

WINE CLUBS
of Sonoma County

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A Guide to the Pleasures and Perks of Belonging

JIM ARNOLD and INGRID LARNIS



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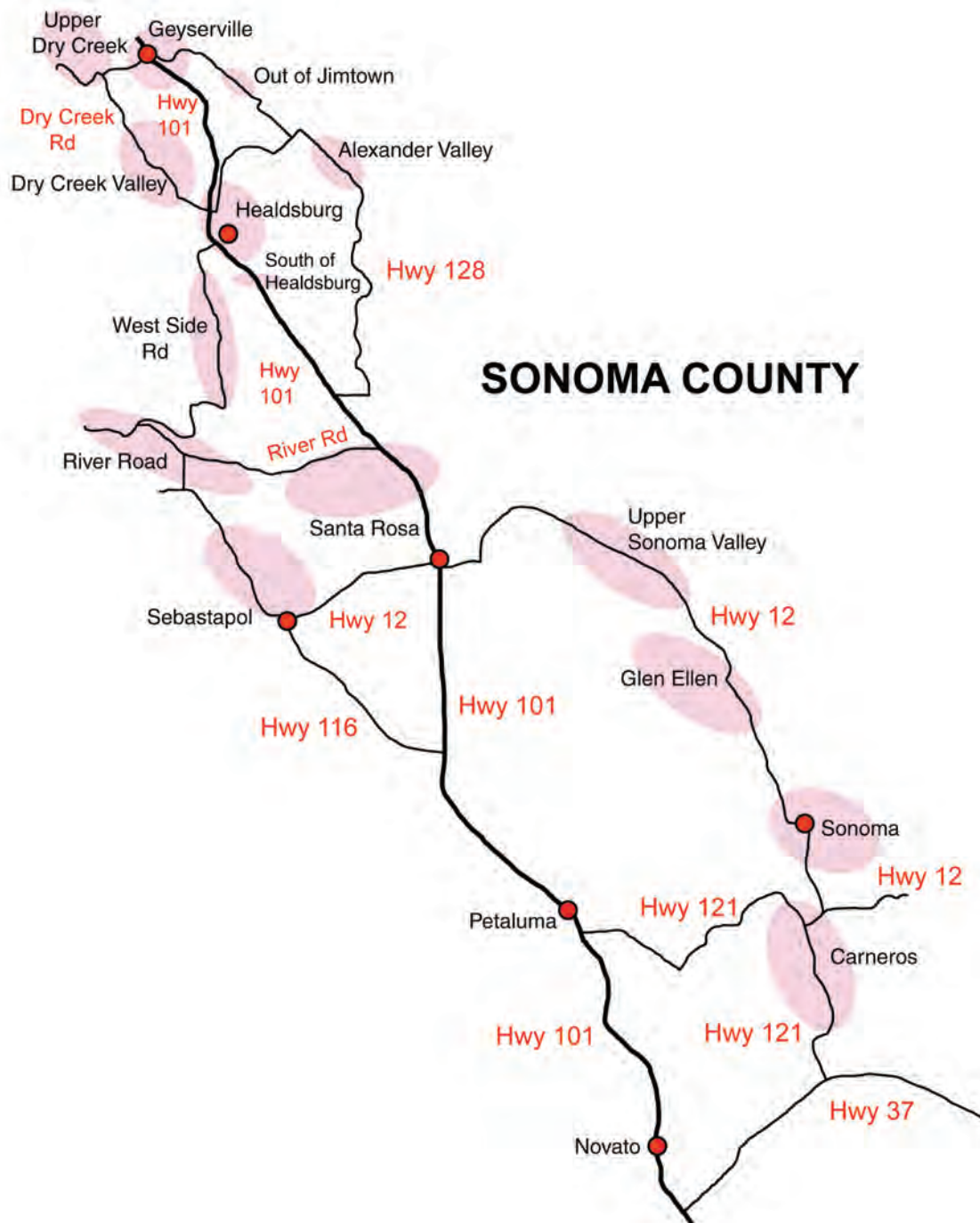
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Introduction

Wine clubs are an increasingly popular way for wine lovers to get premium, discounted wines delivered to their doorsteps and to join in appreciation and celebration at club events with like-minded others. Each club in Sonoma County Wine Country has something special to offer. This book is intended to help you, the reader, select one or more clubs best suited to your particular tastes and interests.

We deliberately avoid judging the wines here. There are plenty of other books on the subject, and it's largely a matter of personal taste anyway. Once you consider the objective information on the ninety-or-so wineries we cover, with your short list in hand you can visit the finalists, sample their wines, experience their real-life ambiance and personalities, and make your best selection or selections.

What Is a Wine club?

