

DOWN CELLAR BY JIM BRYANT

Coasting into Central California

Sometimes it's not only about the wine, but the whole package. Last March, my wife and I, together with another couple we've known since college, went to California's Central Coast seeking such a "whole-package" experience. While the other three people in our party appreciate wine, it is not as important to them as it is to me, so some balance was required.

We flew to Los Angeles, rented a car, and drove to Santa Barbara. Instead of taking the freeway, we took the Pacific Coast Highway (PCH or Highway 1) most of the way. The incredible scenery and mostly undeveloped terrain north of Malibu was almost therapeutic and put us in the right frame of mind. We stayed three days and nights in Santa Barbara and fell in love with the town. The weather there was picture-perfect, as was the timing of the trip (a blizzard hit Chicago the day after we left our home!).

While in Santa Barbara, we focused mainly on eating and drinking at great restaurants. We had good experiences at all our choices for lunch and dinner, but I particularly remember the food and wine at the Wine Cask. It is under new ownership, and the venison with my favorite Petite Syrah (Aaron) will be long remembered.

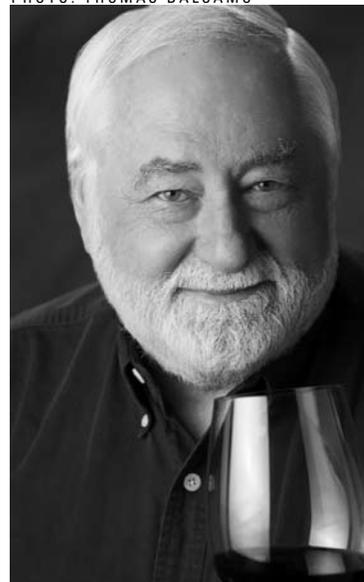
We spent one day at the Channel Islands National Park. Boats depart from Ventura, and it takes about 1.5 to 2 hours to reach one of the

park's five uninhabited islands. We took a picnic lunch and plenty of good wine. After hiking around the island, we had a five-star experience for almost nothing. We did not see any of the rare indigenous foxes or birds but did see some unique plants. The highlight of the trip was the boat ride that took us by several gray and humpback whales, some of which paced the boat for 15 minutes or so. In addition, we were surrounded for about 15 minutes by a large number of porpoises, which crested frequently and pushed themselves through the water with their powerful tails to keep pace with our boat.

There is lots to do in Santa Barbara. While some went shopping, my buddy, a professional photographer, and I visited the Brooks Institute of Photography. Since 1945 this institution has trained many professional photographers. Given the idyllic location of the original campus, as well as the satellite location in Montecito, it's easy to imagine happy students learning well.

Although we did not visit any wineries in the Santa Barbara area, ones that I have enjoyed visiting in the past include Zaca Mesa, Foxen, Fess Parker, Rancho Sisqoc, Firestone, Gainey, and Byron. My favorite varietal in this region is generally Syrah, although Pinot Noir has recently become very popular after the movie *Sideways* was filmed here.

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO



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The loge at Villa Toscana in Paso Robles, California, owned by the Martin & Weyrich Winery.



PHOTO: CHAD SWANDER

The drive up Highway 101 to Paso Robles was memorable for the unspoiled scenery on both sides of the highway. Although I had never been to Paso Robles, someone told me about a bed and breakfast inn there named Villa Toscana. It's owned by the Martin & Weyrich Winery and has to be visited to be believed. Think of a Tuscan villa with the very best appointments. It is almost as if the owner kept spending money until he reached a point where any more would put the inn over the top. The rooms are large suites, all with fireplaces, palatial bathrooms, and views of the beautiful vineyards. For your own preview, visit www.myvillatoscana.com. But nothing can prepare you for the real thing. I've spent much of my life living in some of the world's finest hotels (including in Italy) and this beats them all in many ways. While the rooms are not inexpensive, the value is great, particularly when you consider the superb breakfast and the extensive, high-quality hors d'oeuvres

PHOTOS: CHAD SWANDER



The sunset at Villa Toscana.

and wine served during the 4 to 7 p.m. happy hour. In fact, many guests do not go out for dinner after this feast.

