



# RED OR WHITE?

*The neighborhood wine shop may be a familiar Old World tradition but it's still a relatively new thing in Northern California*

Story by Frank Robertson

Photography by Sarah Bradbury

When a wine shop opened in Monte Rio awhile ago I thought, they're going to try selling high-end wine in Monte Rio? Good luck. It seemed like another lower River retail fantasy, a delusion of grandeur doomed to be swallowed up by our dark wet winter blahs and the area's economy.

I was wrong. Owners John Haggard and David Defries have braved a stagnant Russian River (and global) economy to establish Sophie's Cellars, a cool shop where you can browse rare Sonoma County Pinots and down-to-earth reds and whites that don't break the bank.

They're not too fussy about it either. "I'm the cheese guy," said David, when I first dropped in. "John's the wine guy."

Sophie's used to be a Chinese restaurant called the Golden Chopstick that also served hamburgers and fried chicken because despite our surrounding wine country élan this is the Russian River, you know, where people gravitate to goods and services that are cheap and familiar. That's probably why I didn't go near Sophie's at first because I imagined some intimidatingly precious milieu where everyone's lips were pursed in quiet contemplation.

It's not like that. What Sophie's and some of the other local wine shops, such as Wine Tasting of Sonoma County in Duncans Mills, Healdsburg's Wine Shop near the plaza, Windsor's Vine Tastings, and Sebastopol's Wine Emporium tell you is that a wine shop does not have to be intimidating no matter how little you know about wine. If you're interested in vino, the shopkeeper should be happy to see you and glad to offer help if you ask.

"With all of the good shops these days, there's no reason not to find a caring, patient, knowledgeable merchant," Dottie Gaiter and John Brecher wrote recently in "Tastings," their weekly Wall Street Journal wine column.

A wine shop in Sonoma County also will offer many wines you won't see at the local Safeway, and their presence makes a difference in ways that may surprise. At Sebastopol's Wine Emporium on Main Street one day, I got a spontaneous endorsement from a customer who just happened to pop into the shop as I was browsing the reds on the left side of the store, where they keep the less expensive wines (although the truth is you probably shouldn't go into a wine shop expecting to save money).

She was a dark-haired woman, 30-something, attractive and enthusiastic, who had stopped in to thank proprietors Kai and James for recommending a bottle of Dry Creek Heritage Zinfandel, which just happened to be displayed at that moment on the shelf in front of me.



*Wine Emporium, Sebastopol*

"I drank the whole bottle," she said. "All in one evening. It was so wonderful I kept pouring myself another glass."

She didn't feel drunk nor did she have a hangover the next morning, she said. Considering this was a wine with a 14.5 percent alcohol content, her story was remarkable. Her enthusiasm was so thorough and infectious that I wondered if the proprietors paid her to drop in and rave about the wine in the vicinity of an indecisive customer like me.

"Do they pay you to come in here and talk about how great this wine is?" I said.

"No," she said, "but I wish they did."

I bought a bottle of the Heritage because I was too curious to pass it up. The winemaker, Bill Knuttel of Healdsburg's Dry Creek Vineyard, used a blend of old vine Zinfandel grapes from "a variety of California grape-growing regions," said the label.

The wine proved to be a great companion to cassoulet, and after having been opened for a couple of days it also teamed well with a bowl of chili.

Chili and Zinfandel? That's an easy match. If your ability to pair wine with food has not evolved beyond the red-with-meat level of appreciation, it's another reason why a wine shop visit is more compelling than a trip to the Safeway. At Sophie's, for openers, John Haggard always asks what I'm having for dinner.

"Grilled hamburger," I said one day. Eel River brand organic grass-fed beef from Pacific Market in Sebastopol, to be specific, barbecued over mesquite.

Haggard suggested a 2006 Marraso Vineyards Malbec, “El Caballo Antigua.” (The old horse? I wondered what that meant.) It proved to be a perfectly decent red for the task and cost just \$9.99.

He could just as easily have recommended one of the high-end reds Sophie’s has on hand, sometimes in a locked case, made by stellar local winemakers such as Flowers of Cazadero, Healdsburg’s George, Radio Couteau or Sebastopol’s Fred Scherrer (who I think is making the finest Zin in the county).

“I do my best,” Haggard says of his pairings. “I’m not always right.”

Once I asked him about a red to go with a grilled cheese sandwich flavored with sage, a sensational simple recipe from Judy Rodgers’ *Zuni Café Cookbook*. Haggard recommended a Carol Shelton 2005 Exhale Syrah from Dry Creek Valley. Haggard also asks for your feedback. “I stand back here like I know what I’m talking about,” he said.

