

Duckhorn Vineyards' Director of Estate Viticulture PJ Alviso shows the soil varieties in their vineyards in Napa Valley.

DIVING INTO NAPA

Anyone in the wine and spirits industry knows Napa Valley: the heart of California winemaking, home to some of the most famous AVAs in the world. But how many people can say they *know* Napa Valley, visiting the vineyards, meeting the winemakers and—most important—tasting the wine in its birthplace? Napa Valley Vintners (NVV) is a non-profit organization made up of 525 wineries that aim to promote Napa Valley wines around the world, as well as host the renowned Auction Napa Valley, which raises funds for local charities. Earlier this year, they invited a group of off-premise wine buyers from around the country to visit and look beyond already well-known wines like Napa Cabs and get an in-depth look at all Napa Valley has to offer. It was the perfect time: Harvest was about to start, a time when

EXPLORING NAPA WINES WITH NAPA VALLEY VINTNERS

by Jesse Hom-Dawson



Winemaker Gustavo A. Gonzalez and proprietor Jim “Bear” Dyke, Jr. of Mira Vineyard.

Napa Valley wineries are buzzing with activity in preparation of picking.

Monday began with an introduction to Napa Valley at The Hess Collection Winery with sips of 2015 Albariño and Grüner Veltliner, both from the Mount Veeder AVA, and a tour of the impressive modern art collection of Donald Hess. We were treated to facts and figures that were much more fascinating than your typical history class: Napa’s unique AVAs (16), it’s surprisingly limited wine production (Napa only produces 4 percent of California’s wines) and its viticulture, soil and topography. For many California natives and Napa wine connoisseurs this is old news, but for those attending who live in the Midwest, Canada and England, it was only a brief look into the complexities of what makes Napa Valley such a perfect wine-growing region.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MIRA VINEYARDS

The wine buyers invited by Napa Valley Vintners pose in front of the welcome to Napa Valley sign on Highway 29.



However, the trip wasn't just a history lesson; it was also the chance to get down and dirty and meet the people behind the wine labels. On Thursday before we left, we were broken into small groups in an opportunity spend time in the vineyards with Napa Valley winemakers. I had the pleasure of joining winemaker Kristen Belair of Honig Vineyards in Rutherford, and our group spent the cool, foggy morning walking down the rows of grapes, selecting bunches at random to taste-test the grapes' sugar (officially measured in degrees Brix) to see if they were ready to be picked. "At this time of year, so close to harvest, we'll test the grapes a couple times a week," explained Belair, as we strolled along the vineyards. Next stop was the laboratory, where we tested our picked grapes, eerily similar to a high school science experiment. To celebrate our hard work, Belair led us through a library tasting of Honig's wines for NNV's Premier Napa Valley auction, which features wines created exclusively for the event. "Very few people have tried these wines," says Belair with a smile. "We just keep a few bottles for reference and the rest go to the lot winner."

You can't talk about Napa wine without talking about Napa cuisine, and amazing food was everywhere. A trio of us spent a night at Chef Michael Chiarello's Bottega Ristorante in Yountville with Mira Winery owners Jim "Bear" Dyke, Jr. and Gustavo Gonzalez. Over pasta and prodigious amounts of Mira's wines, including a Cab Franc, a Chardonnay and a Rosé proffered by our sommelier in an elegantly unique magnum bottle, Gonzalez and Dyke gave us the history of their friendship and the winery—which began at a chance meeting at a hotel bar in Washington, D.C. It was a unique night that couldn't have been experienced anywhere else: learning about Mira's wines while talking with the winemakers themselves, dining in the very location where the wine's grapes had been grown.

These were but a few of the events our group experience over the weekend; we also spent an early morning in Duckhorn Vineyard, a seminar on top planted varieties at Groth and a magical candle-lit dinner in the barrel room of Merryvale Vineyards with library vintages from six different wineries. The experience gave the buyers who attended a chance to experience what those lucky enough to live in Napa get to experience every day, and bring that experience back to their consumers. People love a story to go with their wine, and this was a story unlike any other. ■■



Kristen Belair, Winemaker at Honig Vineyards.