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ROBERT YOUNG ESTATE WINERY

JUN
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LOVE

It's the kind of tale Hollywood gravitates towards. A sweeping saga of six generations of farmers: their lives, loves, struggles and reverence for the land—it almost sounds like the blurb for an Oprah book club selection. But it's the real story of the Robert Young Estate Winery and the narrative is still unfolding.

Set in an idyllic corner of Alexander Valley lays a 450-acre parcel of land that was settled in 1858 by Peter Young—the patriarch of a family of pioneering farmers. In the early days Peter grew wheat and ran cattle. Later the family grew prunes and cultivated their ties to the community, and in 1963 Peter's grandson Robert planted grapes and the Robert Young Vineyards were established.

Today the children of Robert Young—JoAnn, Jim, Susan and Fred—work to and maintain the vineyards and winery and instill the tenets of responsible farming and dedication to community in their own children and grandchildren.

The Scions

When I arrive a cheery JoAnn Young (fourth generation) welcomes me to the property offering coffee and muffins. Her granddaughter Rachel (sixth generation) is my host for the day. A recent college grad, Rachel worked her first harvest last year and is now learning the ropes of the family business.

Before we visit the tasting room, JoAnn and Rachel give me a quick tour of the caves.

The door opens to a main chamber filled with the fragrant heady scent of oak and wine. We follow a tight path between the barrels as it snakes along to the reserve tasting room. The intimate space has a long high table for informal tastings and private events. Behind the tasting bar made of barrel staves hangs an intricate piece of metal artwork, the family crest made by Fred Young. Outside the cave there's a shaded patio area set with table and chairs with a view of the vineyards across the road. The patio is dog-friendly for friendly dogs and, most certainly, people-friendly, too.

Adjacent to the main estate residence is a large white clapboard barn that houses the winery and tasting room. The tasting room is smaller than expected, it's as if you just wandered into the family kitchen or den and the feeling is rustic and welcoming. This is not a glass, marble and chrome temple of wine. It's simple and functional, with historic family photos adorning the walls. The motto here, first and foremost, is "Treat everyone as if they are in your home." And with several family members in residence on the estate, the adage rings true.

Tasting room manager Jeff Noel employs the philosophy: "I'm here to help you find the wines you will enjoy." Like a docent at a wine museum, Noel illuminates aspects of the wine and production process that deepen not only your understanding of the wine but also your enjoyment. A high percentage of the guests have been referred by others who had a great experience and Noel is honored to get so many references. "We have a lot of pride—it's super important that the customer feels comfortable no matter what," says Noel.

In the tasting room you can try up to eight different small-production wines. Some wines are very limited with only four to six barrels produced. Only two wines are available in the marketplace, making the tasting room one of the only places you can try the full line.

The Alexander Valley Chardonnay, Merlot, and Scion Cabernet Sauvignon are the signature wines, the cornerstones of the program, and are known for consistency from vintage to vintage. “We are not about trends,” says Noel. Instead they are about following traditions, paying attention to the land and determining what the soils do best.

Richard Arrowood established the family wine style starting in 1997. Then in 2001 Arrowood hired winemaker Kevin Warren, and all the wines have been made by Warren ever since.

Warren has been given full reign to create what he considers the finest blend each year. With an intense scrutiny of the vineyards and selection of ideal blocks, Warren creates a consistency and continuity in the wines that belie the fact the blend percentages have never been duplicated in any vintage.

The signature estate wines include: Area 27 Chardonnay, Alexander Valley Chardonnay, Merlot, Big Rock Block Cabernet Sauvignon, Bob’s Burn Pile Cabernet Sauvignon—100 percent Cabernet, which has become cult in scope and esteem. The flagship wine, Scion Cabernet Sauvignon, is a fusion of California and Bordeaux styles, with tremendous structure and balance.

Of note is the 2012 Merlot—tasting room and wine club only—92 percent Merlot with 4 percent Malbec and 4 percent Petite Verdot. It’s full of dark cherry and spice with a dense and full structure. This is Merlot as it was meant to be, rich, satisfying and palate pleasing.

There are also several limited production wines on hand with Malbec, Petite Verdot, and Cabernet Franc that showcase the incredible estate fruit. The Barrel Select Chardonnay uses 100 percent new French oak grand cru select barrels by Seguin Moreau—the world’s largest cooperage. The grand cur barrels are made with the tighter center-grain pattern in the oak and allow for richer, more concentrated flavor profiles with a long finish. Look for the icon on the label that indicates it’s a wood-barrel designate.

