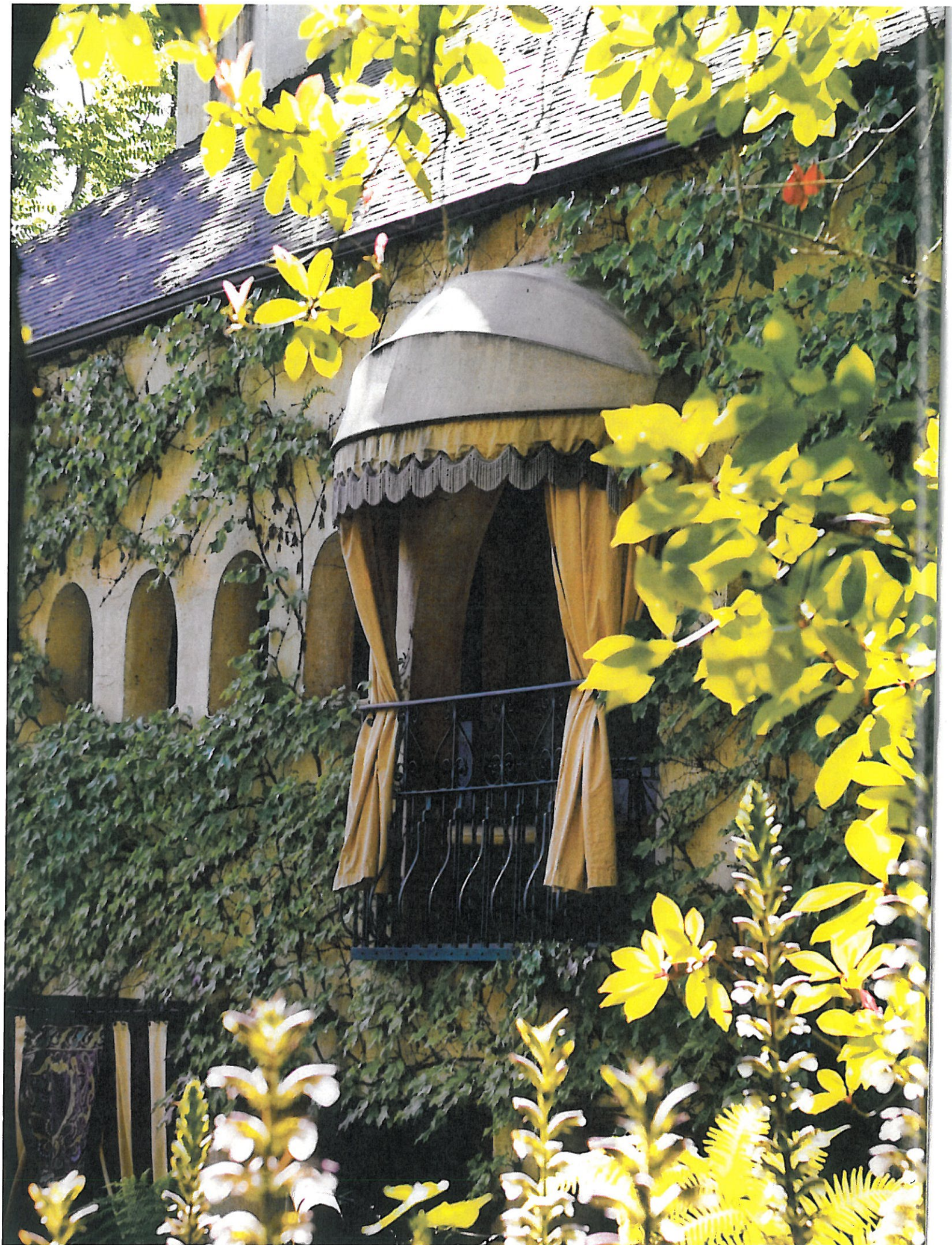


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Liquid Refreshment

Savoring Sonoma wine-country getaways

BY MATT VILLANO

STANDING IN A CAVE that's been tunneled into a hill crowned by a copse of gnarled oak trees, I'm nose-deep into a bold yet fruity glass of Super T-Rex Tuscan-style red wine, when it hits me: Batman might have been on to something. There's a pleasant echo. The air, at 57 degrees, is cool but not chilly. The rounded walls, painted a pleasing sand color, create a sense of intimacy.

