

Our Side of Town

By Rona Edwards

SANTA YNEZ VALLEY-A Few Hours Away & You're on Vacation

Sometimes, I need a change of pace—a place to go where I can decompress—a place that isn't so far that a plane is necessary yet far enough away to feel like you've gone somewhere. Two hours away lies a valley of rolling hills and vineyards, wineries and restaurants, along with charming inns all made famous by the movie, "Sideways," but attracting visitors for many years prior to that movie's release. Santa Ynez Valley, just north of Santa Barbara, home to the Danish town of Solvang, Los Olivos and Santa Rita Hills, has been growing vines for thirty years but it is only over the last decade that it is gaining respect for its world-class grapes.

To begin, book two nights at the *Wine Valley Inn*. This hotel is the best deal in town with fifty-six guestrooms and six cottages. Managed by Sandra Hallmann, who has won awards for customer service, and located off the main drag in Solvang, it offers packages that make it almost unbeatable in affordability. Try the *Dinner and Welcome Package*, which includes a basket of goodies, a bottle of wine, along with a dinner voucher for two at *Angelica's* restaurant. All rooms include a continental breakfast. The prices vary with Sunday through Thursday offering exceptional deals. With these packages, you have a choice of a fireplace deluxe room or a Chateau loft suite. In all, the *Wine Valley Inn* offers ten diverse packages. The cottages, however, with their Old-World appeal, have fireplaces and small kitchens, some with outdoor private Jacuzzis. If you can upgrade to the cottages with their private gardens and a Koi pond at your front door, I would strongly suggest it. Once your lodgings are set, plan what wineries to visit.

"Wine, like a painting, requires a little mystery..."
—Edgar Degas

Wine is passion, friendship and good times. Open a bottle of wine and it transforms from the first taste to the last drop hours later; some wines are valued by their age, while others need to be imbibed young. Grapes are delicate and go through a long cultivation before that bottle arrives at your table.

With nearly 100 wineries to choose from, log on to the Santa Barbara Vintner's Association's website which lists an in-depth description of all of them in the region. It's interesting to note that many of the wineries in this area produce *Pinot Noirs*, full-bodied *Synahs*, *Chardonnays* and *Viogniers* (a favorite of mine). Most offer a flight of wines from \$5 - \$10 and you keep your glass

as a souvenir. Plot your journey according to regions, which are all very close to each other. For example, drive through Foxen Canyon, a real country escape. Start at the end, with a visit to *Rancho Sisquoc*—an out-of-the-way rustic winery—work backwards to *Foxen* and dip

revealing that he imports a number of items from his Italian homeland. Stop by *Artiste*, billed as an impressionist winery and tasting room with unique gift items and equally unique blends of artisanal wines. We loved *First Dance*, along with

Lewellen's Valentine Wine Dinner, held amid the barrels at the winery where a five-course gourmet meal, paired with their fabulous wines, made the evening very special. We sat next to Royce Lewellen, a former Santa Barbara County judge, now partnered with



Photo by Jeff Gerson

scenic views and mouth-watering *Chardonnays*, and though famed vintner Richard Sanford lost his namesake Sanford Wines, you won't be disappointed with his latest creation, *Alma Rosa Winery & Vineyard* where *Pinot Noir* is king!

Hungry? Aside from what's already mentioned, don't miss the famous *Hitching Post* where meat is the name of the game. Santa Maria BBQ—known for its savory red oak flavour—is what makes their prime beef taste so scrumptious. Owned by Frank Ostini, the wines—especially the *Pinot Noir Highliner*—are a highlight. Chef Brad brought us an appetizer plate of *Grilled Artichoke, Quail* and *Yucatan Sweet Potatoes*. Our main dish was *Lobster Tail* cooked over the red oak with a *Filet Mignon* seasoned with their

"magic dust." Extremely tasty! With so many eateries and only so much space, feel free to email me at the Beachwood Voice for any other suggestions or check out my blog

www.oursideoftown.wordpress.com.

