

# THE LUSH LIFE

LIVING THE HIGH LIFE IN CALIFORNIA'S WINE COUNTRY

Talk about sedation. For the moment, the only relief I could find to quell this state of high anxiety was the comfort of something familiar, a Bombay Martini. I needed all the mental lubrication this tonic could supply for me to muster up enough courage to tackle my first official Napa Valley wine tasting. This was not going to be your ordinary run-of-the-mill tasting. We're talking private and I really was not interested in listening to wine snobs pontificating about the red liquid I was going to swill. What did I know about wine etiquette anyway? Nothing. I poured another.

My friends, the bon vivants who orchestrated this glorious wine tasting soirée, saw right through my transparent attempt at procrastination and nervously watched me polish off my drink. With trepidation, I hopped into their car and off we sped to what surely promised an "educational experience" if nothing more.

Passing under a stone arch and around the grand circular driveway, we parked the car and set foot on an expansive flagstone patio. Our host immediately handed us an utterly delicious Chardonnay which we sipped as we

watched a breathtaking sunset flood the lavish expanse of the vineyard. When the last golden ray was pulled below the horizon, our wine glasses were quickly filled again as we were whisked away on a tour of the cellars. Quizzically I assessed the other guests and wondered why all the men

sported moustaches. Obviously a true cork dork must exhibit this look. I, however, felt naked with my bare lip exposed and nothing to say. So I lifted my glass, sampled more of the Chardonnay and inquired about the life expectancy of the red oak barrels protruding from every wall. Only five years? I congratulated myself on presenting a semi-intelligent question and as a reward took another sip.

Nothing quite prepared me for the next phase: a virtual chemistry lab situated next to our dining room, complete with shimmering pipettes. My

eyes darted nervously around searching for the notorious Dr. Evil. I could feel his dastardly presence lurking between the gargantuan wine barrels.

Suddenly the wine master, excuse me, the oenologist, appeared out of nowhere introducing himself as Ethan. He proceeded to explain that our challenge was to formulate



a new red wine. Measuring with the calibrated pipettes we cluelessly mixed different proportions of the varietal wines that he poured into our glasses. Did I fail to mention that the sciences were not among my strong points? It was evident from the puckered looks on the other guests' faces that they were not scientists either. Nevertheless, we eagerly sampled all the varietals, listening intently as Ethan explained each grape's history and personality. We mixed, we sipped. We sipped, we mixed. Use the spittoon? Come, come, how barbaric! Maybe these wine tasting forays really aren't such a bad idea after all. They're certainly entertaining and heck, they're even legal.

Concluding this exercise, Ethan finally offered us each a glass of his own intoxicating creation. Nothing we concocted matched the complex flavors created by Ethan, the brilliant wine master. I never realized the complexity of this wine making business.

With every sip I employed my newly developed palate to discerningly savor the flavorful nuances exhibited in each freshly poured glass. I actually begun reciting eloquent phrases... 'what an extremely pleasant berry and oak aroma, soft tanins — well balanced, well structured wine' or 'just look at this deep rich color' and 'do you detect the spicy overtones?' ... Or better yet, 'it's soft and silky in the mouth with a long elegant finish.' This was easy, I just let the wine do the talking.

I took another swig and headed off to the formal dining room that showcased a monstrous table set for twenty. Well, nineteen connoisseurs — and me.

Seated at tables set with stemware meticulously lined up looking

like soldiers ready for battle, we were told this was to be a red wine tasting. Yikes! Based on past experiences, tomorrow's impending hangover will surely give new meaning to Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath." Still, our stealthy waiters were determined to make sure our glasses always remained full. To my knowledge, I never consumed more than half a glass all night.

Did I actually taste the tender flavorful endive and butter lettuce salad with goat cheese? Didn't we just have the main course? How quickly did I devour that incredibly delicious spiced filet of beef with potato Swiss chard gratin? Was I really there at all or was I at home watching the Food Channel?

My friend at the other end of the table was apparently in worse shape than I was, maneuvering around the room asking inane questions about the winery's future undertakings. Please! It was time to leave. I finished the last bite of nectarine-and-raspberry crisp topped with Sabayon and downed the late-harvest Riesling. Thanking everyone, we took off in my friend's rented Pontiac that he obviously fancied as a red BMW Roadster, with himself as 007 at the wheel. We tooled down the imaginary French Alps at break-neck speed, careened around hairpin curves toward the locked gate looming before us and practically flew into oblivion. My stomach lurched as I wondered where the spittoon was when I really needed it. What a fitting end: a quick burial in one of those perfectly aged red oak caskets. Moral of the story: don't drive drunk and by all means, order the cab!

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*Hans Gschliesser is Creative Director of Forum magazine where he now eschews red wine in favor of simple Martinis.*

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