

Foodie Freak: Visiting Sol Rouge and Focused On Wine

Contributed by Ross A. Christensen
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Sol Rouge Winery recently had a wine release party held at their gorgeous vineyard home in the hills above Kelseyville. It was a lovely personal gathering where Bryan and Jill Kane, hosts/winemakers, made everyone feel welcome and comfortable.

Their estate is in the Red Hills Appellation in Lake County, a rocky, hilly area with red volcanic soil, and Sol Rouge has been producing quality wines for the past three years.

Around the Kanes' patio was a decorative pillar with the Egyptian sun god Ra on it, and there was a small clay sun in another area so I assumed, "Sol Rouge" meant "Red Sun" and these little accents are charming tie-ins.

But no, as I found out with a (very) little research.

Although "Sol" means "sun" in Spanish, in French it means "soil"; therefore the name of their winery means "Red Soil," which is apropos as the vineyard is in the "Red Hills Appellation."

Ah, now it's starting to make sense to me. Luckily, I'm a person who tries to keep my mouth shut until I can't any longer. This time I kept it shut and did not display my original ignorance to anyone. So don't tell anyone.

The gathering was small, intimate and casual, more like a cocktail party for friends than a business function. The Kanes themselves are open and welcoming, and with one of their sons enthusiastically acting as bartender/flamboyant host, it added a factor of fun and charm.

But atmosphere aside, we were there to taste their new releases. Sol Rouge is relatively new in Lake County, so I was excited to see what new items they had to offer.

The wines that were being tasted and released were Viognier, Rosé, Grenache, Gypsy, Zinfandel and Cabernet Sauvignon. About half of the wines are made from grapes grown here in Lake County, and I have to say these were my favorites.

The Sol Rouge '06 Viognier is made from grapes grown in the Russian River Valley and it was what you expect from a Viognier. It has bright fruity flavors, nice and crisp with a nice citrus/grapefruit nose. The '07 Rosé was a surprise. I generally don't buy Rosés because I find their flavors and characteristics to be all over the map; you never know what you're going to get. But this one was nice. It was tart, and drier than most Rosés.

Next on the tasting menu was the '06 Grenache. This wine was very smooth, with rich flavors and lots of cherry and blackberry notes. After that came the '06 Gypsy, which had a rich, velvety feel. Very full-bodied, but not heavily tannic. When my wife asked me which wine I liked the best I had to admit to her, "I snuck a second glass of the Grenache."

Now, I'm not a big fan of Zinfandels because they sometimes can be so full of tannins that they make your tongue feel furry. It's become a habit for us when we go wine tasting that my wife will try a Zin first and then tells me if it's something I would even want to try. Her comment after trying the Sol Rouge '06 Zinfandel was "You will not be offended." She was right. The tannins are very well balanced, allowing the full black cherry flavors of the Zinfandel to come through.

The '06 Cabernet Sauvignon was my least favorite, but only because I'm not that big a fan of red wines. Not that I didn't like it, but it was like trying to choose the least hot Charlie's Angel. Someone's gotta come in last, even though they're all hot. The Cabernet stopped shy of being too tannic for my palate, and my wife (the red wine drinker in the family) thought it was very good. It had a lot of body and deep notes of cassis and black cherry. Usually in wine tastings you finish with the Zinfandel because it's got the most tannin, but in this case the Cabernet took the final spot and it was well chosen.

Sol Rouge focuses on grape varieties from the Rhone and Bordeaux regions of southern France. This is information that you can get from their Web site at www.solrouge.com. The site is still being developed, but it is fun to click on the Google earth view of the vineyard and you can learn about ordering their wines and joining their wine club.

I was very impressed by the personal welcome, the relaxed atmosphere and the impressive selection of wine. This is definitely an up-and-coming label to watch.

And just for the record, Cameron Diaz was the least hot of Charlie's Angels.

Now before we wrap things up, I need to give a little back story to my day at Sol Rouge. The day of the release party we left our house and arrived in Kelseyville having completely forgotten the Sol Rouge address at home. Luckily I remembered that during the Lake County Wine Adventure last summer the wine shop "Focused On Wine" had hosted the winery at their shop, so we made a quick detour to Focused On Wine to ask directions.

Stephanie Cruz-Green, the owner of Focused On Wine, is an enchanting person who seems to have eternal smile affixed to her face. She is a certified sommelier (which is not an easy accomplishment), and so I felt a little guilty reducing her to the level of gas station attendant by asking her for directions, but she gave us the necessary information with friendliness and charm, and we made it right on time.

Speaking of Focused On Wine, some Sol Rouge wines are available there along with an astonishing amount and variety of other wines, including local, regional and imported wines. There's also a variety of spirits, beer, gifts and cigars.

Focused On Wine is beautifully decorated with a relaxing atmosphere and an attentive friendly staff. There is a wine bar

where you can go in and enjoy wine by the glass or enjoy a tasting flight of several wines, so this isn't only a place where you can buy wines, but a place where you can sit down, relax and enjoy drinking a great wine. Personally, if I lived on the west side of the lake I would stop in there daily to relax after work with a glass of wine before heading home for the evening.

When you are finished reading this you should head to downtown Kelseyville and stop by Focused On Wine. Introduce yourself and sit down and have a glass of wine. It's open Thursday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday, and Monday from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. The shop, which is closed on Tuesday and Wednesday, is located at 3940 Main St.

Ross A. Christensen is an award-winning gardener and gourmet cook. He is the author of "Sushi A to Z, The Ultimate Guide" and is currently working on a new book. He has been a public speaker for many years and enjoys being involved in the community.

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