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## Somerston opens a tasting room high in the east Napa hills

By Sasha Paulsen



Somerston's new winery and tasting room are in a renovated barn — that has state-of-the-art, energy-efficient design.

There are still hidden places in this well-traveled county, and myriad valleys inside the “Napa Valley.” To find them takes a turn or two off the main roads, but the effort will yield unexpected rewards: glimpses of history and wildlife amid the grapes.

OK, so it's more than a turn or two to get to Somerston Estates. You have to head down Silverado Trail, and go east the 128 Junction, just past Pritchard Hill, where the signs say

“Winters/Lake Berryessa.” The road hugs the edge of Lake Hennessey until you turn again at Sage Canyon Road. Here, the vineyards have all but vanished, replaced by scrub oak. The roads climbs and twists, gets narrower and more tangled. There are few houses and the only winery is the century-old Nichelini. Just when you're fairly sure you've missed a crucial turn and are heading nowhere — and, ye gads, your mobile phone won't get reception to tell you where you are — you come around a turn and there is a small sign: Somerston. It's still a few more turns and one more winding road, to be sure, and only then does this Somerston begin to unfold before you: rippling hills, forests, lakes and meadows, and, oh, yes, grapes.

Allan Chapman wasn't looking for vineyards and had no plans to become a vintner when he discovered the old Priest Ranch in the eastern hills of Napa County. A Cambridge-trained natural scientist, he'd worked in telecommunication and real estate development and long-term investments. He had made wine in England as a student, he said. “It's amazing what you can make wine out of.” But in 2004 he was looking for a place to build houses in Napa, he said, when he heard the property was for sale and went to see it. The Priest Ranch was named for Joshua James Priest, who came to California in the 1947 looking for gold. The Priest family kept the ranch for more than 100 years until it sold the ranch in 1963. The first grapes were planted there in 1970. The 638-acre ranch went through a series of owners until 2004 when Chapman came upon it, and bought it.

He went on to acquire 990 acres in the adjacent Elder Valley, once part of the 8,000 acre Rancho Catacula, owned by Joseph Chiles. And we all know what happens to people who buy vast tracts of land in the Napa Valley: what ever they might have meant to do, next thing you know they're making wine. Within the property, he noted, there's such a rich variety of terroir, five different soil types, elevations that range from 820 to 2,400 feet. “It seemed like an opportunity to make a different collection of wine.

Chapman turned to his own family history to find a name for the combined 1,628-acre estate. Somerston is a nod to the shipping company owned by his English family. “By now,” Chapman pointed out, “it's hard to come up with a name (for a winery) that hasn't been taken.”

The wine enterprise took off, however, with the arrival Craig Becker, who is now part owner, general manager and winemaker at Somerston. Originally from Long Beach, Becker was drawn north by a love of open space. He studied at Santa Rosa junior college and went on to UC Davis. In one of his classes on plant physiology and soil science he met his wife, Courtney Siverson. She'd been offered harvest work at Mondavi Winery in Oakville. She declined it, but Becker took a job — and then stayed at Mondavi while he finished his studies. Out of Davis, he took a job at Spring Mountain Winery, where he began building a reputation as a winemaker with a feel for mountain vineyards and a deep interest in farming. Becker had started his own vineyard consulting and winemaking business, when on a trip to France he discovered Rhone wines. Back in Napa, he heard that grenache grapes — a Rhone varietal — grew on the Priest Ranch property. He set out to find the place. “I was blown away,” he said. Since 2005, they've replanted two-thirds of the vineyards. Today, about 200 acres of the property are planted in 87 blocks, 18 varietals, in a patchwork among the wild places. Most of the land, however, remains wild — home to trees, streams, wildlife and 1,500 Dorper sheep, a breed from South Africa, who are tended by a Peruvian shepherd. Grazing through the hills they earn their keep, holding invasive plants at bay and lessening the fire hazards in these remote hills.