“How was it?” he asked the next time I came in.

“Off the chart.”

Haggard used to be a chef. He cooked for the renowned Julia Child when he was at Silk’s Restaurant in San Francisco’s Mandarin Oriental Hotel, where he worked with star chef Ken Oringer.

One day last summer Haggard asked what was for dinner.

“It’s sort of a salad nicoise,” I said. Haggard wanted to know what I meant by “sort of.”

I didn’t know. My wife, Mary, said she was preparing a salad that would be like a salad nicoise, with tuna, potatoes, and a dressing of olive oil, but maybe it would be a singular version, composed on individual plates rather than in a serving dish. I forgot whether it would have tomatoes when I was telling John what the ingredients would be.

“Do you want a red?”

“It doesn’t have to be a red,” I said. I thought we’d gotten by in the past with a decent chardonnay. Haggard interviewed me about the ingredients. I mentioned onions and green beans.

“What kind of vinegar are you using?” he asked.

I wasn’t sure. “Probably balsamic,” I guessed. I said I could call home and find out.

Haggard looked thoughtful.

“I think what you want is this Sauvignon Blanc,” he said. He described its taste, an elaborate description of flavors that included grapefruit at first, and then a lot more. Haggard can manage to describe a complexity of flavors interacting in a way that is sometimes so scientifically thorough that it sails over my head. When referring to tannins he may mention sage and dust. I listen, hoping to fathom as much as I can.

The Sauvignon Blanc was a 2007 Atascadero Creek Russian River Valley vintage made from grapes grown at Ritchie Vineyards. It was superb.

“Perfect wine,” Mary said at dinner.

That’s another thing about a good wine shop. It can make ordinary people appear to be brilliant.

## GRILLED CHEESE SANDWICHES

*Adapted by Frank Robertson from The Zuni Cafe Cookbook, Judy Rodgers (2002, W.W. Norton & Co.)*

*Makes 2 sandwiches*

**About 12 fresh sage leaves**

**Olive oil**

**Black pepper**

**4 slices country-style bread**

**(I use pan frances or Sebastopol sourdough from Village Bakery)**

**4 ounces Fontina or Gruyere cheese**

Mince enough sage leaves to make a tablespoon. Put the sage in a small saucepan with two or three tablespoons of olive oil and about a half teaspoon of ground black pepper. Heat until warm to the touch then set aside.

Slice bread about one-quarter to a half-inch thick. (I cut off the crust.)

Slice or coarsely grate enough cheese to evenly blanket two slices of the bread. Place the remaining two slices of bread on top of the cheese and press the sandwiches flat. Weigh them down with a cutting board for 10 to 20 minutes.

When you’re ready to grill, use a pastry brush to coat the outer sides of the bread with the sage oil. Make sure you spread the oil “all the way to the edges and distribute the sage and pepper evenly,” says Judy Rodgers.

Warm a skillet and coat it with a few drops of olive oil spread thin with a paper towel.

Cook the sandwiches for about two or three minutes per side over low heat until the cheese is soft and melting and the sandwiches are golden brown. Cut them in half if you want.

*Serve with a glass of Syrah.*



## [ WINE SHOPPING ]

(All area codes 707)

### **Wine and Cheese Tasting of Sonoma County**

25179 Hwy. 116, Duncans Mills  
Noon to 6 p.m.; closed Tuesday  
865-0565;  
winetastingofsonomacounty.com.

### **Sophie's Cellars**

20293 Hwy. 116, Monte Rio  
Retail wine and cheese; no tastings.  
11 a.m. to 7 p.m.; closed Wednesday  
865-1122; sophiescellars.com.

### **The Wine Shop**

331 Healdsburg Ave., Healdsburg  
Tastings and retail sales;  
10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily,  
Sundays open at noon  
433-0433; thewineshoponline.com

### **Wine Emporium**

125 North Main St., Sebastopol  
Tastings, retail sales;  
exhibits by local artists  
Noon to 6 p.m.  
Wednesday through Sunday  
823-5200; the-wine-emporium.com

### **Vine Tastings**

9058 Windsor Rd., Windsor  
Tastings, retail sales, bistro,  
Sunday brunch  
Mon. through Sat. 4 p.m. to 10 p.m.  
Sunday 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.  
620-0833; vinetastings.us.

### **Sonoma Fine Wine**

3625 Main St., Occidental  
Tastings and retail sales  
by appointment  
874-3300; sonomafinewine.com



*Kai Klieg, Wine Emporium*