



Sunday Herald

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Napa Valley: all froth and bubbles

The late Frenchman Guy Devaux chose Napa Valley in 1979 for its clay soils and mild, sunny climate and it turned out to be a winner, writes Keya Acharya

The rolling hills are neatly laid out in rows of vines sagging with fat, purple fruit under bright but mellow sunshine. The roads wind into beautiful and charming cottages, sometimes in stone covered with bramble roses, sometimes in whitewashed blue like villas near the sea— the area looks Mediterranean; indeed it has been built to resemble Italy's Tuscany region's vineyards, but this is the famous Napa Valley in the California wine country in the US.



California \$45 billion wine industry, with around 1500 commercial wineries, is predominantly family-owned, the fourth largest in the world after France, Italy and Spain, producing about 98 per cent of the country's wine and exporting at least 20 per cent of its total production. World demand for Californian wines is growing steadily.

The Napa, Sonoma and Mendocino Counties, with at least six valleys between them near, or in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada ranges, is a popular tourist destination for both Americans looking for a weekend getaway, or for the US's thousands of annual foreign tourists. The entire industry has, very savvily, used this interest in them both as an advertisement and as a sales opportunity. Almost all wineries have tasting tours, some give them free, and have smart, friendly personnel handling tourists, serving wines and selling them in an atmosphere that hasn't forgotten that their clients are on holiday. Harvest festivals, celebrations at start of the new wine season or bottling season, any season is festival time.

The larger wineries take this 'wining out' to a polished finale: not one member of the eight people in our group went away from Mumm Napa's without buying bottles of wine, some bought several crates, given at a 20 per cent discount, or roughly a 'wholesale' rate for each bottle. A bottle of vintage Mumm's DVX 2000 named after Mumm founder Guy Devaux at \$44 or a premium sparkling Pinot Noir at \$24 is certainly an excellent buy.

Mumm Napa is the American version of French champagne. Patent issues with France's Champagne region that produces this most famous of all wines from the Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, and Pinot Meunier grape varieties, has made the company change the name 'champagne' to Sparkling Wine or 'bubbly' as it is known popularly in the US.

The late Frenchman, Guy Devaux (pronounced 'dee-vo'), the founder of Mumm Napa who worked at the famed Champagne House of Moet & Chandon in France was brought by Seagram's liquor house to find a home for a new champagne in the US. Devaux chose Napa Valley in 1979 for its clay soils and mild, sunny climate and it turned out to be a winner. The soil's density restricts the growth of vine roots, while the clay content gives them good water-holding capacity, a gift in an area with low rainfall.

The effect produces Chardonnay with naturally-high acidity and depth of flavour. It also allows the Pinot Noir grape to develop rich flavours of fresh raspberry, berry, bright cherry and spice. For sparkling wine, the high acidity gives the wine structure and finesse. Not surprisingly, American sparkling wines are more fruity in taste than French champagne.

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The method of producing these sparkling wines are the same as those used for over a century in the French champagne industry, called the Methode Traditionelle. From July to September, grapes are handpicked, mostly Chardonnay (white) but also Pinor Noir (red) and to a lesser extent Pinot Meunier (red) and Pinot Gris(white), and put into specially designed plastic boxes called FYBs (Famous Yellow Boxes!) with holes for aeration that fit neatly into each other without crushing the grapes. "We were the first to design the FYBs, now they're used by everyone in the industry," grins our tour Manager, Steve.

The grapes are gently pressed to extract the juice which is then transferred to giant steel vats inside the Mumm factory to keep for natural fermentation due to the sugar in the juice. The process for sparkling and still wines is similar up to this point. After five to six months, the wines are chosen and blended into the various styles soled. This creative process becomes the signature of a wine company, like Mumm's Brut.

Sparkling wines thereafter undergo a second fermentation with a blend of sugar, wine and yeast, called Tirage, unlike still wines, wherein the bubbles from the carbon dioxide are trapped, giving the wine its fizzy taste. The bottles are temporarily capped with soda bottles and left to age on racks, at least one year for non-vintage and three years for premium sparkling wines.

Every several weeks, a computer program moves each rack a fraction of a turn, to allow the yeast to sediment clearly at the bottom. After six to eight weeks, the bottles stand almost completely upside down, with the sediment trapped in the neck of the bottle.. The temporary bottle cap is then removed and the carbon dioxide in the unfrozen sparkling wine blasts out the iced sediment. A final combination of wine and cane sugar is added for final adjustments to aroma and flavour and then re-corked ready to sell.

The tasters' patio at Mumm is like a visit to an elegant wine café, overlooking luscious red grapes falling gracefully in slopes below. Or something like a wood-panelled pub that the Sutter's wine gallery offers, with a bar and friendly 'wine tenders' explaining you the contents of each bottle while you sit on a barstool with your friends and cheer each tasting with a 'Salut' or simply to health, fun and a happy life !

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