



Grape Camp in Sonoma

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After several years of visiting the wine country of California, my husband and I have grown to love Sonoma Valley – it's climate, it's laid back atmosphere, it's sustainability mindset, and of course, **the Wine**. Yes, Napa Valley is the big dog in wine country where most of the large wineries exist but the quaintness and beauty of Sonoma Valley is unmatched. This is where you will find some of the best kept secrets in the California wine industry. Charming boutique wineries abound producing amazing wines in small quantities (400 cases instead of 20,000 cases). These wines often sell out to beloved wine club members before the public ever gets a chance to taste them.

So, during a recent visit to Sonoma in June, we learned that the owners of our favorite winery, Mazzocco, were hosting a "Grape Camp". What, GRAPE CAMP??? Well, that certainly caught the attention of my nutritionist, wine lover, sustainable-farmer-wanna-be self! I grabbed the descriptor of Grape Camp and this was no macramé or Kumbaya around the campfire. No, sir, this was serious grape and winemaking education from Best of Class and Double Gold Medal winemakers that included actual grape harvesting and unforgettable wine tastings and fabulous food pairings. Yep, we signed up!!

Grape Camp occurred from September 28th through October 1st and was an unforgettable adventure, one worth sharing. So, here is the Grape Camp experience.

A Grape to Glass Experience

Background about Wilson Artisan Wineries

Ken and Diane Wilson, and their daughter, Sydney, were the hosts of Grape Camp. Their grape and wine journey started modestly.

Ken began his wine journey over 30 years ago as a grape grower. He and Diane purchased their first winery, Wilson Winery, in 1993. Diane says her calling as a wine maker happened quickly as she had six weeks to learn how to make wine. In addition, like many new business owners, she performed every other task at the winery, from washing bottles to pouring wine for customers in the tasting room.

Forging her way through the California winemaking scene over the past 22 years, Diane has become recognized as one of California's most celebrated woman winemakers. She was honored as Woman Winemaker of the Year in 2008 and her wines have won multiple back-to-back Sonoma County Harvest Fair and San Francisco Chronical Sweepstakes for Reds (meaning the best of all red wines entered in the contest), dozens of 90+ scores and over 100 Gold medals. In September of this year, Diane's 2013 Matrix Estate Reserve Pinot Noir won the Sweepstakes for Reds at the 2015 Sonoma County Harvest Fair.

Ken and Diane now own [8 wineries](#) in Sonoma Valley that specialize in Zinfandel, Pinot Noir, Petit Syrah, Primitivo, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc varietals. The Wilson's also own several Inns in Healdsburg, California, plus several suites for rent right in their vineyards. This charming Mosaic Suite is in the vineyards at DeLorimier Winery where you can sleep and eat among the grapevines. We did and I ate Primitivo grapes from these grapevines with my salad at lunch.

Itinerary for Grape Camp

Daughter, Sydney Wilson, and her rescue dog, Newton, were the quintessential Camp Directors for this inaugural Grape Camp. Newton is so well known in Sonoma, he was given the cover shot for the Wine Dogs of California coffee table book.

Here is a guide to our daily Grape Camp itinerary:

- **Lots of grapes and lots of wines**
- **Grape education with the amazing and gifted, [Antoine Favero](#).** Antoine is the winemaker at Mazzocco, Soda Rock and Jaxon Keys Wineries in Sonoma. Antoine specializes in robust, flavorful Zinfandel wines which have completely won me over as a Zinfandel lover.
- **Wine tasting education with Antoine at the Wilson's Rockpile Vineyard**
- **Grape harvesting**
- **A blind tasting and aroma seminar.** In a blind tasting you can't see the color of the wine so you have to rely on your senses – taste and smell – to determine if it is a white or red wine based on the flavor notes you're tasting. Surprisingly difficult!
- **Grape pressing and fermentation measuring with winemaker, Diane Wilson.**
- **A grape stomp with my hubby (guys versus gals)**
- **A Sunset dinner in the barn at Soda Rock Winery and Vineyards**
- **And the grand finale, a *Chopped* cooking competition with fellow Grape Campers at [Relish Culinary Adventures](#) in Healdsburg, CA.**

How to Attend Grape Camp?

Needless to say, Grape Camp was a trip to remember! The Wilsons will be hosting Grape Camp each Fall during harvest season so if this kind of experience is on your bucket list, you can contact Sydney at swilson@wilsonartisanwines.com for information about next year's Grape Camp.

There are other Grape Camps in Sonoma as well. Check out [this link](#) for more info. For my husband and me, we have Grape Camp fever so next year it's Grape Camp in Italy!!

Winemakers to Watch

Keep your eyes on these talented winemakers and if you get the chance to taste their wines, do it!!

- [Diane Wilson](#), winemaker and grape grower
- [Antoine Favero](#), winemaker and grape grower
- [Merry Edwards](#), winemaker and grape grower. In 2013, Merry was inducted into the Culinary Institute of America's Vintners Hall of Fame. Merry also won the James Beard Award for Best Wine, Beer or Spirits Professional in the United States, only the fourth woman to receive this honor.

Other Things to do in Sonoma

If you have extra days to fill during your trip to Sonoma, here are a few other "must dos" while you're there.

- Kayaking at Lake Sonoma
- Road trip to Rockpile AVA (the most recently named AVA in California - extremely scenic drive)
- Side trip to Armstrong Woods Redwood Forest with 2000 year old giant redwoods (to give you perspective, the pink dot is me!).
- Side trip to Bodega Bay and Jenner, CA with a sunset dinner at the [River's End Resort](#) where the Russian River meets the Pacific Ocean
- Dinner at [Dry Creek Kitchen](#), Healdsburg
- Dinner at [Valette](#), Healdsburg
- Lunch or dinner at [Diavolo Pizzeria](#), Geyserville