This is the Deerfield Ranch Winery tasting room, where knowledgeable employees serve samples of handcrafted, certified-organic wines. The room is at the center of a 23,000-square-foot, horizontal-wine-glass-shaped cave that allows the winery to age barrels of wine at a consistent temperature year-round. Super T-Rex—a blend of Sangiovese, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Dolcetto—is named for the winery's owners, the Rex family, and honors their Italian heritage and the great "Super Tuscan" Italian wines.

My wife, Nikki, and I have driven past Deer-

field hundreds of times, without really noticing it, on our way from our home in Healdsburg, north of here, to the city of Sonoma. We're delighted finally to become acquainted with the winery's charms.

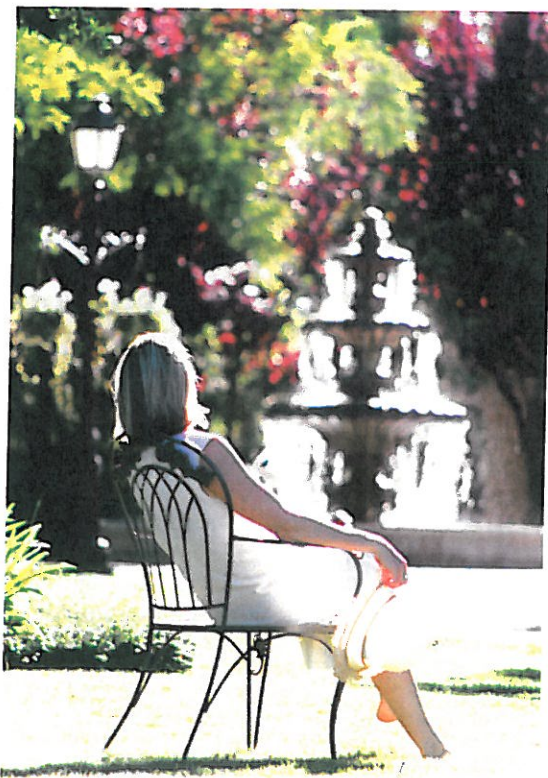
We had help deciding to pay the winery a visit. Deerfield is a stop on a three-winery tour arranged by Kenwood Inn and Spa as part of its two-night "Wine Country Splendor" package. Over the course of an unforgettable day, Nikki and I are being chauffeured through

the Sonoma Valley in a black Cadillac Escalade. Thanks to our swanky ride from tasting room to tasting room, we feel like VIPs. It's a great way to experience the valley in style.

"Wine Country Splendor" is one of the many sit-back-and-enjoy wine-related packages offered by resorts in Sonoma County, which is home to more than 300 wineries. Some packages include transportation. Others include food. Still others include activities such as hot-air ballooning, bike riding, cooking lessons and horseback riding. What the packages all have in common is that they call upon local knowledge to enable visitors to experience and appre-



Facing page: Kenwood Inn and Spa, a European-style oasis, offers a "Wine Country Splendor" package that includes tours of several notable wineries. Above and left: Guests can enjoy a "Blissful Escape" at Vintners Inn and sample Ferrari-Carano wines.



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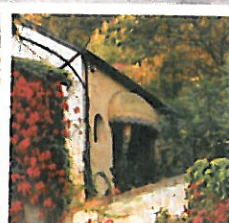
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ciate the region's exceptional wines and wineries.

"The best way to explore the wine country is to let the local experts share their secrets," says Dave Cortez, our driver on the Kenwood trip, and a local tour operator for more than 20 years. "Most of us know the people and places that even the very best guidebooks don't."