Santa Ynez Valley is also home to Mission Santa Ynez, wine festivals and events all through the year. From June to October, enjoy the Solvang Theaterfest under the stars. You'll never be bored. But the best part about vacationing here is you can plan a lot or just a little and still feel content. Driving home, we were satiated, rested and our minds were clear, ready to get back into the city, knowing that we had a three-day respite of food, wine and country roads.

Lodging: Wine Valley Inn - 1564 Copenhagen Drive, Solvang, CA 93463; (800) 824-6444.

Best Bet: The cottages but try one of their packages - www.winevalleyinn.com for prices. Mention you heard about them from the Beachwood Voice!

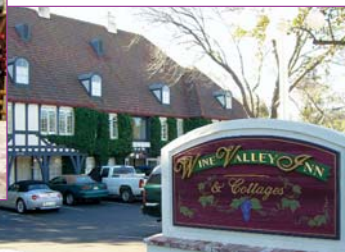
Wineries: Santa Barbara Wine Vintners Website - www.sbcountywineries.com for info, hours, addresses and maps of all wineries in the area. Most have their own websites.

Enteries: Los Olivos Café, The Hitching Post, Volare's, Angelica's and many more!

—Rona Edwards is a motion picture/television producer, co-author of "I Liked It, Didn't Love It. (Screenplay Development From The Inside Out)" published by Lone Eagle, writes music reviews for the Folk Acoustic Music Exchange (FAME) on the net, and, feature articles for *Produced By Magazine*. She's kicking off ESE FILM WORKSHOPS ONLINE in March. Check out www.esentertainment.net for more info.



Photo by Rona Edwards



Top: Take me home Country Road in Foxen Canyon. **Far left:** Royce Lewellen (left) and Louis Lucas pour wine and share stories at their wine tasting room. **Center:** The labels at Artiste are as impressive as the wines! **Right:** The Wine Valley Inn is a romantic getaway. **Bottom:** A wine dinner and pairing amidst the Lucas & Lewellen Barrel Room.

into their Jerry Garcia-style tasting room. Foxen Canyon has eighteen wineries on its picturesque route.

Head to Los Olivos, a quaint town with an abundance of wine tasting rooms from some twenty wineries. Have lunch at the *Los Olivos Café*, by far one of the best restaurants in the area that serves wine-friendly food in a jovial atmosphere. After eating, walk down the country-western promenade; stop by the different tasting rooms including *Carina Cellars* for its iconoclastic *Viognier*.

Another day, head over to historic Santa Ynez, a charming town of western wear and tsothcke shops. Try the *Chicken Parmigiana Pannini* at *Volare's*. Chef Oronzo Rosato is excited to share his food and expertise,

the beautifully painted wine label by artist Daniel Baylis, one of six artists that inspire second-generation winemaker Bion Rice to produce his inventive impressionist cuvee wines.

On your last day, tour Solvang. Check out *Mandolina*, a tasting room owned by *Lucas & Lewellen* whose winemaker Daniel Gehr creates Italian-style wines. Their *Dolcetta* is a full-bodied zesty red wine that will warm you down to your toes, and their tasting room, reminiscent of Italian hospitality, offers unique gifts. A number of wineries offer their club members (free to join with a commitment to buy wine shipments) events throughout the year. We experienced *Lucas &*

Louis Lucas in 400 acres of vineyards in Santa Barbara County. Royce and his lovely wife Ann took us on a tour of some of those vineyards and explained how the valley has grown to be one of the premier places for growing grapes. Royce's partner, Louis, who tirelessly checks the vines, always looking for ways to improve them, joined us at the tasting room, pouring us some delectable *Chardonnays* and a remarkable *Cabernet Franc*. It becomes apparent how passionate they are about their wine, which consistently wins awards, striving to make each season surpass the last.

Lastly, drive towards the Santa Rita Hills. *Melville* winery, with its Tuscan-style tasting room, has beautiful