



## Wine Tasting, Ojai, California-Style

Posted by [Linda Kissam](#) on September 12, 2010 at 1:30pm

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I love visiting emerging wine regions with small lot, family-owned wineries that just don't seem to get the press they deserve. So it came to be that my friend Ginger and I left fast paced So Cal and headed north two hours to Ojai. What's that? You didn't think Ojai had a wine region of its own? Yes it does, thank you very much. Read on as I introduce you to an incredibly unique 2-day wine tasting trip—Ojai Style.

First stop was the by-reservation only [Noble Oaks Vineyard & Winery](#). Located in a private home off a private lane



near downtown Ojai, this 250 case 8-year old winery is run by father-daughter team John Cuthbert and Anne Cuthbert Brink. Noble Oaks Winery is committed to single-vineyard wines "patriotically aged in new American oak barrels" for 2 years followed by 6 months in glass before release. We quickly learned from Anne, "We do wines that we like. We pick, crush, age and barrel our wines ourselves...well sometimes with a little help from our

friends." According to John, "Each year our wines get better and better. I think our 2009 wines will turn out to be our best ever." Ginger and I visited the vineyards and tasted several wines, including a couple of barrel samples – all a treat. Standouts include the 2006 Noble Oaks Malbec (vinted by John), a dark purple color showcasing a distinct earthiness with soft undertones of vanilla, licorice and prunes; and the 2006 fruit forward Santa Barbara Highlands Vineyards Petite Sirah (vinted by Anne) with notes of black pepper & bittersweet chocolate. It is rich, round and velvety. [Wines are available at local retail establishments](#). Call for a private taste and tour, I know you'll be wowed by the experience.



Second stop was a tasting with Joe Boccali of [Boccali Vineyard](#) wines at Boccali's Restaurant. The winery and vineyards are located in the scenic Upper Ojai Valley. Partners and winemakers, DeWayne & Joe Boccali are the driving forces behind the label. Joe set the tone by telling us, "Our wines are medium bodied, taste of the fruit



...you'll get to know the terroir it comes from. I don't mash the fruit. The wine has a smooth finish and yummy characteristics. It's definitely food friendly." I'd agree with that. Boccali Vineyards hand-crafted wines are grown, produced & bottled on-site, and aged in American Oak. We tasted their current offerings including the 2008 Topa Topa Syrah (\$28) (expect vanilla, blackberry, dark cherry, with hints of blackberry, chocolate and spice, medium-bodied with a peppery warm finish), the 2009 Grenache Blanc "Shangri-La" (\$25) (aromas of citrus and apricot, a crisp, acidic and refreshing zippy mouth feel), and the 2009 Pink Moment" Syrah Rose(\$18) (a swirl of fresh floral, strawberries and citrus aromas on the nose. Dry on the palate with a crisp & tangy acidity). [Wines are](#)

[available at their two restaurants and local retailers](#). Nice wines – be sure and stop by for lunch or dinner and a tasting.

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On our way back to the [Emerald Iguana Inn](#) we stopped at [Ojai Olive Oil](#), nestled on the Asquith Farm on the southern edge of the Los Padres National Forest. It can be a bit of a challenge to find – but definitely worth it. This family owned and operated business has been around for 10 years or so. We were certainly impressed with the 130 year-old olive trees and our knowledgeable and enthusiastic private guide Alice Asquith. Bring a picnic lunch so after your free one-hour tour (Saturdays 10 AM – 3 PM year round, or by appointment) you can enjoy the beauty of this place in a leisurely fashion. We loved learning all

about the differences between black and green olives, the “haircut” olive trees receive at the end of harvest, the fascinating 90 minute processing method, and of course...the tasting of the oils and vinegars. This is quite a treat. I recommend you think about visiting during Nov- Jan when harvest is occurring.



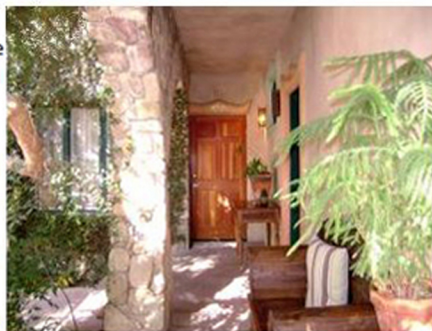
Dinner was at the amazing [AZU](#) restaurant in downtown Ojai. Chef Laurel Moore has created a yummy California fusion style Spanish Menu inspired by traditional Spanish and Mediterranean Cuisine. Fresh local ingredients are used whenever possible, and Chef Moore grows her own produce in the Azu vegetable garden & carefully selects her meat and produce from local Ojai farms and ranches. I certainly enjoyed the hip artsy

décor that seats about 100 people. Featuring 25 wines by the glass (\$8-\$13 -bottles run \$18-\$120) and a tapas menu to die for, we relaxed and enjoyed small plates of Lamb Kabobs, Chili Relleno, Flat Iron Steak and a Syrian Chicken Salad. Dessert followed with home-made (seriously OMG) gelato and a trio of crème brûlée. This is casual fine dining at its best. I highly recommend you stop here just to see what the Ojai fine dining scene is all about.