Wine Country Splendor

The Kenwood Inn and Spa (707-833-1293, www.kenwoodinn.com), located in Kenwood, southeast of Santa Rosa, is a "find" in and of itself. The unassuming but posh resort is tucked behind an ivy-covered wall alongside the Sonoma Highway, the main thoroughfare from our neck of the woods to the rest of Sonoma and Napa wine country.

Inside the rock wall lies a Europeanlike oasis. Six Mediterranean-style buildings surround three quiet courtyards and two tranquil swimming pools. Each of the 29 guestrooms has a gas fireplace, antique furniture and a cavernous bathroom. Numerous rooms have jetted tubs, and one has a steam shower. There's also a private 10-table Italian restaurant and a full-service spa with five treatment rooms.

Nikki and I have come to Kenwood for a mini-escape. Since welcoming our first child in May of 2009, time alone with each other has been rare. We started to unwind the minute we entered Kenwood's grounds the night before, and we had a wonderful conversation over a quiet "three-tastes seasonal wine-and-food flight" that was included in our package. The fare changes with the seasons and includes ingredients from local purveyors such as creameries, olive-oil producers, ranches and wineries. In

May, for instance, one of the three "tastes" is braised pork belly from a California ranch, over creamy Parmigiano Reggiano polenta with a late-harvest-Zinfandel agrodolce reduction. It's paired with a 2008 HKG Russian River Valley Estate Pinot Noir that won a gold medal in this year's *San Francisco Chronicle* Wine Competition. The bright, classic-style Pinot, from Healdsburg's Hop Kiln Winery, is lush and rich, with strawberry, cola and even violet floral flavors.

The first stop on today's "Splendor" excursion was Chateau St. Jean, a winery just up the road from the inn. Here, Philippe Thibault, hospitality operations manager, gave us a quick tour of the winery's picnic area and glorious gardens, then led us into a circa-1920 chateau, the building that hosts tastings of the winery's reserve wines. From a small table in the chateau's original dining room—a spot with spectacular views (through original leaded-glass windows) of the Cabernet Franc vineyard—Nikki and I tasted numerous wines over the course of an hour. Our favorite: the 2005 Cinq Cépages, a rich, deep Bordeaux-style blend with black raspberry, mocha and blueberry nuances.

Next on the tour was the Benziger Family Winery in Glen Ellen, south of Kenwood, where visitors can take a 45-minute tram tour of the 85-acre vineyard or experience it on foot via designated trails. The Benziger family has been cultivating grapes

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The Farmhouse Inn and Restaurant's "Gourmet Getaway" includes dinner at two top restaurants. Farmhouse Restaurant Chef Steve Litke, above left, emphasizes local ingredients, and innovative dishes such as "Rabbit, Rabbit, Rabbit," shown above.

Continued from page 23.

on Sonoma Mountain for nearly 30 years, and the winery uses a sustainable, biodynamic—holistic, natural-balance—approach. The winery tour includes tastings of four wines. One of the standouts was the bright, semisweet 2008 organic Muscat Canelli, whose floral aromas are followed by melon, pineapple and citrus flavors.

By the time we arrived at Deerfield Ranch, we were hungry, and happy that our package included a picnic lunch from Kenwood. As Cortez handed over prosciutto-and-mozzarella sandwiches flavored with basil, Deerfield Tasting Room Manager John Vietti welcomed us to the winery, then guided us to a picnic table at the crushpad—the spot where workers crush the grapes each fall.

Following our meal, Vietti led us into the tasting cave, where couches and chairs were grouped for relaxing conversation. Candles glowed. Jazz played on a radio. Walker, the winery poodle, lounged on a rug.

Standing next to the bar during our tasting, we sip the Super T and chat with Deerfield founder and head winemaker Robert Rex. He explains that he believes winemaking is like gourmet cooking. His winemakers look for the finest ingredients (i.e., grapes), make the wines by hand in small lots and taste them at various stages in order to “nudge them in one direction or another,” he says.

