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The PTA Mom Who Stripped For Jack Ruby

TRAVEL
Culinary Getaways To Sonoma, Barbados, And More

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FEAR RGER

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D TRAVEL

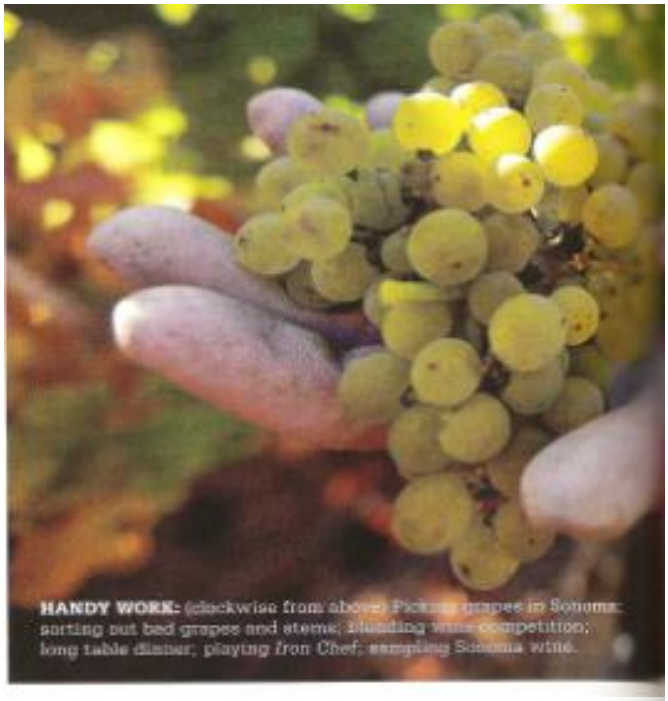
GOURMET GETAWAYS

Pack your appetite and take an adventurous culinary vacation. We present three of our favorite places to mingle with celebrity chefs, sample authentic Ethiopian cuisine, and learn how to blend your own wine.

PLAYING WITH YOUR FOOD: (clockwise from top left) Picking grapes in Sonoma

SONOMA, CALIFORNIA

Sonoma County Grape Camp provides a new look on winemaking and the traditional wine country escape. Grape picking, anyone? **By Andrew Chalk**



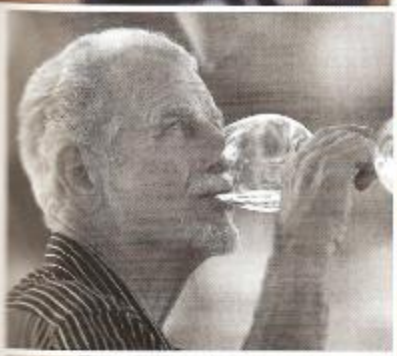
HANDY WORK: (clockwise from above) Picking grapes in Sonoma; sorting out bad grapes and stems; blending wine competition; long table dinner; playing *Iron Chef*; sampling Sonoma wine.

