

AT HOME IN THE VALLEY

Want to immerse yourself in wine country? We have the club for you

By Martin Kaufmann // Santa Rosa, Calif.

GOLF LIFE

T“This is the gateway to wine country,” our caddie, Danny Flores, said as we finished climbing the steep hill to the 15th tee at Mayacama Golf Club.

Flores, who brings a certain flourish to his work, waved his arms in a grandiose fashion, pointing eastward toward Calistoga, St. Helena and Napa, nerve centers of the wine industry in the adjacent valley.

One senses this is part of Flores’ regular shtick with first-timers. He has the easy, practiced patter of an entertainer, which he is in a parallel life. But his point is well taken. If ever there should be a place that provides visitors an overview of wine country, it probably should be a club built to celebrate the wines of Northern California.

Mayacama, in the heart of Sonoma Valley, has 460 members, 36 of whom are local vintners. These include some of the biggest names in the business: Harlan, Jackson, Gallo, Foley, Joseph Phelps and Silver Oak among them.

As part of their memberships, the vintners agree to donate to the club one barrel of wine – equal to about 25 cases – each year. As a practical matter, that gives wine director Jeff McCarthy a big pricing advantage.

But that’s a fraction of McCarthy’s inventory. There are 750 bottles on the wine list, which changes weekly, and several other young or, to borrow McCarthy’s term, “geeky wines” that he’s holding in reserve.

Not surprisingly given the location, McCarthy described the club as “pretty pinot-, cab-, chard-heavy.” Pinot is the club’s biggest volume seller, though the region’s pricey cabernets generate the most revenue.

Each member has a locker in the wine cellar that holds up to four dozen bottles and includes a leather-bound notebook to record tasting notes.

“They have to share golf lockers. They get their own wine locker,” McCarthy said, a sign that the club has its priorities in order.

McCarthy runs an education program, the newest component of which is a 19-acre vineyard that Wilson Winery, a new member, planted on the property. McCarthy will use that as a “laboratory” to show members the viticultural process.

There’s a local focus to much of McCarthy’s program. One of his most popular hourlong seminars

The first (far left) and 18th holes at Mayacama





deals with the neighborhoods of the Russian River Valley. He notes that the growing characteristics across Sonoma County – the *terroir*, to use the all-encompassing term favored in the industry – are more diverse than all of France’s wine-growing regions.

It’s probably appropriate that there’s so much wine on property, because Mayacama is a course that could drive even low-handicappers to drink. It’s a difficult Jack Nicklaus design where uneven lies and tiered targets tend to be the rule rather than the exception. It is a Nicklaus Signature course, which means, among other things, that the architect gave the design more personal attention.

For all of its challenges – a friend, an accomplished player, still mutters about the severely sloped green on the par-3 third – it’s also playful at times. There’s a large tree directly in front of the two-tiered green on the par-5 fourth – the sort of thing one might expect from a more iconoclastic designer such as Jim Engh, but not from Nicklaus. The seventh, a short 4 across a stream to a diagonal green, immediately reminded me of one of Nicklaus’ favorite holes, the 14th at Muirfield Village.

A similar-length par 4, No. 16, presents multiple options; my friend has played it numerous times and still hasn’t settled on the proper approach.

Mayacama (No. 59 on Golfweek’s Best Modern Courses list) has been renovating its bunkers, but that project recently was expanded. Thirteen greens were lost after the early-April aeration for reasons that remain something of a mystery. Rather than applying a Band-Aid, the club quickly settled on plans to regrass all 18 greens with Tyee 007 bentgrass. Work should be completed by fall.

Walking is strongly favored at the club, which speaks to the fitness of the membership, not to mention Flores and his fellow Sherpas who double-bag it up and down the rugged terrain. At times it’s less a walk in the park than a hike in the mountains.

And make no mistake: there always is the sense that you’re immersed in nature while on the course. There are only 31 lots on the 675-acre, gated property, 22 of which have homes on them, but you have to look pretty hard to find them while playing.

Mayacama also has a residence-club program that costs \$385,000 to join; there are six three-bedroom villas and nine one-bedroom casitas from which to choose. Members who pick this alternative can arrive to a fully stocked refrigerator and, if requested, an in-room chef.

Think of that as your turnkey alternative if you want to pass through the gateway to wine country. **Gwk**

COURSE PHOTO COURTESY MAYACAMA; GOLFWEEK/TRACY WILCOX



Jeff McCarthy (above) oversees the wine cellar at Mayacama Golf Club. Each member has a wine locker to store bottles.

