

# Sonoma's Vineyards Inn: A perfect night in green wine country

By Peggy and Gary Diedrichs, Syndicated by REUTERS BUSINESS TRAVELER



How cool! Awaiting us is what promises to be a perfect night in Green Wine Country: a “green” meal, a “green” sleep. At **Vineyards Inn**, the locally acclaimed organic tapas restaurant in **Kenwood**, dinner timing has just been confirmed, a key to our accommodations and instructions on how to operate the ranch gate obtained. Harvest nears, and the grapes hang heavy on the vines. Yet temperatures on this late summer afternoon hover in the upper 90s. The air is still and dry. We creep past the leafy rows on the private driveway, so as not to raise dust. Both the restaurant and ranch in this upper **Sonoma Valley** region sometimes called the **Valley of the Moon** are owned by **Steve and Colleen Rose**, and their **Casa Verde** is a self-contained guest suite in an award-winning green home on **Rose Ranch**.

As we approach, we are reminded of a Tuscan country house set amid the vines. But, my goodness, it's still soooo hot out. We carry our overnight bag across brittle fallen leaves and the crunch of gravel. The key turns in the lock and we step into the entryway. *Ahhhhhh* ... inside, it's beautifully, wonderfully pleasant. An overhead fan softly stirs the air, but there's no frigid AC. Marvelous beginning.

From the large window in the sitting room, we gaze out at those ripening clusters—some of the best merlot grapes in California; certified organic and biodynamic, they're grown for **Benziger Family Winery** of **Glen Ellen**, which produces a Rose Ranch Merlot. Other varietals grown on the ranch in the same exacting fashion include primitivo, the Italian ancestor of zinfandel. The Roses produce their own wines, including primitivo and rosé of primitivo, naturally fermented and low in

sulfites; both are offered at their restaurant, and, we will discover, both are delicious—alive, bright and ripe with cherry notes.



*Casa Verde bedroom: upscale natural*



*Casa Verde: it's cool inside*

## Cooled by denim

But first we settle in a bit at Casa Verde. The exterior walls, we learn, are a form of adobe, and thick insulation is compressed scraps of denim. These account for the coolness without energy-hogging air-conditioning. Solar panels provide the electricity. Reclaimed, restored and renovated materials, fixtures and furnishings have been used throughout. A few years back when the house was completed, it was awarded the distinction of being the greenest home in Sonoma (this we learn from Colleen's mom, Beverly, a spirited octogenarian who lives in the main house and prepares a bountiful breakfast for Casa Verde guests, after thoughtfully inquiring about dietary restrictions.)

## A green “coming out”

In fact, you will fit in at Vineyards Inn no matter how finely or casually you are attired. Like the Casa, it has no pretension—and in the bar you will almost certainly find locals in farming duds, relaxing after another day tending their vines. Colleen handles the bar and front-of-the-house operations, Steve is the chef (Chef Esteban, he calls himself on their website, a nod to the Spanish tapas theme and his Basque heritage). They've successfully operated the place, which sits on the Sonoma Highway (SR 12) just north of Chateau St. Jean winery, for 30 years, a remarkable accomplishment in itself.

In recent years they've done something even more remarkable. They've come out, if you will, with their greenness. Not because it's trendy, not because Steve is a celebrity chef, but because it's a way of living they've embraced forever. (One irresistible example: Steve tells us that when he asked Colleen what she wanted for a birthday, she replied, “A cement mixer.” She uses it to reduce wine bottles, broken cutlery and other glass and ceramic scraps into pebbles for gardening and landscaping!) No, it's



*Vineyards Inn: come as you are*

remarkable because they risked rocking the boat with their loyal clientele by suddenly drawing a green line: “Very sorry, but we aren’t serving that dish you love right now, because we can’t find those ingredients organically and locally.”



*No monoculture here: merlot vines interplanted with tomatillos*

Fortunately, other kitchens in California wine country were catching up to the Roses around that time. Farm-to-table menus were trending. Steve calls it “from the dirt to the table,” and, as is his way, he takes it much further than having a kitchen garden next to the restaurant. A primary tenet of the biodynamic way of farming is to avoid monoculture, to plant a variety of crops that mimic the interdependencies of nature. So Steve plants thousands of tomato and tomatillo plants between his vine rows in warm months, broccoli, chard and other hearty crops in cool months. He experimented with planting jalapeño peppers between his vines, too, but gave that up when the grapes had a detectable new spiciness.

### Edible landscaping

Many organic and most biodynamic farmers plant flowers near their grapes to attract beneficial insects who eat the bad bugs. Steve tells us, “I think the edibles do just as well, and they do a great job attracting the bees.” And thus around his own home he does “edible landscaping” with herbs, lettuces and veggies. He keeps hives so he can harvest honey. Chickens wander his vineyards, as “natural pest control and rototillers.” He uses this green bounty in the restaurant, supplemented by a local network of organic farmers and ranchers like the **Lunny Ranch** (from which he buys an entire organic beef cow at a time and dry ages it for six weeks to ensure tenderness) and fishermen using sustainable methods. The restaurant is a member of both **Safe Harbor Certified Seafood Safety** and the **Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch** programs.

There’s even a small farm stand near the entryway to the restaurant. What’s not sold here or used by Chef Esteban is offered at the **Fort Mason Farmers’ Market** in San Francisco on Sundays, as are the Rose’s artisan products like vinegars and gazpacho. To close the sustainability loop, anything left over and all restaurant food waste and other compostibles go into an **Earthtub** and then back onto the gardens and vineyards as nutrient-rich humus.

But enough about how the Roses do it—how does their food taste? Green thumbs way up, we say. Starting at Colleen’s bar, where she infuses vodka with her organic fruit or herbs, and creates cocktails with local organic vodka or gin. We love the Gin Rosie—Square One organic botanical gin, agave nectar, lemon juice and Pechauds bitters on the rocks. She also has a huge selection by the glass of organic and biodynamic wines on tap. Her goal is to have an all-organic wine list. There’s even a “wine in a jug” program, where you fill your own jug with one of the tap wines.



*Steve (aka Esteban) Rose: in his Rose Ranch greenhouse*

### Tapas expertly executed

Steve’s organic menu ranges from seasonal tapas (Spanish-style small plates) to salads and seasonal specialties like chuletas (lamb chops glazed with Steve’s Basque-style mustard-garlic sauce) and paellas (including a vegan version). Dishes featuring Rose Ranch produce and those that are gluten free are denoted. The tapas we sampled were all expertly executed, with discernible spikes in flavor from the fresh organic ingredients. For instance: the jalapeño poppers—Rose Ranch jalapeños filled with local organic cream cheese and flash fried—were not even distant cousins to greasy, crumb-laden versions. His Paella Valenciana (organic chicken, clams, mussels, house-made chorizo, prawns and Rose Ranch roasted peppers) proved to be as good as any we’ve ever had, its tender, short-grained rice redolent of Spanish saffron.



*Basque Night dinner: monthly gastronomic celebration*

We keep trying, nibbling, trying till we can manage no more. It is a night to remember. Even as we waddle out the door, Colleen is still behind the bar and Steve is visiting from table to table. It’s that kind of place—the kind you want to come back to. Perhaps next time on the second Thursday of the month, for one of Chef Esteban’s by-reservation-only “gastronomic celebrations,” six courses from old family recipes served family-style at a long table, with wine.

For us now, it’s a quarter mile back down a quiet lane from the very green Vineyards Inn, back to the very green Rose Ranch and that tempting Casa Verde bed. It’s not hot outside anymore. We should walk. Maybe.