

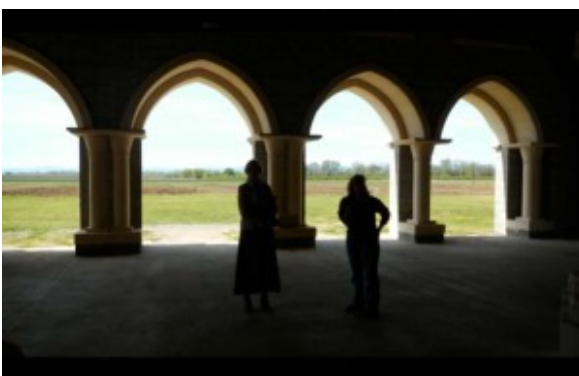
Calif. monastery – a link between old and new

By Kathryn Reed

VINA – Wine and religion have long been partners. One only needs to think of the Last Supper or today's communion. Franciscan monks have been cultivating grapes in California since the 1800s. But it's the Trappist monks who are the newcomers to the wine business – at least in California.

New Clairvaux Winery first planted grapes in 1990. However, the 580-acre spread north of Chico has some famous names associated with the land and structures on it – like those of Leland Stanford, Peter Lassen and William Randolph Hearst.

It was Lassen who in 1846 first planted grapes here. Stanford bought the land in 1881 and then turned it into the world's largest winery and vineyard at 4,000 acres of wine grapes and 55,000 acres in total. In 1919, 23 years after Stanford's death, the Great Vina Ranch was sold.



The Chapter House at the Abbey of New Clairvaux is a window from the old world to the new world.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

The Abbey of New Clairvaux started in 1955.

The monks and their winemaker use the 100-year-old brick wine cellar today.

New Clairvaux winemaker Aimee Sunseri comes from some impressive pedigree. Her family's Nichelini Winery in St. Helena is the oldest family-owned winery in Napa County. She is also the winemaker there; making her the fifth generation to be part of Nichelini.

Sunseri has roots in El Dorado County, too, having worked at Boeger Winery in Placerville.

(Besides wine, the monastery also has a partnership with nearby Sierra Nevada Brewery to produce Ovilla beer in the Belgian tradition.)

While the winery is a draw for many, the entire monastery is worth a visit even if one is not religious or is of a different faith. The Ovilla Chapter House is being constructed from stones from the Ovilla monastery in Spain. Hearst bought the Spanish Chapter House in 1931 with plans to use the stones at his property in Wynton. That never happened and he eventually gave the stones to the city of San Francisco with the intent the Chapter House would be reconstructed in Golden Gate Park. That also never happened.

The Abbey of New Clairvaux was given the stones in 1994 by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco with the agreement they only be used for a Chapter House.

It is now a work in progress. The Ovilla Chapter House is the only place to see Cistercian-Gothic architecture in the United States.

Walking through the vacant structure under construction it's like being transported back in time. The craftsmanship of the hand-carved stone is exquisite, the arches providing views

onto vineyards and open space, the nuances of light and space creating a sense of serenity.

It is purely spiritual.

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Notes:

- More info about the abbey may be found online.
- New Clairvaux Vineyard info is also online.
- The winery is open seven days a week from 11am-5pm except for holy days.
- This is a link to directions. Vina is 20 miles north of Chico and 20 miles south of Red Bluff.

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