



Schaefer on Wine: Wine trails: Hidden in plain sight

By Dennis Schaefer
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When you've been doing this wine thing as long as I have, you tend to think you know all the wineries in California, as well as the name of all the winemakers. But you also know that, given the explosive growth of the California wine biz, it's good to occasionally step outside your comfort zone, mine being Santa Barbara County and the Central Coast, to discover what you don't know.

On a recent trip to the North Coast, I did just that. In Napa Valley, I came across two wineries that were, more or less, hidden in plain sight. Certainly I had driven up and down those wine trails many times, but never spotted them.

Gamble Family Vineyards has a Highway 29 address, though the vineyard operations are set back from the road in Oakville, sandwiched between the Napa River and Conn Creek. Vintner Tom Gamble is no Tommy-comelately to farming either: He bought his first vineyard in 1981. Winemaker Jim Close focuses on Bordeaux varieties and he likes balance and subtlety in his wines.

Somerston Estate Winery at Priest Ranch is also right on the highway, though it's located in hilly terrain 12 miles east of Rutherford (though still regarded as Napa Valley) and is comprised of 130 acres of vineyards with the hillsides reaching up to 2,400 feet in elevation. Co-founder Allan Chapman and winemaker Craig Becker also favor Bordeaux varieties.

Frankly, I was bowled over by the quality of wines from both producers and I'm happy to share that discovery with you.

• **Gamble Sauvignon Blanc, Napa Valley, Gamble Vineyard 2015 (\$32):** Zingy lemon, stone fruit and guava come through distinctly on the nose. Partial fermentation in stainless steel gives it a brisk and lively feeling in the mouth, while the remaining barrel-fermented portion helps give it texture and substance. Nectarine, lemon and especially lime burst on the palate, while the finish leaves you with a sense of honeycomb and preserved lemon.

• **Gamble Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley 2013 (\$65):** After spending 20 months in a variety of small oak barrels, this cab seems extremely well-knit together now though it will certainly age well for a decade. Blackberry and black cherry are the primary fruit aromatics augmented by dried fig, nutmeg and roasted walnut. Robust but balanced in the mouth, here comes more blackberry, black currant and plum as well as hints of mocha, cocoa, Medjool date and tobacco leaf. Outstanding.

• **Gamble Paramount, Napa Valley 2012 (\$90):** A Bordeaux-style blend, this spent an equal amount of time in oak as the cab, though more new French oak was utilized. Black cherry, dark plum and fig compote are the fruit components on the nose with a touch of sage and thyme in the mix. Both the fruit and savory aspects play off each other on the palate. Dark plum leads the way with fig and date, then an insinuation of strawberry and red currant comes through along with tobacco, leather and anise. The flavors coalesce very well on midpalate while the silky smooth tannins help guide the wine to a delicious flavor-packed finish.

Wine expert Dennis Schaefer's column appears every other week in the Food section. Email him at food@newspress.com.