

Vintage America

May 15, 2010



Fruits of labour ... the pinot noir harvest in Santa Maria. *Photo: AFP*

Helen Pitt uncorks Sonoma County and finds an appealing blend of winemaking and rustic lifestyle.

When winemaker Brian Croser moved to California to study viticulture in 1972, he fell in love with a little pastoral place called Petaluma and decided when he returned to Australia he would give the name to his wines. At the time, thanks to its thriving poultry industry, the town 60 kilometres north of San Francisco was known as the "egg capital of the world" and the birthplace of the egg incubator.

"It was important to our decision that there were no vineyards in Petaluma and, according to my viticulture lecturers, unlikely to be because it was too cool and foggy," says Croser, who set up Petaluma Wines in the Adelaide Hills in 1976. "My, how that perception and reality has changed," he says of the town, which is the gateway to Sonoma County wine country.

Croser has since made the name Petaluma synonymous with fine wine in Australia; now vintners of Petaluma Gap, an alliance of premium winemakers, are doing their best to create the same buzz in California. Vineyards about the Petaluma city limits these days and wine pulses through the place in its wine bars, tasting rooms, restaurants and its women's wine club.

As happened in many cooler-climate country towns in Australia, such as Orange and those in the Adelaide Hills, grapes now grow in fields that once were orchards. In Petaluma, the old fruit trees have gone the way of the chicken hatcheries; the old wooden barns remaining are more likely to be artists' studios or cellar doors than chicken coops.

Thanks to the success of Croser's wine company, it's fair to say more Australians than Americans associate the name Petaluma with wine. Yet when they come to visit San Francisco's wine country, instead of heading 45 minutes north of the Golden Gate Bridge on Highway 101 to Petaluma, most veer right on to Highway 37 to visit the more viticulturally famous Napa Valley.

I confess I was one of them back in 1999, when I first went to Petaluma for the reason most Australians visited: outlet shopping (oh, the shame of it). But when I moved there to live in 2002, I soon learnt Sonoma County - of which Petaluma is a part - is the birthplace of Californian winemaking.

The first wine grapes were planted by Russian immigrants in Fort Ross in northern Sonoma County about 1812. They supposedly gave their wine and religious paraphernalia to the Spanish missionaries, who established the most northerly of their 21 missions in Sonoma township.

Today, there are 404,000 hectares of land in Sonoma County, of which 25,000 hectares are vineyards. Sonoma is less of a monocultural county than neighbouring Napa, where wine is the main agricultural product and the foundation of a multimillion-dollar tourist industry. Sonoma County is home to rugged Pacific coastline, redwood forests, fertile valleys and small, charming towns such as Petaluma, population 55,000. It is still the sort of place where you can ride your bike to the Wild Flour Bread Bakery and organic garden in Freestone for a loaf of brick-oven baked bread and be held up by tractors and cows crossing the road, not "tasting room traffic", as is often the case on the two main thoroughfares through Napa Valley.

Napa may have one of the world's most renowned and difficult-to-reserve restaurants (The French Laundry in Yountville); however, in Sonoma County, you can still find old-style "greasy spoon" diners, such as Petaluma's 29er Diner at the Petaluma Municipal Airport, where you can dig into a great burger while watching light planes take off over Sonoma Mountain.

The Sonoma-based correspondent of the US wine bible *Wine Spectator*, Tim Fish, describes the difference between Napa and Sonoma counties thus: "Sonoma is blue jeans, Napa khakis; Sonoma is trucks [albeit nice ones], Napa BMWs ... Sonoma is generally more laid back, with smaller wineries."

The wines made in each county are quite different but equally good, he says. Sonoma has a more varied landscape and is developing a reputation as one of the premier growing regions for robust reds such as zinfandel (a variety that has reached cult status in California), delicate pinot noirs and crisp chardonnays coming from cooler coastal regions, where the fog hugs the hills like a fur stole some summer days and acts like a natural refrigerator for the grapes and allows the fruit to stay on the vine longer and develop more intense flavours. Napa, by contrast, is flat in the valley, hot and, in the main, cabernet country. "Part of Napa's superiority is money; vintners there have the money to spend on meticulous farming and winemaking," Fish says. "They can charge more for their wines because of Napa's more manicured reputation."

"What sets Sonoma County apart is its people," says the mayor of Petaluma, Pam Torliatt, who is running for the office of Sonoma County supervisor later this year. "The wine-grape growers and winemakers of Sonoma County are casual, rural and very friendly. There are multiple vineyards that are 100 years old and still run by the founding families. Roughly half of the vineyards are less than 20 acres [eight hectares] and 80 per cent are 100 acres or less."

Torliatt is a fourth-generation Petaluman who knows the first names of most of the area's grape growers and is a regular at Vine & Barrel, the wine store in the town's rustic Kentucky Street (she went to high school with its owner). Her ancestors were allegedly involved in bootlegging liquor down the Petaluma Slough, the tidal river that flows from San Francisco Bay and dissects the town, smuggling alcohol into the city's speakeasies that thrived during Prohibition. (Croser has a photo of himself in front of Petaluma's temperance monument - a hangover from that era.) One speakeasy, Volpi's, is now an Italian eatery.