Our night's lodging: the [Emerald Iguana Inn](#) was -to say the least – perfect for us. I had heard it was a local treasure, but OMG this is everything a romantic-at heart could ask for: peaceful, restful, spacious, and gorgeous. It's a treat for the eyes and the spirit. Perfect for singles, married couples, writers, or friends traveling together... anyone looking for a rejuvenating experience. There are a variety of rooms and rates to choose from depending on the season, starting at \$159 in the low season. What a luxurious bargain! We stayed in the Lily Pad cottage. Two bedrooms, two stories, kitchen, whirlpool bath, private patio and many, many more amenities, made this an exceptionally private experience. We loved the lush green grounds, continental breakfast by the pool, and the private

layout of each room and cottage. This adult only architectural and artistic inspired property has to be THE Place to stay. The staff is friendly and knowledgeable, but not intrusive. I had a long-ish morning chat poolside with Innkeeper Connie. She explained that Ojai is a bohemian community with a definite art energy to it. She recommended we stop at Primavera gallery and drive to Meditation Mount. With 22 retreat centers hugging the Ojai area, there is indeed a special vibe about this place I am not sure I can put into words, other than to recommend that you include staying at the Emerald Iguana as part of the full experience. It's about a 4 block walk to downtown situated on a dead-end street. It is a luxury that inspires and renews. Absolutely stay here.



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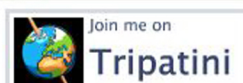
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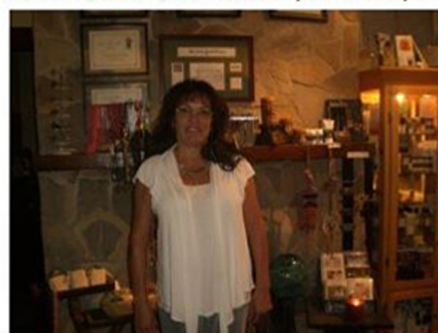
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Dawn breaks to find Ginger and I working madly at our computers in our cottage that overlooks the pool area. We break at 8:15 AM for a leisurely breakfast poolside, then we're off for a very busy day. The GPS is first set for our



ahhhhh moment of the trip at the [Day Spa of Ojai](#). We were greeted serenely and warmly by owner Kim Wachter as our feet soaked in rose petal water. We love spas. We go often. We'd rate this one in the top 3 of our Spa experiences. Whereas the Emerald Iguana was a haven of rest, this was a sanctuary of spiritual calm and well-being. I had the anti-aging 60 minute facial with Kesha (\$99). Talk about a WOW moment. She was more than a technician. The word guardian comes to mind. Ginger had a foot (\$49) and hand treatment (\$29) with an especially gifted staff member, Veronique. This turned out to be a physical and spiritually renewing experience for her as Veronique is a master of reflexology. I must say again the natural based products and staff

are top notch. Owner Kim shared that her idea of success is "Seeing my clients transformed. I want our guests to walk in the door and feel, sense and hear tranquility. That's the beginning of the experience of letting go. That's what we're all about." We couldn't have said it better. Spa prices and products are extremely affordable (\$20 – under \$200). Ginger and I both left with a multitude of advice and products...not because we felt obligated to listen or purchase, but because this place was transformative for us. This is a MUST stop for its kind, nurturing, renewing opportunities. I understand owner Kim has a sister who owns [The Spa Central Coast](#) in Atascadero. Ginger and I agree the next time we're visiting the Paso wine region, we'll be heading over there.

Glowing and renewed we were off to lunch at [Feast Bistro](#). This is an award-winning place to nosh and people watch. Located on the main street (East Ojai Ave) Chef Susan Coulter has created a



small but focused New American cuisine menu I know you'll love. Feast Bistro showcases Susan's talents in an open kitchen at the front of the restaurant. Don't know how she keeps a running conversation with her devoted



clientele as she cooks up and sends out inspired cuisine, but she does...with grace and good humor. She says of her restaurant, "It's the experience of enjoying food with other people enjoying food." We loved the Blue Plate Special and the Pulled Pork Sandwich. Susan let us taste her famous Olive Oil Cake (a citrusy dense cake that is somehow airy and melts in your mouth), and the to-die-for homemade chocolate and lemon crème cookies made by her partner Beryl Schwartz. Feast Bistro has a solid wine list of by-the glass (\$7-\$18) and by-the bottle (\$25-\$36), and they hold winemaker dinners throughout the year. You really need to check this place out.

