



Follow the flock

*California has endured some extreme weather but is still producing great wines, writes **Christine Austin**.*

Wildfires have become the norm all over the world but when they sweep through a wine region there are all kinds of consequences – not just the grave danger to life and property, but the knock-on risk to vineyards and the crop of grapes on the vines.

In October 2017, I was in southern California and had planned to travel north to Napa and Sonoma but instead I cut short my visit and headed home. It takes a lot to divert me from a planned itinerary but at the time, there was a heavy pall of smoke hanging over San Francisco Bay and news reports were full of fires, mass evacuations and devastation. There were even pictures of a winery building, fully ablaze, as the lead item on the national news.

Heading home was the only considerate action to take. No-one wants a wine writer in a region when there are fires breaking out and residents being bussed away from their homes.

So it was with great anticipation that I headed back to California just a few weeks ago. I was not sure whether the region

would still bear the scars of fire, or that a whole vintage might have been wiped out by smoke. When I got there I was totally surprised. California has bounced back and it is business as usual.

The first indication I had of the resilience of the region was just a few weeks after the fires. The owner of the burnt-down winery, Ray Signorello, was in London, pouring wines and explaining that their vineyards were unaffected and it was the tasting room that had burnt down, not the winery. Not only that, the insurance company was assessing the damage and plans were already under way to rebuild.

Beyond that one highly publicised disaster, there was relatively little damage to vineyards and wineries. Most vineyards are threaded with irrigation piping which acts like a sprinkler system. This means that fires often jump vineyards, and instead they burn through dry grassland and trees. And when the fires broke out most of the crop was already harvested and in vats, so there was no chance of smoke taint.

What was remarkable was the way the communities worked together. I heard reports of one large winery, which normally serves a few dozen diners per day, opening up its premises to feed hundreds of displaced residents. At another, stocks of wine were moved to underground storage to keep it safe but the fires didn't come close.

Now California, and in particular the wine regions of Sonoma and Napa, are green and beautiful. The mustard and wild flowers that are often planted between the rows of vines are in flower and bring a fresh, new-season look to the landscape. And it has rained a lot this year. The winter rain has made the grass grow so much that Shafer vineyard has hired 1,000 extra



four-legged workers to keep the grass under control. They will be moved off the land just as soon as the leaves on the vines appear.

Since my last visit to these two important wine regions, tourism has changed. It used to be that you could rock up to a winery and taste through the range for a few dollars then head off to several more wineries in the day, maybe buying a bottle or two if you wanted. Often, by the end of the day, many wine tourists could not remember which properties they had visited. Now there is much more emphasis on offering a quality winery experience of food and wine pairing, where there are qualified people to talk you through the wines.

In Sonoma particularly, there is so much more to explore than just a long list of tasting rooms.

At St Francis winery in Santa Rosa, (StFrancisWinery.com) you can enjoy a wine and food pairing, seated at a large round table with a dozen other guests. This works very much like a private lunch party, with food prepared by chef Trevor Eliason (formerly of top Napa restaurant the French Laundry) with wines poured to match each of the five small-plate courses. Each wine is introduced alongside the food to explain how the flavours work together.

At the Kendall-Jackson winery, also in Santa Rosa (KJ.com), the five-course food and wine pairing experience builds into



IN GOOD TRIM: The Shafer vineyard has hired 1,000 extra sheep to keep the grass down.

a delightful lunch, or you can indulge in a wine and chocolate or a wine and cheese pairing. An added attraction at Kendall-Jackson is the four acres of beautiful gardens which are free to wander around, including the organic vegetable gardens that supply many ingredients for the lunches.

The Buena Vista winery (buenavistawinery.com) has a history going back to the mid 1800s when it was founded by Hungarian-American Agoston Haraszthy. He was responsible for importing vast quantities of European vine cuttings to California and justifiably became known as the father of the Californian wine industry. His wine estate is still standing, now owned by French wine producer Jean-Charles Boisset, and is a great place to visit, for the history and for the wines.

Slightly off the beaten track but well worth the drive through stunning countryside, the Marimar Torres winery just outside Sebastopol (marimarestate.com) offers seated tastings by appointment – although short notice appointments phoned in from the winery gate can usually be accommodated. This is a quiet, elegant place and the wines reflect the location with glorious flavours and elegance, especially in the Pinot Noir wines. With a nod to Marimar's Spanish heritage, you can indulge in tapas and wine pairing or even have a guided tour of the vineyards.