Sonoma County is also the provenance of much of the produce that chef Alice Waters, known as the creator of Californian cuisine, first used in her Berkeley-based restaurant, Chez Panisse. Waters sought out Sonoma's Laura Chenel's Chevre, which became a signature dish at the restaurant - when no one had heard of goat's cheese - and from Petaluma she sourced free-range eggs, chickens and Della Fattoria sourdough bread (although Sonoma has become synonymous with good bread, Sonoma sourdough originates in San Francisco). As US botanist and horticulturist Luther Burbank noted, the predictable northern Californian weather pattern (sunshine for six months, rain for six months) makes "Sonoma County the chosen spot in all the earth for growing things".

But if you don't believe the food, wine and civic experts, let me vouch for the place as a resident of six years. As well as grapes, they grow good people in Petaluma. (And I confess that Tim Fish is my former boss and mayor Torliatt is my friend.) They helped raise my son and I was embraced by a community with a spirit akin to San Francisco in the 1960s; indeed, many are refugees from the city of that era. I joined the movement to turn the

disused railway station into an arts centre. I was a founding member of the women's wine club, a regular at Aquas Cafe at Petaluma's old foundry wharf (also home to the Sonoma Valley Portworks, which, coincidentally, blends Australian ports). I know it to be the sort of small-town US that John Mellencamp and Bruce Springsteen sing about: a rural idyll that appears lifted from a Norman Rockwell illustration. It still has an annual Butter and Egg Day parade to celebrate its poultry heritage, as well as a Taste of Petaluma day to showcase its food and wine; grapes and tourism are its main industries.

In many ways, Petaluma's Victorian downtown is what San Francisco looked like before the 1906 earthquake destroyed it. For that reason, it is a popular setting for period films, including George Lucas's *American Graffiti* (1973), *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986) and the cult classic, *Pleasantville* (1998). Its high school, pretty Californian hills backdrop and old Catholic church - built with money from Portuguese farmers who ran many of the dairies on the outskirts of town - are well known among film and television devotees. When the town's cinema closed, a group of girls - dubbed the superb seven - mounted a campaign to build another, which they did with help from director George Lucas, who lives in nearby Marin County.

Croser no longer makes Petaluma Wines - he sold the company to Lion Nathan - but he visits Petaluma regularly and encourages others to do so. As a veteran of wine harvests around the world, this is his favourite town. And if you don't like wine, well, there's always outlet shopping.

FAST FACTS

Getting there

Qantas flies to San Francisco from Sydney (13hr 20min) for about \$1270 low-season return including tax; Melbourne passengers fly Qantas to Sydney to connect and pay about the same. Or combine a trip to Asia with the US, as many Asian carriers fly to San Francisco via their base; for example, Korean Airlines flies via Seoul, Thai Airways via Bangkok. Australians must apply for US travel authorisation at <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov>.

Hire a car in San Francisco and take Highway 101 north across the Golden Gate Bridge, there's a \$US6 (\$6.76), for 60 kilometres to Petaluma. To see the Sonoma Coast, take the East Washington Street exit and follow the signs 48 kilometres to Bodega Bay (where Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* was filmed). To explore Russian River Wine Road in Sonoma County, continue north on Highway 101 to Healdsburg, rent a bike and ride through the Russian River Valley. To visit Napa Valley, go over the Golden Gate Bridge on Highway 101, turn on to Highway 37 and follow the signs.

Top five Sonoma County cellar doors

Bella Estate Winery has underground wine caves in a steep hillside in the heart of Dry Creek Valley, an area renowned for zinfandel and syrah (what Americans call shiraz). Its tasting room opens daily from 11am-4.30pm for tastings (\$US5) and tours. The fabulous acoustics of the caves allow for a music room, with jazz in summer and Christmas carols in winter. At 9711 West Dry Creek Road, Healdsburg; see www.bellawinery.com.

Keller Estate is perched high on a hill off a eucalyptus-lined road on the outskirts of Petaluma. The views are as stunning as the award-winning pinot noir. Tastings are \$US10; bookings essential. At 5875 Lakeville Highway, Petaluma; see www.kellerestate.com.

Loxton Cellars is run by Australian Chris Loxton, one of Sonoma County's most awarded winemakers. He left his family vineyard in South Australia to become a physicist but, as a third-generation grape grower, wine is in his blood. He hangs his Akubra on his shiraz. Follow the Australian kangaroo road signs to the tasting room, in an old shed, for free tastings. At 11466 Dunbar Road, Glen Ellen; see www.loxtonwines.com.

Gloria Ferrer has cool-climate wine with warm Spanish hospitality. Sip bubbly from the terrace of this hacienda and take in one of the best views of northern California wine country. Sparkling wines are available by the glass. The tasting room is open daily from 10am-5pm. At 23555 Carneros Highway, Sonoma; see www.gloriaferrer.com.

Sonoma Valley Port Works has port tastings straight from the barrel at the old Foundry Wharf building along the Petaluma River. Pick up a bottle of sonomic vinegar, too. If it's too early for port, have a coffee next door at Aqus Cafe, run by Irishman John Crowley and his French wife, Anne-Laure. Opening for free tastings, Monday to Saturday, noon-5pm. At 613 2nd Street, Petaluma; see www.portworks.com.

If you don't like wine

Petaluma Village Premium Outlets is a complex of factory stores selling the biggest clothing and hi-fi brands in the US. These include Levi's, Gap, Nike, Nine West and Bose. At 2200 Petaluma Boulevard North, Petaluma; see www.premiumoutlets.com.