnaway / Special to The Chronicle

though the oil (\$45/500 ml) doesn't come cheap.

A chalkboard behind the tasting bar denotes the wine selections. Be sure to try the Madam Preston (\$30/bottle), one of the winery's best-known offerings; the Viog-

nier-dominant, white Rhone-style blend is creamy and decadent, tasting of cantaloupe and hazelnuts. When it's available, taste the winery's Vin Gris (\$26), a rosé of Cinsault and Mourvedre that's delicate and spice driven.

Then move on to the floral Carignane (\$36), the chalky, elegant Zinfandel (\$36) and the gamey, slightly funky Syrah (\$36).

9282 W. Dry Creek Road, Healdsburg (707) 433-3372, [www.prestonvineyards.com](http://www.prestonvineyards.com).

Open 11 a.m.-4:30 p.m. daily, without an appointment. Tasting fee \$10.

### Lambert Bridge Winery

It may look unassuming from the road, but Lambert Bridge Winery is striking inside. High ceilings and redwood paneling recall a sort of luxurious mountain lodge. Because it puts no wine into distribution, the winery is a bit of a sleeper: You won't have seen Lambert Bridge in wine shops, nor in many restaurants. Which means that the tasting room is its public face, and the charming wines are worth discovering here.

Overall, the wines are made in a polished, elegant style; absent are the rough-hewn, rustic tannin structure common in many Dry Creek Valley reds. The focus is less on Zin than on Bordeaux varieties, and you'll have the opportunity to taste varietal Malbec and Petite Verdot, seldom bottled on their own. Lambert Bridge's are also among the pricier wines in this area, with some edging north of \$100 a bottle.

But the tasting flights available at the bar, without an appointment, represent good value. (Seated tastings, some of which include snacks, are available by appointment for \$35-\$50 per person.) The \$15 flight offers an excellent, savory Zinfandel (\$50) and a dense, chocolatey Petite Sirah (\$55). For \$25, your flight will include the floral Viognier (\$82) a juicy Merlot (\$60) and the hedonistic flagship, the Crane Creek Cuvée (\$110).

4085 W. Dry Creek Road, Healdsburg (707) 431-9600, [www.lambertbridge.com](http://www.lambertbridge.com). Open 10:30 a.m.-5 p.m. daily without an appointment. Tasting fee \$15 to \$25.

### A. Rafanelli Winery

One of the oldest wineries in Dry Creek, A. Rafanelli is also something of an anomaly — the only winery on this stretch of West Dry Creek requiring an appointment, the most highly allocated, and on the expensive end of the region's spectrum. When you make an appointment (and you must call — they don't do email), they'll give you a gate code. It's almost enough to make you feel like you're in Napa.

But the whole affair turns out to be completely unpretentious, in the way of West Dry Creek. Tastings are held standing, in the barrel room, not privately. You'll taste only two wines, Zinfandel (\$42) and Merlot (\$38). They make a Cabernet (\$55) too, but claimed not to have enough bottles left of the current vintage to taste it. A Bordeaux-style blend (\$46), apparently also in short supply, was likewise unavailable for tasting. If you'd like to see the rest of the winery, a staff member will happily take you on a quick tour; if not, you can just taste the two and jet. The result is a tasting that feels easy, quick and pleasant, not something to occupy your entire afternoon. And despite the fact that A. Rafanelli is one of the few Dry Creek producers with a wine that costs more than \$100, there's no tasting fee. Go figure.

4685 W. Dry Creek Road, Healdsburg (707) 433-1385, [www.arafanellivinery.com](http://www.arafanellivinery.com). Open daily, times flexible, by appointment. Tastings complimentary.

### Quivira Vineyards

Biodynamic farming is the focus at Quivira, which has 93

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acres of vineyards around Dry Creek. The estate is lush and exuberant, practically humming with fecundity. Gardens, ponds, beehives, pigs — it's enough to tempt you to drink the Rudolf Steiner Kool-Aid.

If that sounds appealing, you might call ahead to schedule a tour of the estate (\$25, taking just over an hour). But walk-in visitors to Quivira can take a self-guided tour around the gardens and introduce themselves to the swine and chickens, after a flight at the tasting bar. A Rhone-centric flight is \$15 and includes wines like Viognier, Grenache and Syrah. It's a good option if you've had enough Dry Creek Zinfandel, already, though Quivira's "Classic Dry Creek Valley" flight (\$25) showcases the best of what it does. Its Fig Tree Sauvignon Blanc (\$24) — so named for the 140-year-old fig tree on the property — is perennially one of the finest in Sonoma County, zippy and marked by verbena and lemongrass flavors. Zinfandel offerings (\$42-\$48) range from elegant to jammy; pay special attention to the Katz Vineyard bottling, from century-old vines.

4900 W. Dry Creek Road, Healdsburg (707) 431-8333, [www.quivirawine.com](http://www.quivirawine.com). Open 10 a.m.-4 p.m. daily, without an appointment. Tasting fee \$15-\$25.