The tasting-room ambiance and our time with

the owner are both so delightful, we feel like we’re enjoying a glass of good wine in the living room of a good friend.

Blissful Escape

The three-night “Blissful Escape” package at the Vintners Inn (707-575-7350, www.vintnersinn.com) in Santa Rosa spotlights the grapes themselves. The 44-room luxury property sits amid more than 90 acres of sustainably tended vineyard—one of the 19 vineyards whose grapes are used in the wines produced by sister company Ferrari-Carano Vineyards and Winery.

During a solo visit to experience the package (Nikki has obligations at home), I see that the spacious guestrooms are located in three two-story buildings situated for views of grape vines, courtyards, fountains and landscaped gardens. The rooms feature gas fireplaces and amber-colored design elements, and are elegant, warm and inviting.

In addition to enjoying inn amenities such as the whirlpool, sun deck and bocce court, “Blissful Escape” guests receive complimentary Ferrari-Carano Fumé Blanc, and a plate of local artisan cheeses accompanied by a sparkling wine from Sonoma County’s Korbel & Bros. Korbel makes a lighter, drier, “California-style champagne” and was named American Winery of the Year in the international 2008 Wine Star Awards. Guests also receive a full hot breakfast each day; two massages at the

property’s Courtyard Spa, which is designed for couple’s treatments; a \$100 certificate for dining at the John Ash & Co. restaurant next to the inn; a \$25 certificate for Healdsburg’s Bovo restaurant; and a reserved spot on a Ferrari-Carano Vineyards and Winery tour and tasting.

It’s an impressive lineup but, for me, the Vintners Inn experience is all about the vineyard. My immersion in viticulture begins immediately: From the balcony of my second-floor room, I look out on what appears to be a sea of vines.

When I’m seated for dinner at John Ash & Co., the grape vines seem so close, I contemplate reaching out and plucking some grapes to eat. I content myself with a breast of Sonoma County duck, a side of creamy thyme polenta, and a nice 2007 Ferrari-Carano Green Valley of Russian River Valley Pinot Noir. Barrel-aged for nine months in French oak, the rich yet delicate wine has delightful plum, blueberry, chocolate and cinnamon aromas, with flavors of Bing cherry, cranberry, strawberry, rose and tea.

Like a fine wine, my appreciation of the vineyard matures throughout my stay. The next morning, just as the fog is lifting, I go for a run along the paved two-mile jogging path that winds through the vineyard, providing an even closer view. Later, following a soothing classic Swedish massage, I strike up a conversation with vineyard workers, who talk me through the process of pruning leaves

back to allow grapes to grow unobstructed.

The ultimate in grape-to-glass appreciation comes on my last day, when I drive to Healdsburg for my tour of Villa Fiore, Ferrari-Carano’s Italianate headquarters in Dry Creek Valley. (If I desired, I could have enjoyed transportation by Pure Luxury Limousine, which the inn arranges for guests.)

On a stone terrace overlooking a vineyard of Malbec, Ferrari-Carano Director of Hospitality Patrick Mukaida recounts for our group how, after a successful career in gaming law, owner Don Carano visited the nearby Alexander Valley on a wine-buying trip in the early 1970s and fell in love with the Sonoma area. The “Ferrari” part of the name honors Carano’s paternal grandmother, Emelia Ferrari, who helped raise Carano and taught him about cooking, gardening and planting.

Mukaida explains that the operation grows almost 100 percent of the grapes used in its wines, and customizes its approach—from nutrient regimes to canopy management—to the terroir of each vineyard.

After a tour of Villa Fiore’s five acres of manicured gardens—which have 2,000 specimens of trees and shrubs, and are also known for their spring tulips—Mukaida guides us through the winemaking facility. Here, we follow the path that grapes take when they arrive after harvest: from the de-stemmer and the crushpad to the giant, 12,000-gallon fermentation tanks.

He then leads us through the barrel room into a stone cellar, where winemakers place wine in barrels to age for up to two years or more, depending on the type of wine.