Our party was on a mission to find great dining spots, and we found several that met our specifications and one that exceeded them. Many of my friends know about my passion for food. If you appreciate the best in culinary adventures, go to Deborah's Room at the Justin Vineyards & Winery. Small and exquisite, it is located in a remote setting 30 minutes from Villa Toscana. Both food and wine are given great attention. Due to the very small seating capacity (perhaps 24), plan ahead and be prepared for an extraordinary experience. My wife says her fish was the best she's ever had. (Not bad coming from an experienced traveler, a gourmet chef in her own right, and someone who is secure in her knowledge that the French Laundry is her favorite restaurant in the world.)

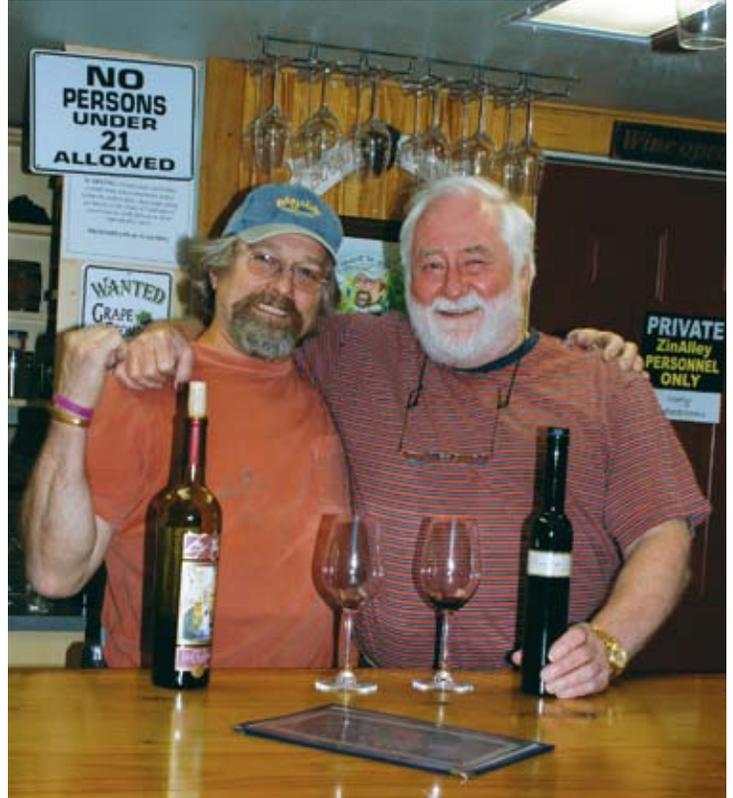
Moving on to wine, we had a delightful experience when we visited ZinAlley. Owner and world-class winemaker Frank Nerelli is one of a kind. There seemed to be general agreement that Frank makes the best Zinfandel in the region. The dry-farmed, head-pruned vines are grown in the old-world tradition to produce a rich and very complex Zinfandel. I loved it, as well as his Zinport and his dessert wine, Nerelli After Hour. However, even if you don't like wine, a visit to spend time with Frank would be a memorable experience. He is a great guy who is following his passion.

We visited Turley Vineyards and were very impressed with this operation. Turley is widely known for producing outstanding Zinfandels, and you can buy them here from most of their vineyards.

My buddy and I spent time at the Edward Sellers Vineyards & Wines retail facility in Paso Robles. Like many local wineries, there is no visitation at the vineyard property. This producer's offering was large in number but small in volume, and all wines sampled were very good.

As we left the area all four of us remarked that it reminded us of Napa Valley days of yore. It is still somewhat quaint and rustic, but it is exploding with planted vineyards.

Our final stop was at Laetitia Vineyard & Winery in Arroyo Grande. All reserve wines tasted here were impressive. I guess if Carnation condensed milk attributes its quality to "milk from contented cows," Laetitia can in part attribute its quality to "grapes from contented vines," as one can see the Pacific Ocean from the winery. Santé! U



World-class winemaker Frank Nerelli (left) of ZinAlley visits with Jim Bryant.



The sweeping coastal vista seen from a ride on the Pacific Coast Highway near Santa Barbara, California.