



Fire up your inner wine geek at the Autumn Food & Wine Festival

Written by Leah Greenstein/special to the World
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Pine needles crisp and litter the ground like a thousand and one porcupine quills. Nights are cooling and the aspens are quickly gilding, wiggling and shaking in the afternoon wind. It's hard to believe it's autumn already — with its ever-shorter days and soft, melon-y evening light.



All over the northern hemisphere, farmers are working fastidiously to gather the crops they tended throughout the hot summer months — tender grains and plump squashes, crisp apples, spicy ginger, garlic, and of course, grapes, lots and lots of grapes.

With a surfeit of intoxicating flavors to blend and the winemaking season just around the corner, it seems appropriate to celebrate autumn with a jubilee: the 21st Annual Autumn Food and Wine Festival, which takes place Sept. 28 through Oct. 1.

The gastronomic gaiety starts Thursday evening with the Kings Beach Passport to Dining at the Kings Beach Conference Center. On Friday afternoon, embrace your inner Lucy at the Gar Woods Grill & Pier Grape Stomp and Luncheon; then spend your evening at a winery dinner at one of our area restaurants. And while the Grand Tasting and Culinary Competition set for Sunday may be the pinnacle of the whole weekend, it's also the only event on Sunday, while Saturday is so chock full of events that you couldn't attend all of them, not even with a split personality and a chauffeur. So what to do? Here's a slightly more in-depth look at two events that fired up my inner wine geek:

Tasting Wine the Master's Way

Chewy? Gamy? A hint of leather on the nose? If you've ever been perplexed by the seemingly arbitrary characteristics some people find in their wine when all you get are grapes, then Tasting Wine the Master's Way is one event you shouldn't miss.



“People hear wine jargon and get intimidated,” says Robert Bath, a Master Sommelier and instructor at the Culinary Institute of America’s (CIA) Wine Professional’s program.

With more than 25 years in the restaurant industry, a wine import business and a wine marketing/education consultancy, Bath’s got the background and the process for making it all come together. At Tasting Wine the Master’s Way, Bath will work to help you better understand that inky substance in your glass, what it is you’re tasting and how to best describe it.

Finding what suits your palate and your budget is what a sommelier does best. Rid yourself of the old fashioned image of a sommelier as a snoot with a corkscrew. Today’s sommelier is “engaging, helpful, knowledgeable and makes you feel as good about having a \$15 bottle of wine as a \$1500 one,” says Bath. All you have to know is how to tell him what you like.

With your new understanding and vocabulary from Tasting Wine the Master’s Way, being a nascent wine geek is just a swirl, sniff and quaff away.

Hidden Gems — Napa Valley’s Boutique Wineries

Rombauer, Silver Oak and Robert Mondavi. These may be the wineries that put the Napa Valley on the world’s wine map, but it’s the likes of Judd’s Hill, Jocelyn and Hill Family Estate that might just be the Valley’s future.



Small, family owned wineries are proliferating in the Napa Valley, but without the massive marketing budgets and large distribution networks of large corporate wineries, these hidden gems are not likely to wind up on Safeway’s shelves. This event is the perfect opportunity to taste these harder-to-find wines and hear about the winemaking business from insiders.

“We’re giving you access to the behind-the-scenes,” says Brandi Jocelyn Pack of Jocelyn Wines, who will be among the presenters.

Brandi will focus on the actual business aspects of the wine business while Holly Finkelstein of Judd's Hill will talk about marketing and Ken Nerlove of Elkhorn Peak cellars will be talking about grape growing. In addition to these three, the Q&A panel will include most members of the Boutique Wine Producers of Napa Valley, a marketing and education consortium (a list of participating wineries is below), all of which make fewer than 5,000 cases of wine annually.

Finally, taste a variety of wines from participating vineyards (listed below) and chat up the family members representing each winery. The real beauty in an event like this is the personal contact with those who know the wines best, the growers and winemakers!

Work Vineyards: Karen and Henry Work will be pouring the 2005 Napa Valley Work Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc (1,100 cases). www.workvineyard.com

Judd's Hill: Holly Finkelstein will representing the family winery, which produces Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, Merlot, Petite Sirah and Syrah (3,000 cases total). www.juddshill.com

Phelan Vineyard: Someone else might be pouring Phelan Vineyard's 2001 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon (840 cases). Growers-turned-vintner's Arlene and Gerry Phelan might be captives of crush. www.phelanvineyard.com

Eagle Eye: Bill and Roxanne Wolf will be pouring Eagle Eye Pinot Gris, Muscat Canelli and Voluptuous (a red blend). The duo, along with consultant winemaker Dennis Johns produces 3,000 cases in 2005. www.eagleeyewine.com

Hill Family Estate: Ryan Hill, marketing and sales director of the family partnership Hill Family Estate will be pouring wines from the family's current releases, including the 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon (511 cases), the 2003 Origin (a red blend; 844 cases), the 2003 Merlot (333 cases), the 2005 Malbec Rosé (580 cases) and the 2005 Sauvignon Blanc (125 cases). www.hillfamilyestate.com

Elkhorn Peak Cellars: Ken and Faith Nerlove will be representing this Jamieson Canyon winery, pouring their current releases: 2002 Elkhorn Peak Pinot Noir (1,500 cases) and the 2005 Elkhorn Peak Chardonnay (500 cases), as well as the 2000 and 2001 Pinot Noirs. www.elkhornpeak.com

Wines from Spelletich Cellars (www.spellwine.com), Frazier Winery (www.frazierwinery.com), Ramian Estate (www.ramianestate.com) and Rocca Family Vineyards (www.roccawines.com) will also be poured at Hidden Gems.