The tour concludes in the Enoteca Tasting Bar and the private PreVail Room for tastings of limited-release and reserve wines. The deep-blue lighting and plush

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chairs in the PreVail Room create the feeling of an upscale nightclub. We watch a video about Ferrari-Carano's vineyards in other parts of wine country, then sample four wines. Ferrari-Carano prides itself on winemaking techniques that result in wines of "elegance and finesse." As I sip a glass of sweet, almost chocolaty, Eldorado Noir dessert wine—made from Black Muscat grapes—I remember that it all starts with the vines.

Gourmet Getaway

Since Sonoma County is hailed as one of the finest culinary destinations in America, it's understandable that many wine-related packages also focus on food.

Among the best of the bunch is the two-night "Gourmet Getaway" package at the quaint, 18-room Farmhouse Inn and Restaurant (707-887-3300, www.farmhouseinn.com) in Forestville, west of Santa Rosa.

The package includes a three-course dinner at the on-site one-Michelin-starred Farmhouse Restaurant and a five-course dinner at the two-Michelin-starred Cyrus restaurant in Healdsburg. (It is extremely prestigious for a restaurant to earn any Michelin stars.)

The Farmhouse sits on a late-19th century farm now owned by brother and sister

Joe and Catherine Bartolomei, whose family has farmed in the Sonoma area for five generations. Guestrooms located in three buildings on the 6-acre grounds are crisply yet restfully decorated in white, tan and brown, with fresh flowers provided each day, and cookies and milk delivered each afternoon. Guests can also procure from Guest Services a complimentary "bath bar" with seasonal scrubs, salts and soaps.

Gourmet Getaway guests receive rooms in the historic 1872 farmhouse or the early 1900s cottages, all of which have been renovated, with amenities that vary by room but typically include more than one of the following: a steam shower, a jetted tub, a soaking tub that fills from the ceiling, a wet/dry sauna, radiant floor heat, and a gas or wood-burning fireplace.

Property amenities include complimentary wine-tasting classes with a master sommelier, a complimentary daily farm-fresh breakfast, a heated outdoor pool and a full-service, four-room "farm-to-treatment" spa. Organic grape seed is used for skin therapies, and therapists use a copper still to extract essential oils and waters from ingredients such as heirloom cider apples that are grown on the family's nearly 100-acre ranch, just three miles from the Farmhouse.

We were attracted to the "Gourmet Getaway" because of its emphasis on seasonal and regional food, and with the baby in the care of an inn-recommended babysitter, we enjoy dinners to remember.

At the Farmhouse, we rave about our appetizer of grilled Monterey Bay sardines with chicory, and a green-olive/preserved-lemon tapenade. We also enjoy "Rabbit, Rabbit, Rabbit," an entree that features a trifecta of different cuts of locally raised rabbit: applewood-smoked, bacon-wrapped loin; roasted rack; and confit of leg with a locally produced whole-grain-mustard sauce.

The sardines are paired with a dry 2005 Ambassador's Chardonnay from the sustainable Hanzell Vineyards in the town of Sonoma, one of the area's oldest wineries, with roots that date back to 1948. The Chardonnay is derived from the fruit of the original Hanzell Vineyards Chardonnay vines, planted in 1953, and now the oldest continuously producing Chardonnay vines in California. It tastes of Asian pear, balanced with spicy apple, offset with lemon drop, as well having flavor notes of oak, shortbread and hazelnut.

The rabbit is paired with an earthy and almost peppery 2007 Estate Pinot Noir from Healdsburg's organic Porter Creek

Vineyards, which is owned by father-and-son George and Alex Davis.

At Cyrus, which is celebrating its fifth anniversary this year, we enjoy every bite of our five-course meal, but in particular love the roasted lobster with locally sourced daikon and blood oranges, as well as the hoisin-glazed short rib with water chestnuts and an all-natural bone marrow flan flavored with local ginger. All the courses are paired perfectly with wines—some local, and some from as far afield as Europe and Argentina.

