

Corkheads: Retreat to Ram's Gate Winery



The tasting bar at Ram's Gate winery in southern Sonoma.

When you think "destination winery," unfavorable images may spring to mind. Long lines. T-shirts studded with bad wine puns. Name-tagged "wine experts" leading tours of busloads of fanny-packers.

You won't find any of that at Ram's Gate. The new farmhouse winery in southern Sonoma has been making a splash on the wine scene because it has the serenity of a world-class spa -- and memorable wines.

Located on the tip of Carneros about 40 minutes from Walnut Creek, Ram's Gate, the brainchild of third-generation vintner Jeffrey O'Neill, is a place where you can linger for hours, enjoying pinot noir tastings in the luxurious parlor, farm-to-table bites in the camera-ready kitchen and customized picnics on the pond overlooking vineyard and bay views.

Seriously, this is Disneyland for yuppies. Tobacco lovers, bring your smoking jacket. There's a humidor. Foodies, relish the ever-changing menu of delectable nibbles while relaxing in the fireside lounge. There's a culinary garden in the back and a bee apiary in the works. The only thing missing is a life coach. And a massage therapist.

Naturally, luxury comes with a price. The yummy bites offered by chef Jason Rose -- from San Francisco's Delfina and Locanda -- include Crispy Fried Forest Mushroom Arancini and huckleberry-infused Seared Foie Gras for \$6 to \$19, and a glass of the suggested wine will run you an additional \$6 to \$34. But you can skip the dining experience and opt for

the customizable tasting at the bar, which offers 11/2 ounces of five selected wines for \$20.

Ah, the wines. They're beautiful. Head winemaker Jeff Gaffner (Chateau St. Jean) and assistant winemaker Jesse Fox (Harlan Estate) craft 8,000 cases annually of single-vineyard wines from coveted spots, including Hyde Vineyards, Ulises Valdez Vineyard and the winery's own 26-acre estate vineyard. In addition to pinot noir, they make small lots of 300 cases or less of chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, syrah, zinfandel and sparkling wine.

Among my favorites are the 2008 Winemaker's Cuvee Cabernet Sauvignon (\$64), a rich, powerful wine with cocoa-laced black currant flavors, and the wild 2009 Sonoma Valley Late Harvest Zinfandel (\$34), a dessert wine with a black peppercorn kick. The 2010 Ulises Valdez chardonnay showcases the earthy potential of this white grape while the 2010 Bush Crispo pinot noir has savory notes of sage and bay leaf. Both wines will be released in April to wine club members only.

Membership ranges from \$900 to \$1,800 annually and includes all sorts of perks. But if that's out of the question for you, stick to the \$20 tasting fee and take in the glorious architecture and design of this winery, which, in addition to its lovely wines, is really the soul of the place.

World-renowned architect Howard Backen (Screaming Eagle) designed Ram's Gate, re-imagining the weathered farmsteads of old Carneros into something unique and modern. Highlights of the 21,000-square-foot property include the glorious barn and its 30-foot ceilings plus recycled French granite cobblestone and an underground dining alcove and barrel cellar that will make you feel millions of miles from home.

food and wine Odyssey

Join executive chef Jason Rose and sommelier Ian Burrows as they share Ram's Gate Winery's pairing philosophy. Sip on wines chosen by Burrows and seasonal dishes prepared by Rose. Tasting notes, recipes and gift basket will help re-create the experience at home. 1 p.m. Sundays-Mondays, Ram's Gate Winery, 28700 Arnold Drive, Sonoma. \$85. Call 707-721-8700 for reservations or visit www.ramsgatewinery.com.



The 2008 Ram's Gate Cabernet Sauvignon Winemaker's Cuvee