

Corkheads
Jessica Yadegaran

Tasting room: J Vineyards & Winery
Address: 11447 Old Redwood Hwy., Healdsburg
Hours: Tasting bar, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily; Bubble Lounge, until 4 p.m. Thursday-Monday. Reservations required for tours and Bubble Lounge.
Contact: 707-431-3646; www.jwine.com.
Vibe: Chic and modern salon without pretension.
Food and wine pairings: Bubble Room (\$55); Essence (\$200). Regular tasting, \$10.
Must-buy bottle: 2005 J Pinotage Russian River Valley (\$38), the marriage of smoke, spice and fruit.

This is the first in a series of occasional columns on stand-out tasting room experiences.

Situated between Windsor and Healdsburg in the heart of Russian River Valley, J Vineyards & Winery's modern Visitor Center is a fun contrast to its rustic, agricultural surroundings. It feels more like the lounge portion of a trendy wine country restaurant – think Farm at the Carneros Inn – than a conservative tasting room. Local artist Gordon Heuther designed the urbane space, not to mention the floor-to-ceiling metal and glass installation behind the bar. Chilling there, you just feel hip.

And for \$10, that's where you sample J's signature sparkling wines, made in the traditional methode champenoise, as well as the classic Russian River varietals of Pinot Noir and Chardonnay. Winemaker George Bursick churns out other elegant, stand-out stills, like the trend-setting Pinotage, a hybrid of Pinot Noir and Cinsault typically associated with South Africa (J owns 2.5 of the 20 acres planted in California). You'll get a taste of this smoky beauty, too, in addition to the crisp Pinot Gris. J's chasing the trend on that varietal. The new vintages will be released May 1, and this is Bursick's first fully-executed vintage of varietal wines for J.

On a recent stormy day, I took refuge in J's wine and food sanctuary, sampling my way through their current-release Pinot Noirs while gabbing with the tasting room attendants about this valley's reputation for growing everything, and growing it well. My favorite Pinot Noir was the 2005 Nicole's Vineyard (\$50). With its reddish loam and gravel striations, the estate vineyard is J's crown jewel hillside parcel, and it shows in the glass: aromas of spice and crushed blackberries lead to flavors of black plum, cola and earth. A lush and defined wine.

But I'm a sucker for sparkling wines and a huge proponent of them with food, so I soon made my way into J's Bubble Room. The Bubble Room is a serene tasting salon with table service. Floor to ceiling, it is the color of Champagne. The sofas have sparkles in the fabric. Chairs have tiny bubbles in the upholstery. The wine selection in the Bubble Room changes regularly, but usually includes four wines per flight and often older vintages, small production wines or vertical Pinot Noir tastings that are only available at the winery. While the food and wine pairings aren't cheap (\$55/four), I love the

education, albeit luxurious, that J is providing. They were the first winery to marry wine and seasonal dishes in this valley.

Fans of caviar and sparklers should try the Indulgence Flight, which includes the 1997 J Vintage Brut Late Disgorged (\$100). I've tasted this sparkling wine in the past, and it's gorgeous. After six to eight weeks in secondary fermentation, the wine was aged another eight years in J's cellars. After the wine was disgorged, it was aged another year in bottle. The result is a tete de cuvee with aromas of honey and baked biscuit and creamy flavors balanced by a lengthy and spicy finish. If you like Schramsberg's 1999 J. Schram, you'll like this.

Of the wines in the White Flight, I thought the stand-out pairing was the 2006 J Viognier Alexander Valley with Dungeness Crab Cake and Coconut-Mango Salsa. Whoever said Viognier isn't a food wine should try this combination, which marries Viognier's exotic floral aromas and luscious mouth feel with an acidity that can stand up to fried crab. J's expression is outgoing and vibrant, with lot of stone fruits on the mid-palate that come alive against the mango salsa. I was wowed.

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