

Napa Valley Register

An 'approachable culture': Shadybrook Estate Winery wants visitors to feel at home

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HILARY WENDEL - December 17, 2024



With hundreds of wineries in Napa Valley, it takes a little extra to get noticed. The oldest wineries can lean on a compelling history and origin story, but newer ones need to get creative. Offering

interactive experiences that combine a tasting with a hands-on activity can set them apart from the rest.

Shadybrook Estate Winery, located at 100 Rapp Lane in Napa, is a newer brand with its first vintage in 2010. In addition to leaning into its location at Coombsville's Rapp Ranch, it offers an interactive experience: a horseback ride through the vineyards of a working ranch, followed by an al fresco wine tasting.

It is possibly the only winery in the valley where visitors can enjoy a vineyard tour on horseback. Shadybrook's website offers the Ultimate Ranch Experience at \$250 per person. It is a three-hour experience with a 45-minute guided trail ride through estate vineyards, followed by a wine tasting.

Napa Valley Trail Rides is the team that runs the equine portion of the business at Shadybrook. During a recent ride, a small group of riders signed waivers and listened to a safety briefing. The ranch hands then introduced participants to their horses.

Hattie Hatton, 20, was one of the seasonal hires assigned to a recent group. Friendly and personable, she seemed to inspire confidence in a few nervous riders.

The group headed to the corral where the horses were saddled and waiting. She introduced each rider to their horse and, with evident admiration, gave a few notes about its personality. An online questionnaire asked for riding experience, height and weight to help the staff match the rider to the horse.

Kristine Youngberg, the general manager of Shadybrook Estate Winery, explained that Napa Valley Trail Rides can accommodate up to eight guests at a time. The wine tasting always takes place after horseback riding for the safety of humans and horses.

The trail runs through the vineyards and passes the original Rapp Family home.

Hatton briefly explained the property's history as the nationally recognized Rapp Quarter Horse Ranch, a training facility founded in the early 1980s. Along the ride, she pointed out a secluded hillside overlook where "surprise" engagements can be arranged.

At the property's highest point, Hatton directed the group's attention to Shadybrook's latest acquisition, an adjacent cave property. A visit features a tour and wine and food pairing curated by Ken Frank of La Toque restaurant.

Nearby are several newly constructed cabanas for the Overlook Experience, where visitors can reserve a private wine tasting. The view from this hilltop is impressive, and Hatton helped her riders line the horses side-by-side to take a photo.

"Everything looks different on horseback," observed one of the riders.

Hatton then led the riders to the Grand Terrace, a 4,000-square-foot patio with multiple seating areas served by a hospitality team. The terrace offers panoramic views of the 12 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon vineyards and the hillside fairways of the Napa Valley Country Club.

Guests can choose the Perfect Pairing with wines from Shadybrook Estate Winery or Rapp Ranch Vineyards, each a flight of four wines from the respective labels. A charcuterie board is also provided.

The owners of Shadybrook Estate Winery, Napa Valley Trail Rides and Alko Equestrian Center are Alice and David Alkosser.

Alice Alkosser recounted how they came to be vintners. The couple said they had been coming to Napa for years from their base in San Francisco, a respite from the daily grind of the nationwide multi-family housing business they founded.

After a multi-year search for a two-bedroom bungalow, a realtor took them to a property off Shadybrook Lane in Coombsville.

Alkosser recalled, "We drove down this long driveway and came up to this huge estate, and my husband was so mad. He told the realtor, 'You are wasting your time; we are not interested in an estate with vineyards.' The other realtor came out of the house and said, 'I can see your client is upset. Did you tell them this is a foreclosure?'"

Alkosser explained that as entrepreneurs at heart, they were enticed by the value prospect as a potential real estate investment. "Long story short, we ended up getting the property, and now we are in the viticulture business. That's where it started with that one small vineyard at Shadybrook."

Alkosser said she had dabbled in viticulture classes as an undergraduate at UC Davis but was new to grape selling. She said she had to scramble to find a buyer for the fruit on the property that year.

She turned to winemaker Rudy Zuidema, who she had met via a charity auction lot she had purchased.

She recalled that Zuidema tasted the Malbec grapes and immediately told her, "'You have to vinify these grapes; they are so good they need to be put on the market.'"

Zuidema also recalled that moment in a recent interview. "I came to look at her property, and it turns out it is this immaculate, gorgeous, seven-and-a-half acres of rolling hills in Coombsville, facing the southwest," Zuidema said. "It's just utter perfection. I told her, 'I'll do anything you ask me to do here with this vineyard.'"

Alkosser said she had no intention of becoming a vintner, but she agreed to let Zuidema make four barrels of wine as samples to sell the fruit. When those four barrels sold out immediately, the Alkosser's entrepreneurial spirit took over, and they decided to pour their efforts and capital into making the wine a success.

They acquired additional acreage to have complete control over the winemaking process.

"Zuidema is our winemaker to this day for all five of our vineyard properties," Alkosser said.

Rapp Ranch is the physical headquarters of their growing wine business. As horse enthusiasts with adult children who rode horses their entire lives, the couple has made capital investments in the boarding stables, which they modernized and renamed Alko Equestrian Center, merging a complete winery program at a working horse ranch.

Alkosser said the ranch's history enchanted them from the beginning, and they set out to retain the Western feel of the original ranch. "We want everyone here to feel relaxed and at home."

The label on the Rapp Ranch bottle hints at the Wild West, employing a vintage-style font on a wood-patterned background. Logo bandanas and trucker hats are for sale so that guests can take home some of that Western aesthetic.

Between the award-winning wines, the setting, and the horses, Shadybrook's strategy to get noticed is working. Among other awards, they won 1st Place for Best Boutique Winery in the 2024 Napa Valley Life Magazine Reader's Choice Awards, 2nd Place for Best Outdoor Winetasting and 2nd Place for Best Local Winemaker.

Despite the accolades, the culture at Shadybrook is meant to feel approachable.

"When you come here, you don't have to dress up, and you don't have to be fancy," said Alkosser. "If you're going riding, you can wear your boots and jeans, and then come for a tasting and feel comfortable. We aim for that, and I think we achieved it."

Info: Shadybrook Estate Winery, 707-255-5661, 100 Rapp Lane, Napa, shadybrookestate.com