Barrel designates? Yes, I know, the nitty is getting gritty now. But perhaps cooperage can be destiny. I found there was a clear difference in the Barrel Select Chardonnay most noticeable on the nose and especially on the finish—the wine is not overwhelmed by the oak; it’s elevated.

If you are strict anti-oak, maybe it's time to re-think your barrel. "We think of our barrel program like a chef's spice rack," says Noel. "All the different barrels impart specific flavors. It's not just the oak, it's the grain." If you are on the fence about oak, the 2013 Barrel Select Chardonnay made with clone #17 may be the one that pulls you over.

The Outlook

Up behind the barn a trail dotted with heritage oaks climbs through the pastures and vineyard blocks to the newest section of the estate—a large pergola-covered deck with the most outstanding views of the valley below. This jaw-dropping vista stretches for miles and has changed little since the land was first settled. The pavilion will be used as a venue for wine club events and splendid weddings. Already married? The view alone may entice you to renew your VOWS.

From the hilltop it's easy to see why this magic corner of the Alexander Valley, at the apex of Geysers and Red Winery roads, is a cyclist's dream. The winery is a popular stop for bike tour groups and cyclists making the Alexander Valley loop.

Looking down on the property you get a birds-eye view of the towering redwoods behind the estate house, a cherished family gathering spot for special occasions. Rachel tells me the Redwoods were planted when her great-grandparents Robert and Gertrude got married, and that soon she and her cousins will plant new trees on the property to establish their own roots and mark the sixth generation.

Circling the Wagons of History

At a time when many wine families are selling out, divvying up, and leaving the business altogether, the Young family is circling the wagons of history and fostering the next generation, the scions, as they carry forward the legacy of Robert Young Wine. SD

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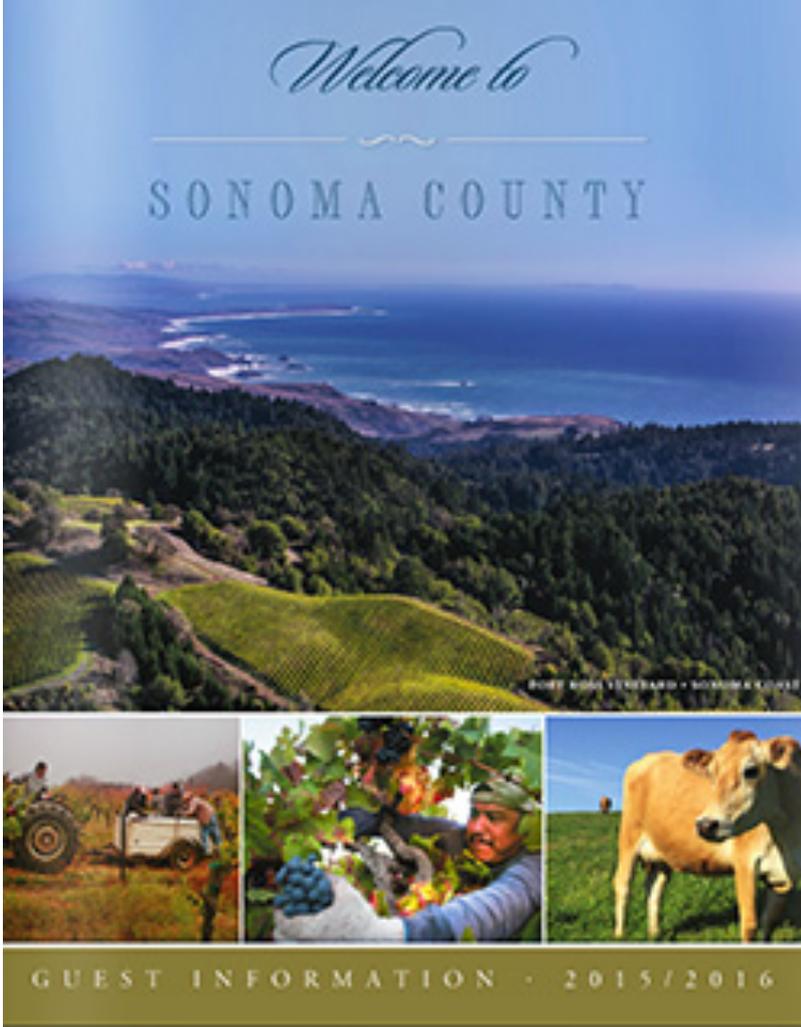
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