

Sonoma Valley's Kenwood, village of snug beauty

Linda Castrone, Special to The Chronicle

Sunday, January 11, 2009

When newscasts are dominated by wars, layoffs and financial disasters, we find ourselves dreaming of snug little places where we can retreat and lick our wounds. Laid-back, bucolic Kenwood is one of those places, a quiet Sonoma Valley village that offers just enough of a buffer from the real world hustle while serving equally well as a base for the valley's attractions.

Images



The village of 4,000 straddles the sweet spot of Sonoma Valley's wine country on Highway 12, about halfway between Sonoma and Santa Rosa. Farmers still tend the grapevines planted there by their families more than 100 years ago, joined in recent times by celebrities - comedian Tommy Smothers, actress Geena Davis and Pixar Animation Studios honcho John Lassiter among them - who come for the anonymity as much as the solace.

Weekend visitors can share the same blissful serenity, adding as much - or as little - hiking, shopping, dining, pampering, golfing, bird watching, wine tasting and historic touring as needed.

The back story: In the 1880s, English settlers built the railroad town on a Spanish land grant and made their living by raising cattle or growing prunes, walnuts and grapes. Eventually, winemakers arrived to take advantage of the geography: Parallel mountain ridges trap the summer heat that bakes zinfandels, and notches to the west let in the coastal breezes that cool chardonnays and shroud the valley with morning fog. About 15 wineries are clustered within 5 miles of each other on either side of Kenwood.

Why now? With most wine tourists gone for the season, Kenwood settles into a pleasant rhythm - stargazing on long winter nights from the Robert Ferguson Observatory; scouring Sugarloaf Ridge State Park trails for the first spring wildflowers; dropping into the Wine Room for a solitary chat with tasting room employees. Through February, B.R. Cohn Winery and others throughout Sonoma Valley celebrate the olive harvest and pressing as part of the annual winter Olive Festival.

Checking in: Guests seeking an escape might gravitate toward the rural Southern sensibilities of Beltane Ranch Bed and Breakfast, a country getaway built in 1890 by Mary Ellen Pleasant, a San Francisco abolitionist and by repute, a voodoo priestess. Best features: sunset from the second-floor balcony, private trails into the Mayacamas and plentiful hammocks in which to recover.

The Kenwood Inn & Spa, with gourmet restaurant and fireplaces galore, is a good upscale option.

Spend your day: The 10-mile stretch of Sonoma Highway that runs through Kenwood is a wine lover's dream, with some tasting rooms large enough to have national name recognition - St. Francis, Kenwood, Blackstone - but many more that require some research. Ledson and Chateau St. Jean trade on the elaborate architecture of their tasting rooms, but Kunde, Landmark, Deerfield Ranch, Mayo, Ty Caton, VJB, Wellington and Muscardini let the wines do

the talking. At the Wine Room and Family Wineries, visitors can sample the work of local vintners too small to support their own rooms, although Richard Kasmier operates his own one-man show at Kaz Vineyards & Winery, oddly billed as the smallest winery no one has ever heard of.

Once you've hit your limit, consider hiking or trail biking in Sugarloaf Ridge State Park, Hood Mountain Regional Park, Annadel State Park or Jack London State Historic Park. They're often draped in coastal fog on winter mornings, but midday sun brings prime weather for treks that range from simple to challenging. The top of Bald Mountain or Hood Mountain rewards the hardy with panoramic views from San Pablo Bay to Mount St. Helena. For a wine-hiking combo, Jeff Kunde of Kunde Estates Winery schedules eco-tours that focus on stories about the land. "We just go out for a walk and tell you what we do," he said on a recent Saturday. "We'll go to up 1,400 feet, take our time, teach you about sustainability and end up with a nice lunch."

Nearby Oakmont Golf Club has two 18-hole courses that are often empty after 2 p.m. Special deals abound, sometimes dipping to \$25 a round for walkers.