Tapas are also on offer at the Gloria Ferrer winery in Sonoma where you can sip Californian sparkling wine then take a tour of the winery.

If you are all wined out then Sonoma offers a wide range of other activities. Described as the Serengeti of Sonoma, Safari West (safariwest.com) offers safari-style wildlife tours and its upmarket tents on stilts provide a good place to stay while you explore the region. A few glasses of wine on your deck overlooking the safari park is a splendid way to get to know the wines of Sonoma. 

wine club april offer

STYLISH ITALIANS – 12 BOTTLES FOR £85

Capture some of Italy's glorious sunshine with this range of Italian wines. Sourced from quality producers, these wines will provide stylish drinking as spring turns into summer.

This 12-bottle case should cost £111.40, but the Yorkshire Post price is just £85. Delivery costs £9.95 for a single case but if you order two cases to the same address it is free.

How to order: Order online at www.houseoftownend.com/yorkshire-post-wine-club or ring

our order line on 01482 638888, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm. Outside this time, leave a message including your telephone



number and we will ring you back. There are 12 bottles in this case, two each of: **Whites:** Grillo 2017, Rupe Secca, Sicily – crisp with lime and lemon fruit, a good match with fish; Falanghina di Sannio 2017, La Guardiense – honeysuckle, apricots and melon with zesty freshness; Amori Pinot Grigio 2017 – ripe pears and orange zest flavours.

Reds: Chianti 2017, Duca di Sassetta – full of red berry fruit and perfect with pasta; Montepulciano di Abruzzo 2016, Conte di Castelvecchio – lively, damson and morello cherry fruit, perfect with tomato sauces; Primitivo Appassimento 2016, Carломagno – fabulous flavours, dark cherry, plums and black pepper.

off the shelf

Bruce Jack Chenin Blanc 2018, South Africa, 13%, Sainsbury's, down from £7 to £6 until Tuesday:

Fresh crisp, honeysuckle aromas, with white peach and crunchy apple notes on the palate. Team with fishcakes and pork chops.



Jackson Estate Stich Sauvignon Blanc 2017, Marlborough, New Zealand, 12.5%, Waitrose, down from £12.99 to £8.59 until May 14:

Packed with punchy gooseberry freshness, underpinned by a layer of mineral crunch.



Errazuriz Estate Merlot 2017, Chile, 13.5%, Asda, down from £9 to £7 until May 22:

Full of ripe plum and blueberry fruit with touches of herbs, chocolate and vanilla. Pour alongside lamb.



CVNE Rioja Crianza 2015, Spain, 13.5%, Booths, down from £10 to £7.50 until May 7:

A youthful style of Rioja full of cherry and red berry fruit, a hint of vanilla and cocoa on the finish. Team with lamb or herb-spiced roast chicken.



on the grapevine

Flying corks: Middlethorpe Hall in York recently played host to the Confrérie du Sabre d'Or which sounds like it might be an association of swordfighters, but the only thing their swords were fighting was the cork on a bottle of Champagne. Sabrage – the art of removing the top of a bottle of Champagne with a sword – is a technique that became popular in France around the time of Napoleon when everyone had a sword to hand. Several members of the Confrérie demonstrated this cavalier way of opening a bottle and then Middlethorpe's restaurant manager, Liam Warwick (pictured right), had a go. After completing the task successfully, Liam was appointed as a Chevalier of

the Confrérie. As well as enjoying the excellent food and wine at the official Grande Ouverture du Caveau de Sabrage, several dinner guests managed the tricky technique of sabrage. Like all activities that involve a high-pressure



glass container and a sword, sabrage should not be attempted at home without instruction and safety goggles.

Hit the club: Tickets are now on sale for the Chez Vin Spring Fair on May 31 at Otley Rugby Club. They cost £12.50 including hog roast and tapas. There will be around 80 wines open for tasting and since this is always a well-attended tasting, you need to book your place quickly. It is also well worth booking a place at the series of gin tastings that will take place on May 17 and 24 and June 7 and 14. For just £15, you can taste seven gins and at the end of the tasting, enjoy a cocktail made with your favourite. Ring 01943 466143 for details of these events.