



Family members run every part of the winemaking operation at Amador Cellars: Carpenter Justin Long (left), assistant winemaker Ashley Long, winemaker Michael Long, and proprietors Linda and Larry Long.



A sign marks the tasting room at Cooper Vineyards.



Zinfandel reigns supreme at Terra d'Oro.

IF YOU GO

Take the opportunity to taste as many varietals as Amador County has to offer. These are just a few wineries that present a sense of history, family, fine wines and — bonus point — complimentary pours.

Terra d'Oro: No other winery has as prominent a place in Amador County wine history as Terra d'Oro. Founded and established by Cary Gott in 1973 under the Montevina label, this is the first winery to set up shop post-Prohibition. And if Zinfandel is the king of the county, then Terra d'Oro is its palace. Its Deaver Vineyard contains one of the oldest original Zinfandel plantings in Amador County, serving as the parent cuttings for about 80 percent of the Zinfandel grown in the area.

When visiting Terra d'Oro, taste through their various Zinfandels and experience how the eclectic terroir of Amador affects the varietal's flavors and textures.

Wine to try: 2014 TdO Deaver Old Vine Zinfandel (\$24)

20680 Shenandoah School Road, Plymouth; (209) 245-6942. www.terradorowinery.com. Open 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. daily. Free.

Cooper Vineyards: The Cooper family has been farming in Amador County since 1919, when "Grandpa Cooper" left his San Francisco medical practice to tend a walnut orchard. Not until current owner Dick Cooper graduated from UC Davis in the 1970s did the Coopers consider grafting grapevines. But they wanted to think outside the Zinfandel box. Friend Darrell Corti, of Sacramento's famed Corti Brothers grocery store, gave the Coopers a tip. "Mr. Corti pulled his pocketbook out, retrieved a \$1 bill and wrote 'Barbera' and 'Nebbiolo' on it," remembers Dick Cooper. With no Nebbiolo to be found, the Coopers turned to neighbor Cary Gott of Montevina, who was willing to sell a bit of Barbera rootstock.

Today, Barbera is Cooper Vineyards' flagship wine, the one that customers flock to the tasting room to buy in bulk. But I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Dick Cooper's newly released Primitivo.

Wines to try: 2013 Barbera (\$29); 2012 Primitivo (\$38)

21365 Shenandoah School Road, Plymouth; (209) 245-6181. www.cooperwines.com. Open 11 a.m.-4:45 p.m. Thursday through Monday. Free.

Vino Noceto: The name Vino Noceto has become synonymous with Sangiovese. Inspired by their time spent in Chianti visiting the Chianti Classico and Brunello vineyards, proprietors Jim and Suzy Gullett were drawn to the Mediterranean climate of the area when deciding where to buy their first parcel of land in the mid-1980s. Coincidentally, it was also Darrell Corti who helped the Gulletts find local cuttings of Sangiovese with true Tuscan origins. Again, it was founding winery Montevina, owner of nine Sangiovese plants (supposedly brought to the United States via briefcase import in the early 1970s) that kindly shared the coveted rootstock with the new neighbor.

From a meager vineyard of two-thirds of an acre and an inaugural vintage of 110 cases in 1990, Vino Noceto has sprawled to include 25 acres of grapes, producing 9,000 cases annually — including 6,000 cases of seven different Sangioveses.

Wines to try: 2013 Noceto Sangiovese (\$19); Non-Vintage Rosso, Super-Tuscan Red Blend (\$19)

11011 Shenandoah Road, Plymouth; (209) 245-6556. www.noceto.com. Open 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday-Friday; until 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Free.

Jeff Runquist: One of Jeff Runquist's first jobs in the industry was working the cellar at Montevina in the early 1980s. Although he's since worked at several wineries throughout the state, Amador County has had the greatest influence on him as a winemaker. He says the overall laid-back and welcoming attitude of fellow winemakers makes it easier to practice and promote innovation and creativity — whether in the fields or cellar. And Runquist does, indeed, practice creativity: If you're looking for a place to experience the broad spectrum of Amador wines, including a few obscure varietals, then Jeff Runquist is your one-stop shop. "Variety is the spice of life," he says.

Wine to try: 2014 Alicante Bouschet (\$29)

10776 Shenandoah Road, Plymouth; (209) 245-6282. www.jeffrunquistwines.com. Open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursday-Monday. Free.

Amador Cellars: "We are farmers first and foremost," says winemaker Ashley Long. And that's the sense you get as you walk along a scenic landscape of rolling vineyards toward the barnlike structure that is the winery, fermentation cellar and tasting room of Amador Cellars. This is the embodiment of the bucolic, boutique beauty that defines the area.

A family business, five members of the Long clan run every part of the winemaking operation, from grape-grafting to tasting room management. And what you'll taste from Amador Cellars are wines that speak to this home-style atmosphere. On a recent visit, the GSM Reserve was one to rival any Rhone Ranger — dusty, earthy aromas, minimal use of oak; it's a well-rounded red wine that celebrates the soil and lush greenery of the land over obvious fruit.

Wines to try: 2013 Syrah (\$28); 2012 GSM Reserve (\$34)

11093 Shenandoah Road, Plymouth; (209) 245-6150. www.amadorcellars.com. Open 10:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Free.

— Stacy Briscoe

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