

## ALEXANDER VALLEY VINEYARDS

Wine country tours? Hurtling down the highway at a hundred vineyards per hour, for the most part. Most tourists never explore the other side of the end post. Now, a Colorado-based

adventure-tourism outfit has launched an idea that, believe it or not, is new: take a hike. Sonoma Vineyard Walks is designed for active people who don't mind learning something. To help publicize the venture, Sonoma Grapegrowers and Zephyr Adventures recently wined and dined members of the local press—at least a free lunch from the Jimtown Store, and that's good enough for me.



This is not the model where people pay \$5K to get in the way of the harvest crew for a day. It's all talking, tasting and three to six miles of hiking. First, we hike across Sausal Winery's parking lot to the tasting bar and sample a trio of old-vine Zinfandels. Thus fortified, we take an even more vigorous walk to have a look-see at the gnarled old vines. While we dig our heels into freshly tilled soil, vineyard manager Mark Houser fills us in on colorful viticultural anecdotes. Next the trail turns up a steep hillside. I break a sweat, and an hour passes with no wine (paying guests, at this point, could opt to go shopping in Healdsburg while the mountain goats among them scabble up Rockpile appellation).

At family-run Alexander Valley Vineyards, Harry Wetzel IV leads us into a cave construction site and doles out barrel samples of hearty Grenache. Blinking in the light at the end of the tunnel, we find a table of wine awaiting. Trivia: Premium Bordeaux blend Cyrus (\$55) is, like the high-end restaurant, named for homesteading patriarch Cyrus Alexander. Although the Wetzels opened their winery in the 1970s, they serve as curators of local history, having restored Cyrus' original adobe and schoolhouse.

At the end of the trail, what have we learned? Of interest to locals eager to know what vineyard dust tastes like on the other side of the globe, Zephyr books tours in Burgundy, Italy, Spain, South Africa, South America and Oregon (including amphibious winery assaults along the Willamette River, via canoe). If they've done as good a job as they have here, lining up key keepers of the grape for personal tours and tastings, these promise to be great.

I emphasize my availability for the Burgundy press tour, and then blaze my own path to the tasting room. Here is AVV's delightfully idiosyncratic Wicked Weekend Zinfandel three pack (\$49), Temptation and Sin Zin through Redemption. But it's no sin of haste to enjoy the fresh 2007 New Gewürztraminer (\$9). It's like biting into a crisp Asian pear, lightly sweet, spicy and delicious. Chill a bottle any day, put it in a backpack and get walking.

Alexander Valley Vineyards, 8644 Hwy. 128, Healdsburg. Tasting room open daily, 10am–5pm; no fee. 707.433.7209. To learn more about Zephyr Wine Adventures, go to [www.zephyradventures.com](http://www.zephyradventures.com).

*James Knight*