Two stores dominate the diminutive shopping scene: Swede's Feeds stocks things like gravestones for your dog, bright canvas pinwheels, garden plants and giant metal chicken sculptures; and across the street, the Kenwood Farmhouse is a showplace for local artisans and craftsmen, selling lavender bouquets, knits and prints. The latter also sells a self-guided tour map of Kenwood's historic sites.

Eats: Locally owned restaurants are scattered along the wine road, all of which pride themselves on pouring their neighbors' wines and serving food grown on nearby farmland. Doce Lunas serves bistro food; Vineyards Inn specializes in organic foods with a Spanish flair; Café Citti is Italian; and the Kenwood Restaurant has an elegant menu and patio views of Kunde's vineyards. Kenwood Market's deli serves everything from fresh sandwiches to baked chicken and lasagna.

Don't miss: Deerfield Ranch Winery's subterranean tasting room is something to write home about, buried deep in the mountainside behind stacks of aging wine.

Don't bother: Morton's Warm Springs, the summer swim and picnic resort, closes between October and April.

Good to know: Although shops, restaurants and wineries line both sides of Highway 12, most of Kenwood isn't visible from the road. Its residential core stretches several blocks south along Warm Springs Road, with the historic stone train depot serving as the town's heart.

If you go

Getting There

Kenwood is about 55 miles north of San Francisco in the Sonoma Valley, a 60- to 90-minute drive from most parts of the Bay Area.

Where to Stay

Beltane Ranch, 11775 Sonoma Highway, (707) 996-6501, www.beltaneranch.com. Rooms range from \$150-\$220 a night, with five rooms inside the historic ranch house and a sixth in an adjacent two-room cottage.

The Kenwood Inn & Spa, 10400 Sonoma Highway, (707) 833-1293, www.kenwoodinn.com. Its 29 rooms and suites range from \$275 to \$825 a night, depending on size and date. Amenities include a wine bar, a restaurant, pools and full-service spa.

Where to Eat

Doce Lunas, 8910 Sonoma Highway, (707) 833-4000, www.docelunasrestaurant.com. The intimate wine bar carries local labels; the food is as warm, friendly and sophisticated as the dining room. An antique gallery fills the second story. Lunch entrees \$8-\$10; dinner \$13-\$21.

The Vineyards Inn, 8445 Sonoma Highway, (707) 833-4500, www.vineyardsinn.com. Its Spanish cuisine makes use of organic, biodynamic produce grown by the owners, as well as "green" crops from throughout the state. Open for lunch and dinner. Lunch entrees \$12-\$14; dinner entrees \$12-\$26.

Kenwood Restaurant, 9900 Sonoma Highway, (707) 833-6326, www.kenwoodrestaurant.com. This landmark restaurant cemented its reputation with elegant lunches and dinners, served Wednesday through Sunday, but locals love the vineyard views from its porch and patio. The wine bar stocks local labels, including Smothers Remick Ridge. Dinner entrees \$14 - \$30.

Café Citti, 9049 Sonoma Highway, (707) 833-2690. This former diner is a cozy Italian kitchen serving lunch and dinner. Lunch items \$6.95-\$17.50; dinner \$11.50-\$17.50.

What to Do

Kunde Family Estate Winery, 9825 Sonoma Highway, (707) 833-5501, www.kunde.com, is open 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Free cave tours are offered hourly from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Friday through Sunday.

St. Francis Winery & Vineyards, 100 Pythian Road, (888) 675-9463, www.stfranciswine.com, is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Monthly winery fireside dinners are prepared by Chef David Bush.

For More Information

Heart of Sonoma Valley Association, (866) 794-9463, www.heartofsonomavalley.com; "Sonoma Valley: The Secret Wine Country" by Kathleen and Gerald Hill (Insiders' Guide); "Kenwood Yesterday and Today" by Dallyce Sand (available at Kenwood Farmhouse, 9255 Sonoma Highway, (707) 833-1212).

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