

# Passport – a trip through EDC wine country



Vineyards in El Dorado County are coming alive.  
Photo/Kathryn Reed

**By Kathryn Reed**

PLACERVILLE – Wine has often been described as its own food group, and yet, most people will agree that all wine tastes better with food.

This theory was put to the test last weekend during the annual El Dorado County Passport event. (The two-weekend shindig continues this Saturday and Sunday.)

“It’s like the Super Bowl of wine weekends,” Tiya Grabowski told *Lake Tahoe News*. The Citrus Heights woman has been going

to Passport for about 20 years.

For her friend Shelly Celio of Georgetown it was the food pairings that impressed her this year. A fun time with friends, while enjoying good wine close to home keeps her coming back.



El Dorado County is celebrating the 25th anniversary of Passport. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Now in its 25th year, Passport has gone through various iterations. There was a time about 10 years when it was more

of a crazy party, with buses and limos clogging the parking lots, people seeming to be more interested in freebies and getting drunk than experiencing a tasting. It was a bit of a cultish type event, with a waiting list. The recession changed that.

The deals on wine fluctuate from year-to-year, as well as winery-to-winery. But a definite trend this year is on the food and wine. Some wineries have a few edibles to go with the flight of wines, while others have individual bites for specific wines.



Busby uses Chardonnay in its mac and cheese. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Passport started as a way for wineries to unload excess bottles before the next vintage was released. El Dorado was one of the first regions to put on such an event. In the beginning it was conducted earlier in the year as a way to get people to come to the region in the off-season. Snow, even in the foothills, started to keep people away so the dates kept being pushed back to where now it's the second and third weekends of April.

John MacCready of Sierra Vista is one of the few winemakers who has participated in Passport every year. This Placerville winery is the second oldest in the county, with the first

grapes planted in 1974. (Boeger is the oldest, having started in 1972.)

“For us, it’s a money-maker,” MacCready told *Lake Tahoe News*.

MacCready was a pioneer when it came to planting Rhone varietals in the region. Since then many wineries have followed suit.

He’s noticed less of a party atmosphere through the years, especially with people coming with a designated driver.



John MacCready of Sierra Vista pours a rare Cabernet release. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Sierra Vista hired Allez out of Diamond Springs to cater the event. The creamy wild mushroom sauté was outstanding. It paired nicely with the 2013 Roussanne. While the wild boar Bourgogne on mashed root vegetables was a hit, especially in conjunction with the 2012 Syrah, the mushrooms on the mash was also delectable. (The boar came from Nevada.)

“The food has been just as much of an experience as the wine,” Jeanne Garman of Sacramento said while sampling the fare at Sierra Vista. This was her first Passport.

At Narrow Gate Vineyards, owner Teena Hildebrand noticed more people from the Bay Area and Sacramento were participating in Passport than locals.

This is the Placerville winery’s 10th year to be part of the event. Being able to introduce people to wine, what it’s all about and the intricacies of it are what appeals to her. Plus, Passport is great exposure for Narrow Gate.

She makes all the food to pair with the wine that her winemaker husband, Frank, produces. The ginger garlic stir fry was good with the Chardonnay, but even better with the Viognier. The house smoked pork Panini went well with the Cabernet and Syrah. A veggie Panini is also available, and paired well with the bold reds.



More than 2,000 acres in El Dorado County are planted with wine grapes. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Elliot Graham of Busby Cellars was putting a different twist on food and wine pairings as he poured some Chardonnay into the mac and cheese he was serving to guests.

This is the 10th year he and his wife, Sherrie, have participated in Passport. He admits there was a time when the event was overwhelming. Participants coming in smaller batches is better for a winery their size.

In the past they paired individual varietals with specific food, now it's a variety of food to go with their array of wines.

Carrie Bendick with Holly's Hill told *Lake Tahoe News*, "It's nice to do something as a group. It helps distinguish the region, which people are still discovering."

The El Dorado Winery Association puts on Passport. This year 24 of its more than 30 member wineries are participating. In all, El Dorado County has about 70 wineries.

One thing that distinguishes this area is the elevation – with some vines planted at 3,500 feet. The county is home to more than 50 varietals. While Zinfandel has always been a stalwart favorite, Barbera has created quite a following in the last few years.

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**Notes:**

- For more information about Passport or to buy tickets for this weekend, go **online**.