There are several kinds of wine clubs. There are wine-of-the-month clubs run by brokers who ship collections of wines from any number of wineries. There are similar clubs run by the wineries themselves, which simply ship a number of their wines to members on a regular basis. We've chosen to focus here on the exclusive group of Sonoma County wineries that provide club benefits and services beyond shipping wine: open membership, social events, tasting rooms regularly open to the

public, and various additional benefits. These criteria exclude some fine wineries, mostly small ones, that don't have the resources to maintain a tasting room and organize events or that aren't actively seeking new members. Wine lovers who live in or near Sonoma County may be able to discover some of these by visiting them during their occasional openings for regional events, but we've chosen to limit our survey to clubs that are more easily accessible, with more enticing benefits.

Why Join a Wine Club?

For many people either too busy or too far away membership in a wine club provides their only opportunity to purchase wines from limited-production wineries, many of which sell exclusively to tasting room visitors and club members. Shipping costs are often more than offset by discounted club prices.

Wine tasting is one of the main attractions of wine country, and being a member of a club can greatly enhance your visits. There is a special pleasure to visiting "your" winery and attending an event with "your" club. Club events can be a wonderful experience; they can be the primary purpose and focus of a vacation to the area. You can expect a warm welcome as a club member, with special favors like free tastings (if there is normally a fee), sometimes exclusive tastings of limited releases, and first options on new releases.

Membership in a club is often the only way to get close to a winery's best wines. A wine club event is an opportunity to make new friends, meet the staff, and pick, or "thief," the brain (oenologically speaking!) of the winemaker.

How to Choose a Club

Choosing a particular wine club can be a haphazard decision. It may be the first winery you visit after coming around to the idea of joining one; it may be the first winery with a great sales presentation. But with about ninety clubs in this book to choose from, there are sure to be a few that are ideally suited to your taste and style. Your choice may be based on a combination of the wine, the personality of the staff, the general character of the club, the most favored food or music played at events, and the prevailing age of the membership. You might prefer large wineries with large clubs, or you might prefer small "ma and pa" boutiques that tend to hold more personal affairs. Depending on your wine consumption and budget, you might want to join a number of clubs and enjoy a variety of wines, styles, and settings.

How the Book Is Organized

The chapters of this book group the wineries by vicinity. If you are going to visit one winery in a vicinity, it may be convenient to visit the others covered in the same chapter. An appendix lists the regional organizations, their member wineries and clubs, and their annual events.

The information on the wineries and their clubs has been standardized as much as possible for ease of reference and comparison. Information on the wines is limited to objective factors like each winery's specialties, price ranges, and number of cases produced. Wine price ranges are given at the retail level, prior to club discounts. The annual costs given for shipments to club members are our estimates, including discounts, allowing for a direct comparison where the monthly and quarterly costs as given by the wineries can be confusing. Shipping and handling charges and any applicable taxes are not included in the estimated costs.

Due to space limitations, we may list only the most special varietals and blends available at a winery. For the same reason, Cabernet Sauvignon (but not Cabernet Franc) may be listed as just "Cabernet" and Pinot Noir as "Pinot." Bordeaux varietals and blends include Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Malbec, Petit Verdot, and Meritage. Rhone varietals and blends include Syrah ("Sirah" or "Shiraz"), Viognier, Grenache, Carignan, and Mourvèdre.

The Common Perks

All the clubs provide a number of perks in common. Except for the cost of the wine, club memberships are free, unless noted otherwise. Membership usually includes exclusive access or first options on limited releases, the waiving of tasting fees (if any), private tastings of reserve wines, and personal tours of the winery. Newsletters are frequently included

with shipments, with notes from the winemaker, food pairing suggestions, and recipes.

For members and nonmembers alike, tastings outside normal hours can often be arranged by prior appointment.

Counsel and Disclaimers

By joining a club you are typically expected to remain a member for a specified period of time. It is not a legal contract, but it's bad form to opt out early without good reason.

The situation is changing, but wine shipments to some states are restricted at present, and different states may be excluded by different wineries. You'll want to make sure a winery can ship to your state before you join their club.

We caution against assuming that cost and discount can be taken at face value when judging the relative priceyness of a winery or the value of a discount. A winery that tends to underprice its wines may offer a relatively small discount, but the discounted price may actually be a similar value to higher-priced wines with larger discounts. Besides, the wines of either extreme may be more desirable to your taste, and the taste (and the club) may be relatively more important than differences in prices and discounts.

All the information contained here—prices, discounts, events, hours, etc.—are subject to change. Life moves faster than print. Discounts may not apply to limited-release and library wines. There is wine and there is wine.

At Last . . .

We have sought to avoid expressing our own favorites and preferences. We've tried instead to stress what is unique and positive about each winery and club. Winemaking is a labor of love for everyone we have met in the industry, and you are unlikely to have a bad experience with any club you join. The one endorsement we feel comfortable in making is to suggest that you join more than one club if you can, perhaps based on some contrast in their selections of wines, their size (corporate or "ma and pa"), their location, or the timing or nature of their activities. Every shipment (or pick-up if you're local) can be a wonderful surprise, and to visit "your" winery is to experience the welcome of a valued friend.

The people in the wine industry are remarkably warm, friendly, and enjoyable. It may be the wine! It's definitely a wonderful subculture in which to be a member.

Salut and salute! Salud, prost, and cheers!