

Serene elegance at Matanzas Creek Winery

Carey Sweet, Special to The Chronicle

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There are only two wineries open for visits in Bennett Valley, the pocket-size, fiercely development-protected area nestled between southeast Santa Rosa and Glen Ellen. One, Sable Ridge Vineyards, is by appointment only.

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Fortunately, the Valley's centerpiece public attraction, Matanzas Creek Winery, is enough of a destination that you likely won't feel the need to tasting-room hop, anyway. And the drive, curving between Sonoma, Bennett and Taylor mountains, is worthy of a trip in itself, beautifully crisscrossed with vineyards, towering oaks and bucolic farms.

Go slow, or you might miss the entry - other than the sign, the 1,500-acre property looks like a private estate, its main building framed with an Asian-style wood deck, trellises and metal crane sculptures standing sentry above mossy boulders canopied by sprawling trees. By June, the terraced hillside entry garden flows in an ocean of brilliant purple lavender bushes.

The vibe: As serene and lovely as its surrounding countryside. Enter at a waterfall "fireplace" on the deck. Inside, natural woods, soaring ceilings and a curving, contemporary bar are sophisticated; the elegant gift shop area feels more like a decor statement than a souvenir promotion.

There's lavender, lavender everywhere. Many of the perfumed niceties are made in an old barn on site, and displayed on endless shelves of spa products, toffee, grilling sticks and bouquets.

The team: Wine mogul Jess Jackson purchased the property from Sandra and Bill MacIver in 2000. The winemaker is Francois Cordesse, a native of the Languedoc region of France who worked at wineries across Europe and Australia before joining Matanzas in 2001.

The wines: Established in 1977, Matanzas Creek sources grapes like Cabernet Sauvignon from across Sonoma County. Yet in 2003, Bennett Valley was designated an official American Viticultural Area, and Matanzas showcases the region's Merlot, Chardonnay, Syrah and Sauvignon Blanc from its own estate and neighboring vineyards. Its 330 acres also grow some Semillon and Malbec.

While you frequently see a few Matanzas labels on restaurant wine lists and at grocery stores, most of the wines, such as a 2003 Proprietor's Blend (a lush, black cherry Merlot, Cabernet and Syrah), are available only through the winery.

Tastes of the two whites are complimentary, and guests may choose from two flights of three reds for \$5, which is applied to bottle purchase.

The experience: On the quiet, rainy day we stopped in, the two staffers were exceptionally generous, first allowing us to mix and match our own red flights, then throwing in tastes of every wine on the list because "they liked us." We liked that.

The extras: Make an appointment, and for \$10, you can enjoy a tasting and tour of the working winery; for \$20, the tasting is a sit-down affair in the Vintage Room and includes a full estate tour. To explore on your own, pack your own picnic out to the olive grove behind the tasting room, with tables overlooking a water reservoir bobbing with ducks, plus a nearby bocce court.

Lavender fans will want to purchase tickets now to the 13th Annual Days of Wine and Lavender scheduled for June 27 - the highly popular harvest party sells out quickly for its celebration of food, wine, live music and flowers.

If you go: 6097 Bennett Valley Road (near Sonoma Mountain Road), Santa Rosa, (707) 528-6464, matanzascreek.com. Open 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily.

Nearby: Sable Ridge Vineyards (6320 Jamison Rd., Santa Rosa; (707) 542-3138, sableridge.com). By appointment only.

Rating: THREE STARS

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