

Creston Wine Trail is a Destination Experience

By

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I can't think of anything more delightful than a nice drive in the country and when one can mix it with visits to six different wineries, a tour of an olive oil farm, and really good eats at a locally famous restaurant, I'd say you have a destination experience. This is what is offered on a tour of the Creston Wine Trail.

The idea for establishing this wine trail came from Mike Mooney owner and winemaker at Chateau Margene Winery. Since the Creston district is in its own AVA Mooney garnered support from six of his neighboring wineries and the olive oil producers at Olivas de Oro to form the group.

"Each one of the wineries offers something different," Mooney commented, "something unique to their own operation."



As unique as each place is, there is also the feeling that you have stepped back into the old west here. The tiny town of Creston has a main street consisting of the Long Branch Saloon, a country market and deli, a small United State Post Office, and the popular Loading Chute Restaurant. Across the road from this is the arena where once a year the Creston Rodeo takes place.

The wineries on the trail along with Chateau Margene include August Ridge, Shadow Run, Still Waters, Stanger, and B & E.

Starting your tour from Atascadero you can drive out Highway 41 through beautiful countryside dotted with ranches. Along the winding road you might see special breeds like Longhorn and

Red Brangus cattle. The road dips and winds and rises about 1000 feet in elevation taking you through areas lush with old growth oak trees.

The first winery you come to is August Ridge at, owned and operated by John August Backer and his wife Jill Zamborelli. With Zamborelli's Italian ancestry the Backers decided to grow Italian varietals. Oddly enough the name "August" does not refer to the month but is a name in both Backer's and Zamborelli's family.



Backer is winemaker and this is a small boutique winery where the tasting room is right inside the winery. In 2001 they bought 40 acres on this hillside and planted Italian clones of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, Sangiovese, and Nebbiolo, about three acres each. Backer produces eight to 12 vintages a year equaling 2000 cases.

Backer's favorite wine is the Nebbiolo which has the flavor of dried roses. He also makes a very nice dry pinot grigio. Backer says Italian wines are meant to be served with food.

"We make wines you can drink every day," Backer said, "and our wines represent food, family, faith and friends."



August Ridge is also home to 120 acres of olive trees and they produce olive oil for their own label that is pressed by their neighbor, Olivas de Oro.

August Ridge is participating in Passport Weekend and will offer some fine Italian food from Jill's recipes as well as cheese pairing, musical entertainment, and of

course, Italian wines.

Continuing on the trail a next stop might be B & E Vineyard on Creston Road. Entering the property, you drive up a hill passing a gaggle of Canada geese that are resting by the side of a large pond and arrive at their western Saloon tasting room.



The ranch began as a quarter horse racing operation at the hands of Doc Elliott which accounts for the “E” in the winery name. Jerry and Pat Bello expanded the ranch to farming along with raising registered Quarter Horses and registered cattle. In 1989 they added the vineyard with 25 acres of cabernet sauvignon and 25 acres of merlot as well as eight other reds for blending. Winemaker Pat Bello is an avid horsewoman and competes in cutting horse events all over the country but still makes time to produce quality wines begun in 2002 on her cowgirl label.



A visit to the Saloon may have you meeting tasting room manager Ray Lyn Watkins who will guide you through the tasting experience. You can even go outside and pet the horses or watch them being fed.

The Bellos have completed the construction of a new and much larger tasting room located near the road and surrounded by their vineyard. The larger facility will help when pick-up parties and other wine events take place at the property. The new tasting room will come in handy for Passport Weekend.

A Creston Road turn off at Old Grove Lane will bring you to Still Waters Vineyards. Here Paul Hoover, owner and winemaker, has created a little slice of heaven. Entering the grounds, you pass rose bushes trimmed into heart shapes that grow alongside the vineyard. Just outside the

tasting room is a lush grassy lawn where Hoover has set up tables and chairs all of which back up against a sloping grade covered with 100-year-old olive trees.



Hoover bought the property in 2003 and after many years working in both the hotel and insurance industries he got to do primarily what he was trained for during the 1970s at Cal Poly University.

“I apply what I call egonomics,” Hoover commented, “a combination of skill and a drawing on my hospitality industry experience.”

Whatever it is Hoover produces 300 cases of 14 varietals of hand-crafted estate Bordeaux and Rhone wines that he sells direct to consumer as do all the Creston Wine Trail wineries. Hoover grows 60 acres of cabernet sauvignon and merlot in the vineyard that is visible as one strolls from the top of the hill above the tasting room through the olive grove and onto the lawn. All along this walk you will hear the trickling of water that Hoover has engineered throughout the grounds culminating in a Coy pond surrounded by water plants. Robins and goldfinches fly in during springtime and summer to catch a drink from the flowing water. It’s a great place to hold weddings which happen here often.



