

# Living the Good Life

**KATHY MARCKS HARDESTY**

*From New Times SLO – Thursday, July 24, 2008*

In June this year, I celebrated my 12th anniversary of writing New Times' Cuisine column; a milestone I'm quite proud of achieving. And I never fail to hear it whenever I first meet someone, resident or tourist, once they learn I'm the Cuisine columnist: They always tell me I'm "blessed." I couldn't agree more, but I believe that life for all of us living on the Central Coast is nothing short of blessed. We have an abundance of farm-fresh, organic fruits and vegetables, such artisan cheese makers as Rinconada Dairy and Cal Poly, Hearst Ranch Beef, and we can boast we're home to America's largest fishery devoted to one specialty, the Abalone Farm. Besides all that, we have an incredible wealth of excellent wineries from Paso Robles to Santa Barbara within a short drive — I'm a foodie and I couldn't ask for more.



## **POURING SUNSHINE**

*Sundry sumptuous Pinot Noir were poured at the annual Fiddlefest celebration at Fiddlehead Cellars in Lompoc*

PHOTO COURTESY OF FIDDLEFEST 08

Of course it didn't hurt, when I moved here in 1996, that I was already knowledgeable about the Central Coast wine regions. That's why New Times' founder Steve Moss brought me onboard as the wine columnist. Formerly from San Francisco, where I was Wine Spectator magazine's tasting coordinator, I had met or called most of the winemakers on the Central Coast. Their numbers were few then, but all of them were run by artisans dedicated to bringing these coastal grape growing regions well deserved respect.

The passionate forces ranged from small brands making Burgundy or Rhone varieties to large producers who offered a broad list of varietals that included whites, reds, and sweet wines. Yet whether they were producing a small or a large number of cases I never met a single vintner who wasn't ardent about the wine they made, and they continue to be. A recent tasting event

showcasing the new Sta. Rita Hills American Viticultural Area (A.V.A.) in western Santa Barbara County emphasized the qualities of Central Coast wines and their amazing growth.

It inspired me to focus on the little gems this week, many of which don't have tasting rooms but their wines aren't difficult to find. Most are available on the Internet directly through the winery's Web site and can be ordered and received overnight if you're impatient. Even better, you'll find their special wines in restaurants and family-owned wine shops from Paso Robles to Santa Barbara. Honestly, if you spot some of these wines on a wine list when you're dining out or shopping for something special to stash in your

wine cellar (even if it's just the tiny closet under your stairs), you can't go wrong with any wine from these excellent producers.

At Fiddlehead Cellars in Lompoc the impassioned Kathy Joseph is devoted to making excellent Pinot Noirs and Sauvignon Blancs under her label. The Pinot Noir grown in her Fiddlestix Vineyard on Santa Rosa Road near Buellton is prized by some of the most talented winemakers on the Central Coast, but Joseph has always featured Pinot Noir from Oregon's prestigious Willamette Valley and Sauvignon Blanc from vineyards in the Santa Ynez Valley's easternmost edge, known as Happy Canyon.

During her recent annual "Fiddlefest" celebration, she invited 15 winemakers, who currently purchase Fiddlestix Pinot Noir, to join her in the vineyard barn to show off their wines. This event is a favorite among wine geeks like me, but it's one of the most edifying tastings a novice wine drinker can experience. You'll recognize the signature qualities of grapes grown in this vineyard and discover just how differently they can taste, depending on which pair of talented hands made them.

Joseph promised Web site visitors this: "If you love Pinot Noir and you care about terroir and you like great wine from small producers, then you are crazy not to be at Fiddlefest." In simple terms, terroir refers to her unique vineyard site where the grapes are grown and developed into fine wine grapes.

This year, Joseph offered vertical tastings of two of her signature Pinot Noirs: Seven Twenty Eight from 2001 through 2005 vintages, and Lollapalooza from 2002 through 2005. The first is more Burgundian in style, offering bright red and black fruit flavors highlighted with rustic earth and leathery notes, the fine vintage proving its ability to age well. The latter is more Californian in style with its lush, ripe black fruit aromas and flavors with nuances of spice, game, leather, and earth.

From her Santa Barbara County peers I recommend Fiddlestix Vineyard designated Pinot Noir from Bonaccorsi, Hartley-Ostini Hitching Post, and Paul Lato Wines. From SLO County, I was equally impressed by the Fiddlestix Vineyard Pinots made by Ortman Family, RN Estate, and Wedell Cellars; the first two have tasting rooms in Paso Robles which can be found through [www.pasowine.com](http://www.pasowine.com).

Fiddlehead Cellars now has its own tasting room in Lompoc, where Joseph makes the wines, but it only opens for limited hours. Check out [www.fiddleheadcellars.com](http://www.fiddleheadcellars.com) for information and directions.

### **Seeking Gold?**

If you haven't visited the Costa de Oro tasting room in Santa Maria alongside Highway 101 (eastside across from Costco), perhaps it's because you haven't discovered their delicious Pinot Noirs, Chardonnays and Syrahs grown in Santa Maria Valley. Now they're offering another tantalizing reason for taking the short drive over: freshly grilled lunch treats by Zoe's Catering. When I met chef Rex Matsunaga he was serving oak-

grilled baby back ribs with a great spice rub and barbecue sauce, plus a side of Zoe's beans (Hawaiian style—he hails from Oahu) and grilled corn-on-the-cob, only \$12 per person. Costa de Oro Syrah tasted perfect with the sweet, tangy ribs. During the next barbecue, Saturday, August 2, from noon to 3 p.m., chef Rex will be grilling hamburgers and portabello burgers with herbed goat cheese and a side of Zoe's beans.

Be sure to taste winemaker Gary Burk's signature wines, I enjoyed both the estate and reserve Pinots and Chardonnays, which are reasonably priced. Burk is currently offering refreshing Rosé and Sauvignon Blanc, plus interesting red blends. Not big on barbecue? Then I suggest stopping by Costa de Oro on Fridays' for their version of happy hour from 4:30 to 7:30 p.m. with live music. Winetasting fee is \$5 for five 1-oz. pours or \$7 for ten 1-oz. pours and you can keep the logo glass. It's a great way to kick off the weekend.

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