They also provide cheese and charcuterie that is served along with Somerston's wines in the newly opened tasting room. A 12,000 square-foot barn has been converted to the winery and tasting room — the simplicity of which belies the state-of-the-art, high-tech operation that includes an innovative, carbon-neutral carbon dioxide cooling and heating and hot water system, that will, Becker explained, will have Somerston operating totally off the energy grid. The extra investment in the energy system will pay for itself in three years, Becker said.

“Somerston's guiding mission is to operate systematically as a sustainable, efficient and land-focused project,” Becker said. “While plenty of producers build efficiently, they rarely operate efficiently; similarly there is no shortage of sustainable wineries and vineyards that fall short of the goal of being environmentally friendly.”

While Somerston continues to sell 35 to 40 percent grapes to respected names in the valley — David Ramey, Heidi Barrett, David Phinney Biale Caymus, Orin Swift, Pahlmeyer, Duckhorn, Viader and Balcom Family Cellars — they are also now producing three of their own labels. Becker, an ardent proponent of natural winemaking, oversees production of all three labels, all unfiltered, native-fermented wines. At the high end is an extremely limited production of Somerston, single vineyard wines including a cabernet sauvignon (\$120), sauvignon blanc (\$40) and a red Bordeaux blend (\$90). Mid-range the Priest Ranch label is composed of 2,000 cases of cabernet sauvignon (\$40), petite sirah (\$40), zinfandel (\$38) and sauvignon blanc (\$24). Becker also makes 6,000 cases for the adventurous Highflyer label, a name inspired by his love of flying. This eclectic line-up includes viognier (\$17), grenache blanc (\$19), pinot noir (\$38), Somerston syrah (\$48), Vivio syrah (\$48) and Centerline, a red blend (\$28). For these wines he sources grapes from Bennett Valley, Santa Lucia, Santa Maria and Santa Ynez as well as Somerston vineyards.

“With all this variety (of terroir), it wouldn't make sense to make just one wine,” Chapman said.

The wines can be tasted both at the Yountville Somerston tasting room and on the Somerston Estate. Many of the visitors who've found their way to Somerston have first gone to the Yountville tasting room, Chapman said. For those who make the trek up into the hills, Somerston offers a tour of the property, via an all-terrain vehicle. In our case, it was Becker at the wheel while Chapman provided the narrative as we bounced up the dirt roads into the back country. Along with describing plans to replant varietals or reconfigure row, he included tales of bear-sightings and of a historic bordello, now only a ruin on a hillside.

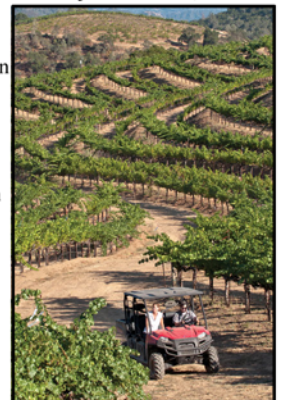
The higher we climbed the more spectacular the views became of ridges of hills, spring fed lakes, wild birds, and of course, the sheep. And the tour included two stops not usually included on a vineyard tour: one up near the highest point of the plantings was to inspect the block where they've planted varietals to create a Somerston Port-style wine. “I do like my Port,” the Englishman said. The other was to have a drink of water. Soda springs from its hillsides once were tapped, bottled and sold as healing water, Chapman explained; remnants of blue bottle glass can still be found on the property. A short walk brings visitors to one spring, crystal clear and still bubbling away, like a hot tub for one.

In fact, Chapman said, one time he had brought a group up to see the spring and “I looked around and one person had just hopped into it,” he said.

Just one more reason to turn off the main roads and find the way to Somerston.



A herd of 1,500 Dorper sheep, bred in South Africa, graze on the Somerston property.



Off Sage Canyon Road, Somerston Estate winery covers 1,628 acres in the eastern hills of Napa County.