Hoover sells grapes to other wineries and Mike Mooney at Chateau Margene is one of his customers. He also produces an extra virgin olive oil from the fruit of the 100-year-old trees that is pressed within four hours of picking by Gregg Bones of Kiler Ridge Olive Oil Company.



During summer months Still Waters offers Picture Perfect Sundays with music outdoors in the olive grove. Some of the performers this season will be Louie Ortega, Jill Knight, and Julie Beaver and Dorian Michael. You can obtain a full list at www.stillwaters.com .

If you had driven to the Creston Wine Trail from Paso Robles, 13th street would take you to Creston Road and then Still Waters would be the first wine trail winery you would come to. To see the final three on the trail, take Creston across Highway 41 where it becomes La Panza Road.

On the corner of Highway 41 is the entrance to Stanger Vineyards where you can even make reservations to stay at Creston House at Stanger Vineyards and enjoy the view from its wraparound porch. Meet Roger and Cheryl Janakus, descendants of Daniel Stanger who came to the United States from Alsace Lorraine, France in 1832.

Roger and Cheryl produce only about 800 cases a year of cabernet sauvignon, Tempranillo, Syrah and BENCH cuvee which they offer for tasting at their old world style tasting room on the trail as well as their second tasting room on Vineyard Drive in West Paso Robles. Stanger wines are handcrafted and matured in the bottle for seven to nine years before being offered for sale.



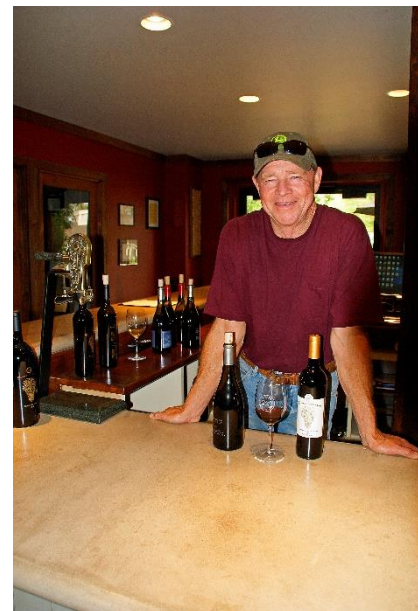
Down La Panza Road you can stop in at Olivas de Oro to taste the award-winning olive oils grown from Frank and Marti Menacho's century old olive trees that they transported from northern California and replanted here. Their extra virgin olive oil and eight flavored olive oils are processed on site with an Italian Perialisi mill. Tours include the orchard and the sheep pen where they raise grass fed Katahdin sheep. Lamb from their freezer is available for sale also. You can also book a stay at their three-bedroom guest house to have a longer stay on the trail.

Just down the road is the entrance to Chateau Margene where Mike Mooney can take you on a great tour of his facility. Mooney offers a wine education experience for people who get to see his unique winemaking process.

"I take people to sit in the barrel room," he said, "and I go over the whole operation."

Everything starts with the Bordeaux vines that he planted on site in 1997. He also purchases grapes through acreage contracts with Santa Lucia Highlands vineyards in Monterey County. Mooney's incredible 2013 and 2014 pinot noir came from these vineyards.

Mooney makes wine a little differently than his neighbors. First grapes are grown organically and picked at their peak at three in the morning to keep them cool. They are put into a stainless-steel tray and stems and leaves hand picked out, then are gravity fed through the presser, but only lightly pressed so that the grapes stay whole. Finally, excess detritus is shaken off and the grapes are put into open bins and manually crushed using what looks a little like a modified shovel with open slits in it. The final operation



is putting them into a variety of French oak barrels that are anywhere from lightly tight in grain to medium tight plus and are obtained from a variety of different locations in France.

The outcome is a quality that is unsurpassed. Mooney's pinot noir offered under his Mooney label is like velvet on the palate.

Mooney offers vintages from his Chateau Margene label, Mooney label, and the reasonably priced El Pistolero label. El Pistolero wines are produced from the very same grapes that are used in the higher priced labels.

Chateau Margene also has a bed and breakfast that sleeps six people as well as a special one-bedroom Petite Chateau. The grounds are lovely, and many weddings take place here.



Last but not least is Shadow Run also on La Panza a short distance from Chateau Margene. You will enjoy the 150 acres of rugged beauty and may even glimpse some visiting wildlife. Winemaker Susan James offers varietals of Malbec, viognier, Syrah, grenache, and Petite Sirah. Much of the success of the production of this winery comes from the talents and skills of women and that makes this winery distinctive.



Your Creston Wine Trail experience can end with a delicious prime rib or steak dinner at the Loading Chute on Route 229.