Our next stop was the 1,000 case [Ojai Ridge Winery](#). This was to turn out to be the adventure of the year for us.



Publicist Ann Flower had developed the Ojai visit for me, and noted on the itinerary that Ojai Ridge Winery, "...was a bit of a drive, but worth it." Holy smokes...it was a 2- mile winding, drop slope ride up an unmapped mountain. Ginger was the cheerleader and communicator as we crept up the sharp climb in my too-big-for-the-trip SUV, "Mr. Big." Ginger was constantly on the cell phone at every twist and turn with owner Don Dafau as he talked us up the mountain. But...as Ann promised...it was worth the trip...not just for the

incredible 360 degree view, but for the charming, welcoming vintner who told us the whole way up, "Trust that you can make it up here. I promise my beautiful wines are the reward and I am here too." He was also right. This was perhaps our favorite wine tasting spot. Owner Don Dafau grows his grapes on his home-estate vineyards then takes them up to work with Norm Yost at Flying Goat Cellars. Don believes Ojai is a viable wine region as



he envisions a time in the not too distant future when, "More and more grapes will be grown here, more wineries will be established, and our area will merit more interest by wine lovers and the media." We LOVED his 2009 Rosé of Cabernet Sauvignon (\$14). This is a PERFECT European style dry rosé that is sassy, refreshing and balanced. We also enjoyed and can easily recommend the 2006 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$18), and the 2007 Syrah (\$18). Wines are sold online and at local Ojai retailers.



Our last two winery stops were in downtown Ojai. [Casa Barranca](#) specializes in boutique wines handcrafted from organic grapes. They believe in, "...organic, natural, and sustainable practices" as they continue to strive for optimal balance in their approach to wine making. Their organic tasting menu includes Pinot Noir, Syrah, Viognier, Grenache, and red blends, including a no sulfites added Arts & Crafts Red and a Bungalow Red (\$25) that we liked a lot. We enjoyed the feel of the tasting room with its interesting art by local Ojai artists as our server Chloe led us through a relaxed

tasting of reds and whites. Ginger asked Chloe to use the Venturi to aerate the reds which we felt really helped showcase the wines true character. I encourage you to make this winetasting room a stop on your Ojai visit.

Our final winery tasting was at the [Ojai Vineyards](#) tasting room just around the corner from Casa Barranca. We met owner/winemaker Adam Tolmach for one of the most intense and productive tastings of the trip. In his 28<sup>th</sup> harvest and with no lack of enthusiasm after all those years, this man knows his stuff and it was a sincere pleasure to spend an hour with him. His vision is to, "Stay small and keep an eye towards the craft that insures premium balanced wines that can age gracefully for 8-15 years." What's "the craft?" It is comprised of

knowledge, experience and intuition...and his wines definitely speak to that philosophy. His wines are balanced treasures of strong and plentiful fruit. They're aromatic and complex. They inspire, rather than tire out the palate. "I am on a never ending quest to make my wines ever so much better and fine." Yup, we get that. Signature wines to be sure and try are: 2006 CLOS PEPE Chardonnay (\$37.50), 2009 KICK ON Riesling (Unexpected and unusual zippy excellence- \$24), and the earthy, chewy, balanced 2005 FE CIEGA Pinot Noir (\$56).

Last stop of our amazing trip was dinner at [Suzanne's Cuisine](#), one of the top 3 fine dining masterpieces that make up the magical Ojai culinary scene. Set off a bit from Ojai's main street, the rustic looking restaurant is surrounded by large trees and lush greenery which set us up for a relaxed evening of great seasonally inspired food, amazing wine and professional caring staff. We took a deep breath when we went through the front door to an interior where the décor is richly romantic ...appointed with dark woods, a big stone fireplace and tables spaced for intimate conversation. Our table overlooked a beautiful garden oasis

completing the feeling of the fine dining experience. That is not to say this is a stuffy, dress up kind of place. Come as you are. This place definitely shouts the cool, relaxed Ojai vibe we had come to know. What's not to love when you're handed a 15-page wine list and an eclectic menu featuring Italian, French, Asian and Mexican cuisine? We had an Asian inspired hors d'oeuvre, an Italian inspired entrée, and an heirloom salad that knocked our socks off. Our server Kari Chapman, an 18 year veteran of the restaurant, watched over us all night. She was patient explaining our options, stopped by often to see how we were doing, and generally made our dining experience one to remember and recommend to all of you.



Rested, relaxed, rejuvenated, and truly stirred by the fine wines, food, activities, and special feeling that [is Ojai](#), I programmed "Mr Big's" GPS and headed back to our hectic lives in Temecula. This Ojai wine region has a prosperous future in front of it. I can feel it, I can sense it. No looking back now... I think it is on its way to fame and fortune. I am going to keep my eye on this place and will be checking in periodically to check its purposeful progress. YOU should go see it now to watch a rock star in development.

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