VACATIONING IN WINE COUNTRY ANYWHERE in the world means days of sampling wine and eating fine food. You always pick up a few pointers about winemaking and perhaps discover a new grape varietal. It's no secret that Sonoma County ranks as one of the more beautiful grape growing areas in the country. More than picturesque, it's also a well-respected, world-class winemaking region. The rolling hills are dotted with sumptuous places to stay, a wealth of restaurants, local craft shops, and historic sites. It's also home to **Sonoma County Grape Camp**, a three-day immersion program for intrepid oenophiles presented by the Sonoma County Winegrape Commission. Yes, dear friends, you learn about making wine by doing all of the work, which includes picking grapes and blending wine. **BASE CAMP:** Last fall I joined a group of 20 such souls who gathered at the bucolic **Vintners Inn** just outside Santa Rosa. Earlier in the day, I'd flown into San Francisco and rented a car to make the two-hour drive. Thanks to the time change, I arrived in time to do some laps in the small pool and soak in the hot tub before the opening reception. The layout of the inn is more like a compact campus than a hotel. My room was in one of three satellite buildings, a short walk from the main lobby, where we had breakfast each day. The room had a king-size bed, satellite TV, HD DVD player, wi-fi, and a large balcony. **TEAM MEETING:** I met my fellow campers that evening for dinner in the garden at **Quivira Vineyard and Winery**. *Iron Chef* contestant Duskie Estes and her husband, John Stewart, who co-own **Zazu** restaurant and farm, cooked our meal as we sampled a Top 40 hit parade of Sonoma County wines. The group consisted of a few who knew a lot about wine and others who were just beginning their journey. One couple owned a wine bar in Wisconsin, and they were there to learn more about the wine they sell. Then there was a retired woman from Sacramento who was enrolled in the camp for her third session (this was only the fourth!). **WORK TIME:** Early the next morning, we boarded a small bus and set off for **Windsor Oaks Vineyards & Winery**. We spent the next hour picking Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay grapes. We used a hook to remove grape bunches from the vines and put them in a plastic carrier we pulled along with us. At each stage, we dropped grape bunches that looked pecked by birds or otherwise damaged. Luckily we started early, while the temperature was still moderate (about 70 degrees). I left with an enduring respect for those who devote long days and months to complete a harvest. **FOOD RELIEF:** We left the fields for a tasting at the little-known but fast-rising **Dutcher Crossing Winery**, followed by lunch with the ingratiating culinary team at **Michel-Schlumberger** winery. Then our culinary expertise was challenged at **Relish Culinary Adventures** in Healdsburg. We spent the afternoon creating our own episode of *Iron Chef*. We were given herbs, condiments, fruit, and spices and asked to create dishes using local shrimp. Next we had to pair our dish with one of the preselected Sonoma County wines. That evening we traveled to **Robert Young Estate Winery** to dine at a long table crowded with bottles in an eerie yet intimate dining room. **SORTING OUT:** On Wednesday we went to the microsize **Valdez Family Winery**, where owner Ulises Valdez instructed us on the fine art of sorting the grapes headed to the first crush. The grapes were set on one end of a conveyor belt, and, as the clusters rolled toward the crusher/de-stemmer, we picked out those that were damaged or stunted. We also removed debris brought in from the field. That afternoon we turned into real winemakers at **DeLoach Vineyards**. We split into teams and were given four "component" wines, each chosen because they were somewhat one-dimensional, exhibiting a particular characteristic such as fruit or tannin, to the exclusion of others. We blended them to make what we considered a better-balanced, more complex wine. My group's blended Zinfandel won second place. **GRADUATION NIGHT:** After the short but intense camp, everyone agreed that Grape Camp had given us the opportunity to visit places that we would never have known about otherwise, all accompanied by growers' best wines and superb food. And each time I take a sip of wine now, I have a sympathy pain in my lower back.

FAST FACTS

HOW TO GET THERE:
American Airlines (aa.com) to San Francisco or Oakland. Rental car to Santa Rosa (around a two-hour drive).

NEXT GRAPE CAMP:
Sept. 20–22, 2011
Price: $1,850 per person, per couple (single supplement $150) and includes two nights' accommodations at the acclaimed Kenwood Inn and Spa, all meals, tastings, and transportation during camp. An additional third night at Kenwood Inn is available for $250, and the optional end-of-camp celebration dinner is $155 per person. For more information or to register, call 707-522-5860 or visit sonomagrapecamp.com.

SEE MORE SONOMA

Grape Camp is instructive, intensive, and stimulating, but Sonoma has so much to see that three days cannot possibly do it justice. Since camp starts on Tuesday at 4:30 PM and ends on Thursday night after the graduation dinner, you might want to add a couple of extra days on the front or back of the trip. If you choose to do so, consider driving Highway 1 up the Sonoma Coast. From the Vintners Inn in Santa Rosa, take the Bodega Highway directly to Bodega Bay at the southern tip of Sonoma County. While there, stock up with maps and other collateral material at the Sonoma Valley Visitors Center, and then take a gentle cruise all the way to the Mendocino County border at Gualala. The first part of the journey is through a state park, so there is very little development; the beaches and headlands are wild and dramatic. On the inland side, there are several impressive redwood sites in state parks and nature reserves all the way up the highway. Fog may envelop the coastline in the early morning but burns off later in the day. And you can actually get to see the mouth of the famous Russian River. Along the route are numerous restaurants and B&B-type accommodations. —A.C.