

# John On Wine: a month of wine weekends



Barrel Tasting 101, BARRA of Mendocino (Photo by John Cesano)

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Zinfandel Experience, Rich Parducci and Chris Sawyer (Photo by John Cesano)

One of the genuine perquisites of writing a wine column is receiving invitations to organized wine tasting events. Today, I'm going to recap my last four weekends of wine tastings.

Barrel Tasting 101 in Hopland coincided with the last weekend of the Mendocino County Crab, Wine & Beer Fest and featured winery tasting rooms along Highway 101 from Hopland to Calpella and Ukiah to Redwood Valley pouring barrel samples of wines not yet bottled, providing an opportunity to taste the future, and purchase futures of these wines, while offering up delicious food pairing treats created around Dungeness crab.

This was a joyful weekend for me, as I was able to visit all of my neighbors, and taste many delicious crab treats, as well as get a glimpse of what is coming wine-wise in the future.

Best food spread goes to the team at Testa, with terrific tastes at Barra, Simaine, Seebass, Milano, Cesar Toxqui, and Terra Savia, as well.

This was the second annual Barrel Tasting 101, a great addition to the two Passport events put on by Destination Hopland each year, and saw attendance triple over the previous inaugural event. There will certainly be a third annual Barrel Tasting 101 event in January next year.

Zinfandel Advocates & Producers, ZAP, made San Francisco the epicenter of Zinfandel love, with their multi-day Zinfandel Experience. On Wednesday, I attended Epicuria, a food and wine pairing tasting, featuring over 30 top Zinfandel producers, each sharing a table with chefs from bay area kitchens.



On Thursday, I attended Flights, a seated tasting of three flights of five wines each, moderated by Joel Peterson, featuring winemakers from three distinctly different growing areas in California, Contra Costa County, Amador County, and the Dry Creek Valley of Sonoma County.

On Saturday, I attended The Tasting, with over 100 producers pouring their Zinfandel, and the folks from the SOMM Journal leading panel workshops exploring lesser known Zinfandel growing areas of California. These workshops included a look at Lake and Mendocino County by Sommelier Chris Sawyer and featuring Lake County's Jelly Jar Wine Zinfandel and Mendocino County's Rich Parducci pouring two McNab Ridge Winery Zinfandels. I wrote a piece, running over 4,400 words, with pictures, that you can find archived on [johnonwine.com](http://johnonwine.com) about my three days in Zin-bliss.

The 10th annual International Alsace Varietals Festival in Mendocino County's Anderson Valley was held right in the middle of the deluge that saw 3-11" of rain fall, depending on where you were in the county, in just a week. Bacchus, the God of wine, smiled and provided a window of warm weather and sun for the festival.

The main grape varieties of Alsace include Riesling, Pinot Blanc, Gewurztraminer, and Pinot Gris, with (unoaked) Pinot Noir, Sylvaner, and Muscat also represented.

At 8:30 a.m., the Alsace Fest kicked off with educational sessions, with Glenn McGourty moderating the sessions, including panel tastings of white wines featuring different periods of skin contact and examples of winemaking protocols at Campovida by winemaker Sebastian Donoso; an exploration of single vineyard Pinot Blanc by sommelier Chris Sawyer (this guy is everywhere!) with Randy Schock of Handley Cellars, Jason McConnell of Rivino, and James Wasson of Rein each pouring wine made from Shrader Ranch Pinot Blanc grapes; Christie Dufault leading a food and wine pairing featuring food prepared by her Culinary Institute of America at Greystone team and four very different, but delicious Gewurztraminer from Brooks, Navarro Vineyards, Pierre Sparr, and Husch; Thomas Schlumberger's tasting of eight Grand Cru wines from his Domaines Schlumberger estate in Alsace, France; and a steelhead trout on cauliflower puree cooking demonstration by Francois de Melogue.

After the educational sessions came the big public tasting, with Alsace variety wines from around the world, but concentrated heavily on the Anderson Valley and Alsace, France.

Thomas Schlumberger poured three additional Grand Cru wines from his Alsace estate, originally planted in 1810; the 11 wines Schlumberger poured that day were the best 11 wines I tasted that day, were revelatory for me, and set a new high bar for tasting of Alsace varietal wines that I will measure all other tastes against.

Another huge treat for me was talking with Master Sommelier Ian Cauble, who I recognized from the movie SOMM — find it on Netflix and watch it — who was pouring at the Wines of Alsace USA table.

I did taste our local Alsace variety wines too, and enjoyed offerings from Handley, Graziano, Navarro, and Lichen very much.

Too many associate these Alsace variety wines with sickly, cloyingly sweet, wines; but the wines I tasted on this Saturday were uniformly drier and more concentrated in depth and character, multi-noted, layered wines, that I will reach for again and again this summer.

Lastly, on Valentine's Day Saturday, I attended the San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition's public tasting of Gold, Double Gold, and Best of Show awarded wines from January's competition.

Rather than treat the day, and the tasting, like a press opportunity, I decided to just relax and have fun. Juanita Plaza works with me at McFadden's tasting room in Hopland, and neither of us had a Valentine, so we decided to go together for a San Francisco getaway, built around the wine tasting and an Italian dinner in North Beach.

The weather was unbeatable, blue sky and warm sun, and the tasting was a treat. We tasted several terrific wines, and even a beer and a cidre (really, that's how they spell it) from Stella Artois. It was nice to see our friends from Campovida, Rivino, Handley, and Simaine pouring.

Dinner didn't work out. My brother Tom, by fortuitous coincidence, pulled into town across the bay and arranged great tickets and working passes for the Enrique Iglesias and Pitbull concert that evening at Oracle Arena in Oakland, and we had a blast, up and dancing for most of the show. Thanks Tom, we really appreciated you hooking us up, sorry you were working and we didn't get to see you. Thanks Juanita for joining me for a fun weekend getaway.

That's it, four weekends of wine tastings. I have to give thanks to Destination Hopland, Zinfandel Advocates & Producers, Anderson Valley Winegrowers Association, and the San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition for comp tickets. I write about events, encourage you to get out there and attend some, and I'll continue to do so. I attend as many events as I can, because I consider it continuing education, it helps to taste broadly and refine or renew perceptions about wines and wineries, and sometimes it can just be a great getaway.

I hope to see you at future wine events...like the Celebration of Mendocino County Sparkling Wines at Terra Savia in Hopland on April 11, the Passport to Dry Creek Valley on April 25 and 26, or Hopland Passport on May 2 and 3.