

Natural Affinity

STORY AND PHOTO BY—KATE, BLOOD

California has a long tradition of enjoying food and wine in its natural setting. In the 18th-century Spanish missionaries planted grape vines throughout the state, and although much of the resulting wine was doled out during Catholic mass, the surplus paired nicely with the figs and olives flourishing in the dry, Mediterranean climate.

Today, Kendall-Jackson's 120-acre Wine Center offers both a viticultural testing ground, with 26 grape varieties grown on 19 different trellising systems, and a tasting playground, where visitors can pluck grapes right off the vine or sip Pinot Grigio and sniff a freshly torn basil leaf.

Any visitor may explore Kendall-Jackson's Culinary and Sensory gardens planted with the cardoons and heirloom tomatoes Italian cooks have long recognized as suitable mates for Chianti. Unfortunately, participation in the winery's Culinary Exchange Program is limited to the nation's top chefs.

Led by the Wine Center's Executive Chef Randy Lewis, each three-day Culinary Exchange Program allows four chefs ample opportunity to traipse down the rows of oregano and eggplant—complementary to Cabernet and Merlot—and sample the local bounty of artisan cheeses, olive oil, seafood, fish and meat products.

cowgirl and hog island

Program participants visit Tomales Bay's Cowgirl Creamery and Hog Island Oyster Company, then Bellwether Farms, DaVero Olive Oil, and Liberty Duck to taste and match products with local



wines. A cookbook compiling the chef's wine-tinged recipes is set for future release.

Participating Chef Jody Adams said the Culinary Exchange Program is "like a dream come true! It's an improvisational theater camp with no homework—just a chance for chefs to interact with their peers and winemakers."

Touring the country in support of her cookbook, *In the Hands of a Chef*, Adams has already discovered the region's exceptional products. Her popular Boston eatery, Rialto, offers Kendall-Jackson's Grand Reserve Pinot Noir, and the pungent cheeses of Cowgirl Creamery are prominently served on the restaurant's cheese trolley.

"Wine is a gap in my culinary education," Adams admitted. "And, to a

chef, wine is an important ingredient in the meal."

Adams knows wine and food pairing is increasingly emphasized in the restaurant industry, and she is eager to continue her education.

"I have daily discussions with Rialto's wine director about what pairs well with our food. But we always have a duck on the menu that goes with everything. It's made with soy sauce, mustard and Sicilian green olives without a high acid content—and slow roasted until we've rendered off all the fat."

Experimentation—also an important tool in the cooking process—is something Adams is quite familiar with. She began playing with the toasted spices and seeds encountered in Middle Eastern dishes many years ago, and her recipe for Dukkah (an Egyptian mix of seeds, nuts and spice) is a wonderful nibble alongside a glass of fruity California Zinfandel. The substantial wine stands up nicely to the riot of flavors in the cumin and coriander-scented appetizer dip.

in the grove

If visiting Kendall-Jackson's Wine Center unleashes the culinary goddess or god in you, don't let the lack of a chef's starched white toque keep you from a fulfilling food experience. The grounds are perfect for picnicking, especially under the covered gazebo in the middle of the historic walnut grove.

If you begin your day by following the free map distributed through Sonoma County Farm Trails, when you reach the winery, you may unpack a picnic basket stuffed with Vella's aged Dry Monterey Jack, dark purple figs, U-pick strawberries, Willie Bird's smoked turkey legs, and a Polish sausage or two.

The Wine Center's tasting room staff is, of course, more than happy to sell you a bottle of vino and souvenir wineglasses. The \$2 tasting fee (\$10 for reserve tastings) is credited toward any purchase.

If you'd rather experience the finest local wines served alongside food prepared by a talented local chef, John Ash & Co—with Jeffrey Madura now in charge—is located at the Vintner's Inn less than a mile down the road. Madura's menu uses regional food products, such as Redwood Hill Farm's smoked cheddar goat cheese and Hog Island Oysters, which are as good with a cold beer as with the more traditional glass of bubbly.

bleu cheese burger

The menu includes an "Executive Lunch"—salmon club sandwich on Focaccia with romaine lettuce and roasted garlic cloves, plus a mug of cream of asparagus soup. A hefty, \$14 burger topped with Point Reyes Bleu and Applewood smoked bacon, served on a peaceful patio overlooking verdant green grapevines, is one of the world's great bargains.

A good selection of local varietals available by the glass will satisfy your urge to play with new food and wine combinations.

Kendall-Jackson Wine Center, 5007 Fulton Road, Fulton, 707. 571.8100, www.kj.com. Open 10-5; garden tours 11 a.m., 1 p.m. and 3 p.m.

Sonoma County Farm Trails, 800. 207.9464, www.farmtrails.org.

John Ash & Co., Vintner's Inn, 4350 Barnes Road, Santa Rosa. 707. 527.7687. www.vintnersinn.com.

Kate Blood is a freelance food and travel writer. For an electronic copy of Chef Jody Adams' complete recipe for seared tuna with preserved lemon vinaigrette, soft wheat berries and Dukkah, email bloodkate@yahoo.com.