

Alaska BEYOND»

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LEGENDARY SERVICE

15 EMPLOYEES AWARDED ALASKA'S
HIGHEST HONOR FOR GOING BEYOND

SEE
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Savor memorable beverages in Sonoma and Napa counties | BY CAREY SWEET

About seven years ago, Kunde Family Winery patriarch Jeff Kunde experienced an epiphany as he strolled through his Sonoma Valley vineyards in Kenwood. Why, he wondered, did he have visitors crowd at an indoor bar to sample his wines? “I suddenly decided I needed to kick guests out of my tasting room,” he says. “They should be outside, in the sun, exploring the beautiful place where the grapes are actually grown.”

And that is how I and two of my friends have come to be relaxing with Jeff and one of his sons, Jordan Kunde, on a 1,400-foot-elevation tasting deck, sipping luscious wines and soaking up views of the 1,850-acre Kunde Family Winery estate in the Sonoma Valley American Viticultural Area. As part of the winery’s two-hour Mountain Top Tasting experience, Jordan has brought us to the pinnacle of this grand estate, whose Kunde-family ownership dates to German emigrant Louis Kunde’s 1904 purchase of this land, which was first planted with vines in 1879. Most of the outdoor tours are led by Jordan, although Jeff sometimes comes up the mountain to say hello, as he has done today.

We can see dusky peaks west, north and east, while to the

south, parts of San Pablo Bay, a tidal estuary, are visible. Below us lie verdant vineyards, the winery’s own Island Lake, and a row of 125-year-old magnolia trees flanking the Kunde driveway. With so much beauty in view, I’m not surprised when Jeff tells us that the estate was the backdrop for some scenes in the 1980s TV drama *Falcon Crest*, and that some famous actors have held their weddings here.

Clockwise from top left: Russian River Brewing Company crafts delicious beers that can be enjoyed at Windsor and Santa Rosa locations. Kunde Family Winery uses sustainable practices in its vineyards. Wine enthusiasts enjoy a visit to Gustafson Family Vineyards.



As Jordan pours wine samples, he explains that the selections change by season, but generally include tastes of seven to eight wines throughout the tour, which also features a visit to the winery's caves. Signature wines include the Red Dirt Red blend and the Reserve Century Vines Zinfandel. The 2016 Red Dirt Red combines Zinfandel, Barbera and Syrah, resulting in notes of plum, cherry, caramel and nutmeg, while the robust 2016 Reserve Century Vines Zinfandel thrills me with its ancestry. The grapes are harvested from vines originally planted in 1882. The lovely Zinfandel is rich and concentrated, with vibrant layers of chocolate-covered cherry and baking spices.

The heirloom vines offer only about 1½ tons of premium fruit per acre, compared to a robust younger vineyard's 5 to 6 tons, but "it's worth it," Jordan says, "not only for the beautiful, flavorful fruit, but for how the historical vineyard speaks to the Kunde family heritage."

The Kunde family, now in their fifth generation of stewardship over the estate, has always been committed to sustainable farming. For instance, although all Kunde wines are crafted exclusively with grapes grown on the family's own estate, the Kundes have planted only 700 acres with the fruit, conserving the rest of the land for natural vegetation and wildlife. The vineyard areas are thoughtfully planned, with each hill retaining an unplanted top area for animal habitat, and with vine rows planted with soil-nourishing cover crops. The winery and the vineyard were among the first in the state of California to be certified as sustainable by the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance.

Kunde is one of the many wineries in Sonoma County and Napa County that are acclaimed for the care with which they approach viticulture and winemaking. The region is also becoming known for artisanal breweries and distilleries that passionately and meticulously produce quality beverages. Here are a few examples of additional notable sites to visit on touring-and-tasting excursions.

Owned since 2002 by Dan Gustafson, his daughter, Kristen Khanna, and his son, Jeff Gustafson, the 247-acre property embraces nature, with only 20 acres planted with vines. They are beloved vines, to be sure, in eight varietals, to produce 10 different estate wines.

Balance is key for the environment, explains Estate Manager and Assistant Winemaker Steve Spinella, so wildflower fields have been retained to feed hummingbirds, and at the end of vine rows, his team leaves full buckets of water for coyotes and foxes to lap.

I'm here for the Tour, Tasting and Lunch Experience, which includes a tour of the five-tank fermentation area, a short hike through vines to learn about grape growth cycles, and an explanation of how the plants are positioned to soak up warmth or be sheltered from the sun, depending on what each kind of grape needs.

Spinella pours a splash of 2018 Estate Syrah Rosé—only 244 cases were created of this lively beauty blossoming with ripe strawberry, rose petal and dragon fruit flavors. He provides samples of four more varietals during our approximately half-hour hike to a hilltop for views of Lake Sonoma and Mount Saint Helena. The pours include an Estate Heritage Tree

Wineries

Gustafson Family Vineyards

Some of Sonoma County's most attractive wineries are part of the Wine Road, an association of nearly 200 wineries in the Alexander, Dry Creek and Russian River valleys. One such winery is Gustafson, which has a stylish tasting room in downtown Healdsburg that serves wines crafted on Gustafson's secluded estate to the north in the Dry Creek Valley.

As I arrive at the estate, I'm greeted by winery dogs Rampage, Reyla and Leo.



Gustafson Family Vineyards.