## Martorana Family Winery

"Help! Wines trapped in bottle, need rescuing" reads a handwritten sign in the driveway of Martorana Family Winery. Few wineries exude West Dry Creek's honey allure more charmingly than Martorana. The estate's organic vineyards dwarf the modest



Shawn Somawantzer / Special to The Chronicle

winery, whose tasting room is underground in the cellar. A chalkboard behind a tasting bar lists the day's offerings.

The Martoranas, who have been farming 35 acres of organic vineyards here for 30 years, in 2005 began making wine themselves. It still feels like a homespun operation, in the best way. Sidle up to the bar, and a friendly attendant will take you through a generously portioned flight of six wines. All from their estate, the lineup includes leathery Zinfandel (\$36), rustic Merlot (\$34) and subtle, understated Chardonnay (\$28). Make sure to try the round, crisp Sauvignon Blanc (\$24), but the best wine on offer is the elegant, dried-herb-inflected Cabernet Sauvignon (\$48). Friendly

service is privileged over in-depth wine discussion. No one will make you worry that you didn't ask enough questions about the oak barrel treatment or that you may have mispronounced "malolactic."

You can taste inside, or grab a bottle and wander out back to the bocce courts and picnic tables. This is one of just two wineries with direct access to Dry Creek, so take advantage of that and walk down to the banks. The estate also produces excellent olive oil, though it's not quite as attractively priced as its

wines.  
5956 W. Dry Creek Road, Healdsburg, (707) 433-1909, [www.martoranafamilywinery.com](http://www.martoranafamilywinery.com). Open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. daily, no appointment necessary. Tasting fee \$10.

## Yoakim Bridge Vineyards & Winery

An overwhelming sense of cuteness may accost you at Yoakim Bridge, as it did me, to the extent that by the end of a visit with proprietors David Cooper and Virginia

Morgan, you may have persuaded yourself to move to Sonoma County and buy a vineyard. The couple met in middle life, in culinary school in San Francisco, and afterward bought a small, 40-year-old, head-trained Zinfandel vineyard here, which is the foundation of their 2,500-case winery.

Cooper is the winemaker, Morgan the bookkeeper — and that's it. "Sometimes, with my shoulder, I have someone come in to help me with punchdowns," Cooper admits when asked how he can do all the winemaking by himself. The two staff the tasting room, too, which is why they're open only Friday through Sunday. All visitors get a meatball, ladled from a slow-cooker perched behind the tasting bar. The meatballs are store bought, but the sauce — a tasty Zinfandel reduction — is Morgan's.

The wines are sound and often rustic: powerful Zinfandel from their estate (\$40-\$42), sweet-fruited Merlot (\$42), dense Petite Sirah (\$46, and mysteriously misspelled on the label as Petite Syrah). For all of Yoakim Bridge's homespun appeal, the tasting room feels supremely comfortable. (That's to say nothing of Morgan and Cooper's home, adjacent to the tasting room, a gorgeous renovation of an old farmhouse.) You'll depart happy, and possibly with a jar of meatball sauce.

7209 Dry Creek Road, Healdsburg, (707) 433-8511, [www.yoakimbridge.com](http://www.yoakimbridge.com). Open 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Friday-Sunday, without an appointment. Tasting fee \$10.

## Bella Vineyards & Wine Caves

If subterranean grottoes thrill you, visiting Bella will



James Tanasian / Special to The Chronicle



Kim Carroll / A. Rafanelli Winery

be an easy sell. The main attraction of this winery, founded in 1996 by Scott and Lynn Adams, is its caves. Built in 2002, these caves are not quite the spelunker wonders that you might find in Napa Valley at places like Jarvis or Anica, but they nevertheless breathe that quintessential Wine Country cave charm, apparently more popular than ever. And unlike its counterparts to the east, Bella's caves are accessible without an appointment.

Belly up to the tasting bar inside the cave, and you'll taste, for example, a briny Santa Lucia Highlands Chardonnay (\$30); the pleasing, if basic, Sonoma County Zinfandel (\$20); a rustic Petite Sirah (\$38); and the Lily Hill

Zinfandel (\$45), punchy and sanguine, from the estate's 85-year-old vines. If you like late-harvest Zinfandel, you'll enjoy Bella's (\$25), and they'll offer you a dark chocolate peanut butter cup to accompany it. Outside is a nice lawn for picnics, but beware of yellow jackets, especially if you've got a glass of the late harvest.

9711 W. Dry Creek Road, Healdsburg, (707) 473-9271 [www.bellawinery.com](http://www.bellawinery.com). Open 11 a.m.-4:30 p.m. daily without an appointment. Tasting fee \$20.

*Esther Mobley is The San Francisco Chronicle's wine, beer and spirits writer. Email: [emobley@sfgchronicle.com](mailto:emobley@sfgchronicle.com) Twitter: @Esther\_mobley Instagram: @esthermob*



James Tanasian / Special to The Chronicle



James Tanasian / Special to The Chronicle

**Clockwise from top left: Quivira Vineyards focuses on biodynamic farming. A. Rafanelli is the only winery on this stretch of West Dry Creek Road requiring an appointment. Bella Vineyards' tasting room is in a cave; customers sample wine from a barrel at the Healdsburg winery.**

<http://personalshopper.sfgate.com/SS/Page.aspx?secid=160914&pagenum=9&sstarg=&facing=false&>