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What a wine weekend

MacMurray Ranch showcase attracts record crowd as part of newly expanded vintners' event Combined vintner event attracts record crowds at MacMurray Ranch

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A record crowd of 2,000 wine and food lovers descended on the grassy meadow of MacMurray Ranch on Saturday during the 29th annual Taste of Sonoma as part of a revamped, four-day Sonoma Wine Country Weekend.

There was more wine and food than ever -- 120 wineries and some 60 chefs -- greeting guests with tasty pairings, from bubbly and ahi tuna sliders to pinot noir and duck rillettes.

"We had more people today than we've ever had in the 29-year-old history of the event," said Honore Comfort, executive of the Sonoma County Vintners. "I think people are looking for a destination for Labor Day weekend."

The event was moved from mid-July to Labor Day weekend this year as part of a new collaboration with the Sonoma Valley Vintners and Growers, who are putting on the Sonoma Valley Harvest Wine Auction today at Cline Cellars in Sonoma.

By joining forces, the two biggest wine organizations in Sonoma County are hoping to lure more people to the county while reaching the ultimate goal of raising more money for local charities.

"It makes much more sense as one event," said Carlo Cavallo, chef and owner of Meritage restaurant in Sonoma and culinary director for the Sonoma Valley Harvest Wine Auction. "I think it's bigger than anything they do in Napa."

With the fog returning Friday to cool the county down to the high 80s, both the grapes and the guests at MacMurray Ranch on Saturday were spared from being turned into raisins in the sun.

"The weather is perfect," said Michael Salinger, director of the Santa Rosa Junior College Culinary Program, who brought 30 students and faculty volunteers to the event.

The wineries were happy with this year's setup, especially since their tasting tables were set

deeper into the tents and away from the sun.

Guests were greeted by glasses of Gloria Ferrer sparkling wine in an area known as the Bubble Lounge, where Jesse McQuarrie of Feast Catering served up pairings of ahi tuna sliders, endive cups with brie and quail stuffed with duck.

"There were literally hundreds of people," he said. "I served 1,000 people in one and a half hours."

Guests from across the country rubbed shoulders with vintners and chefs under the four appellation tents. Some watched the chef's competition while others attended wine seminars and went on tours with sommeliers from around the country -- a new feature added this year.

"We've brought in nine, all-star sommeliers who represent a whole new wave of superstars in the world of food and wine," said Greg Hittelman, director of the sommelier program.

Troy Weissmann, a sommelier from South Gate at the Essex House in New York, took a group of 20 guests on a two-hour tasting tour of zinfandels.

Weissmann was impressed with several boutique wineries whose wines he had never tasted before, including Wilson, Acorn and Mauritson Wines.

"Acorn makes really good wine," he said. "And the Mauritson Rockpile Ridge was a study in zinfandel . . . it was maybe the most complex wine at the tasting."

Among the food offerings, the pork belly BLT made by Janine Falvo of Carneros Bistro in Sonoma proved to be one of the most popular tastes of the day.

"It's a root-beer braised pork belly with a brown butter hollandaise aioli," Falvo said. "I used Oak Hill Farms tomatoes and a Hampshire pig. They are fatty goodness."

Falvo, one of four Sonoma County chefs competing in the Steel Chef Competition, fell in the first round to Thomas Schmidt, the new executive chef at John Ash & Co. in Santa Rosa.

In the second round, defending champion Jeff Mall of Zin restaurant in Healdsburg was defeated by Carlo Cavallo of Meritage in Sonoma.

In the final round, the new guy on the block -- Schmidt -- proved to be indomitable. After 17 years of cooking in Europe, he said he's learned to aim for simplicity.

"You want the flavors to speak for themselves," he said.

Ironically, one of the most popular watering holes at the Taste of Sonoma was the Lagunitas Brewery booth.

"I'm a winemaker, so I started with the beer," said Joe Otos of Owl Ridge Wines.

Mark Cohen, who manned the Lagunitas tap, said the Taste of Sonoma is his favorite event of the year.

"It's an embarrassment of riches," he said. "And it really confirms why we live here."

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