The roasted lobster, for instance, is served with an Arneis from Healdsburg's Seghesio Family Vineyards, established in 1895. The medium-bodied Arneis is crisp and lemony, with ripe-green-apple and honeydew nuances. Its acidity pairs well with the lobster's sweet yet acidic tamarind glaze, and the wine is rich enough to stand up to the richness of the lobster. Arneis originated in the Piedmont region of Italy from which Italian winemaker Edoardo Seghesio emigrated in 1886.

The short rib is accompanied by the 2007 Baker Ranch Syrah from Healdsburg's Copain Wine Cellars. The wine is deep and lush, with blackberry and cherry flavors. Copain, which is partially owned by the Guthrie family, embraces organic viticultural practices.

As part of our package, we also receive a copy of *The Russian River Wineroad Cookbook*, which catalogs recipes from local chefs and vintners. Our copy is signed by Farmhouse chef Steve Litke.

Another enjoyable aspect of our food-and-wine-focused stay is the Farmhouse's self-serve snack bar. Located in the lobby, it includes jars of trail mix, red licorice and fresh cookies. We're delighted to see that it also features jars with the ingredients for s'mores. On our last afternoon, Nikki and I take graham crackers, Valrhona chocolate and housemade marshmallows to the fire pit. There—once we're sure the toasted marshmallows have sufficiently cooled—we teach our daughter her first lesson in gourmet living. Considering that she'll grow up in Sonoma wine country, it likely won't be her last. ■

Matt Villano is a freelance writer and editor.

Horizon Air (800-547-9308, www.horizonair.com) flies daily to Santa Rosa, gateway to Sonoma County and Napa Valley wine country. For more information on visiting Sonoma County, contact the Sonoma County Tourism Bureau at 800-576-6662; www.sonomacounty.com.

More Wine-Country Packages
The Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa (707-938-9000, www.fairmont.com/sonoma): Dubbed the "Sommelier Package," this two-night experience includes a more-extensive, VIP tour at Benziger Family Winery in Glen Ellen, a wine-paired dinner for two at The Fairmont's Santé restaurant—which has a Michelin star—and a sommelier-led tour of two nearby Sonoma Valley wineries.

Grape Leaf Inn (866-433-8140, www.grapeleafinn.com): The "Sonoma County Bounty Package" includes chilled local Chardonnay; Sonoma County cheeses, fruits and breads delivered to your room; and complimentary breakfast. Guests are also invited to complimentary day's-end tastings of Sonoma County wines in the inn's "Speakeasy."

Hilton Garden Inn Sonoma County Airport (707-545-0444, www.sonoma-countyairport.hgi.com): The "Romance Package" includes in-room local Korbel California champagne and a full breakfast, or a dinner discount for a meal that often features local and sustainably grown or raised ingredients.
Hyatt Vineyard Creek (707-284-1234, www.vineyardcreek.hyatt.com): The Santa Rosa resort's one-night "Sip 'n' Cycle" package includes a five-hour, 15- to 20-mile guided bike ride to local wineries, with a picnic lunch.

Inn at Occidental (800-522-6324, www.innatoccidental.com): The inn's three-night package is called the "Ultimate Sonoma Wine Country Experience." Highlights include a meal at Bistro Des Copains, a five-hour escorted tour of Russian River Valley wineries and a hot-air-balloon ride.

Sheraton Sonoma County—Petaluma (866-716-8123, www.sheraton.com/petaluma): With this one-night package, guests receive a bottle of local wine and a cheese plate upon arrival, as well as two VIP passes for special tastings at a number of wineries in the Carneros region in the southern part of the county. The VIP passes mean you avoid any lines and have access to VIP tasting rooms at wineries that have them. Use rate plan "NWINE" when you book.

Sonoma Coast Villa & Spa (888-404-2255, www.scvilla.com): The three-night "Food & Wine Experience" at this Bodega Bay resort features a gift box with snacks and a local Pinot Noir, a cooking lesson and a customized dinner for two with a local wine. The package also includes a scenic horseback ride. —M.V.