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Wise choices at Thomas George

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FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

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Getting a handle on a wine country region could be done by internet, books, DVDs/videos and other electronic gadgets, I suppose.

But there is nothing like visiting. All of which went through my mind recently as I drove to one of the newer and most attractive wineries in the Russian River Valley.

Those planning to visit a wine region this year could probably do no better than getting acquainted with Russian River, located in a relatively unspoiled area of western Sonoma County, one often shrouded in morning fog.

Driving there from Santa Rosa, west along River Road and then across the one-lane Wohler Bridge (1922), you turn north onto Westside Road amid towering redwoods, oaks and hillsides. There are no vines here, but a mile along the usually foggy road you see the sign for MacMurray Ranch, the retreat of the late actor Fred MacMurray, now home to a pristine pinot noir vineyard owned by E&J Gallo.

Just around a bend on the small road is Thomas George Estate, once owned by wine maker Davis Bynum.

Bynum, a pioneer of the region and one of the first to put a winery into Russian River, retired in 2008 and sold the property to Jeremy Baker, a former Toronto restaurant designer and owner and wine buyer.

Baker spent more than a year renovating the property, upgrading the old tasting room, adding an 8,000-square-foot wine cave, creating a handsome grassy picnic area in a grove of trees, and began to make wine.

There are numerous wineries in this area along Westside Road; most make spectacular if not world class wines, notably pinot noirs and chardonnays. That's because this "middle reach" Russian River area is usually cool enough to make wines that allow the two Burgundian varieties to thrive.

And those were the grapes Baker focused on when he hired as his wine maker Chris Russi. Russi had worked at Geyser Peak and in Australia and understands the need for perfect balance in both wines.

And with the first wines, Thomas George (an amalgam of the first names of Jeremy's father and grandfather) began to hit home runs. The earliest wines showed both verve as well as balance.

But Baker wasn't just making wine. He was creating a wine culture here, and that included adding four guest cottages, available to the public; regular wine and food events; a knowledgeable staff, and a wine club that offers 50% discounts on cottage accommodations.

So impressive was the rapid launch that within just a year of the first wines hitting the market, the winery signed a distribution agreement with Southern Wine and

Spirits, and the wines are now available nationally.

Moreover, Russi was encouraged to experiment with other varieties, and before long he and Baker had developed such a passion for the rare grape grenache that the winery planted new acreage to it. Today, Thomas George makes a fascinating wine from it (albeit in scant amounts).

Charmingly, the white-haired Bynum couldn't stay away from the property he founded in the early 1970s, so he consults with Russi to make the grenache, and he and Baker have lunch regularly.

Also in the Thomas George lineup now is a dry rosé, a sparkling rosé, a pinot blanc, a fine sauvignon blanc, two great chardonnays and more wines in the works.

Wine of the Week: 2009 Thomas George Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley (\$40) -- It may sound like a lot of money, but this is one of the most impressive young red wines you'll ever taste, and it will be better in a few years. Red fruit, strawberry, faint hints of clove and spice, and a classic match with rare roast beef or salmon.

Sonoma County resident Dan Berger publishes "Vintage Experiences," a weekly wine newsletter. Write to him at winenut@gmail.com.

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