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## Navigating local wine country

Tasting and touring on the dusty back roads of the Central Coast

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When K. Reka Badger goes wine touring and tasting in San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties, she knows how to do it in style. At Red Soles Winery vintner Randy Phillips insisted she taste through all the wines. At Calcareous Winery owner Dana Brown prepared a sumptuous lunch served on the lawn with a helping of a panoramic view of the oaky hills. At Whalebone Vineyard, proprietor Janalyn Simpson pointed out an old editing bench (now a shipping table) used by Hollywood film director King Vidor, who once owned the property.

Now you may not get quite the same treatment, but it would only be from lack of trying, if you follow her path and savvy advice in the new wine touring book, "The California Directory of Fine Wineries, Central Coast," (Ten Speed Press, \$19.95) co-authored with Santa Barbaran Cheryl Crabtree. Ms. Badger is, of course, famous as the master gardener who pens weekly columns in the News-Press about all things floral and botanical.

How she came to co-author a book about wine touring is a serendipitous story in itself. Ms. Badger and Ms. Crabtree were both feature writers for Santa Barbara Seasons magazine. Even though they had never met, Ms. Crabtree recommended her to editor Tom Silberkleit of "The California Directory of Fine Wineries," as a local writer who knew her way around the dusty back roads of



JON BUDAC PHOTO

K. Reka Badger, co-author of "The California Directory of Fine Wineries, Central Coast," at Still Waters Vineyards.

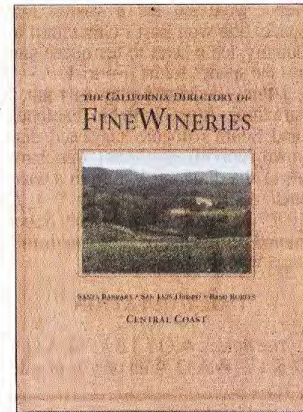
Central Coast wine country.

And if the title, "The California Directory of Fine Wineries," (www.californiafinewineries.com) sounds familiar, Mr. Silberkleit had edited a similar volume in 2002, covering the North Coast, subtitled "Napa, Sonoma, Mendocino." Quite a successful one stop, wine touring planner, that book is now in its fourth edition. He developed the guide as a by product of living in wine country.

Having lived in Sonoma Valley for twenty-five years, Mr. Silberkleit had his share of visitors seeking winery adventures. "Out of town friends and family, eager to go wine tasting, would always look to me for expertise," he explained. "But I soon found that there was often dissent in the group: one person who didn't

drink and/or had little interest in wine. To keep everyone engaged and happy, my challenge was to select wineries that offered visitors something extraordinary beyond great wine, such as spectacular gardens, pleasing architecture or world class art exhibitions."

The new Central Coast book in "The California Directory of Fine Wineries," series, subtitled "Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Paso Robles," had a curious evolution to come to fruition. "One day over lunch, my photographer, Robert Holmes (who frequently works for Wine Spectator) threatened to 'hit me over the head' if I didn't get myself down to Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties," he said. "After several skeptical years on the sidelines, the quality and diversity of



Central Coast wines had finally caught my attention. I had the epiphany and spent the next two years driving the back roads between Summerland and Paso Robles on a mission of discovery. I was determined to understand just what made the area and its wine singularly unique."

Ms. Badger too, felt the time was right to spotlight Central Coast wineries in a sophisticated, user friendly volume. "Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo wineries long ago joined the 'big boys' up north in terms of quality, variety and innovation," she said. "They offer rural scenery and tasting room experiences as memorable as those of their northern counterparts but with a lot less road traffic and tasting room congestion."

When Mr. Silberkleit chose the wineries and gave the co-authors the go ahead, they were off to the races, splitting up the assignment to cover

fifty-eight selected winery destinations. The book follows the template of the North Coast wine touring volume with two pages devoted to each winery, detailing their unique background. It includes a description of their tasting room, including expressive photos. There is also a sidebar with all the nuts and bolts details such as driving directions, phone numbers, web sites, hours of operation, tasting fees, wine specialties and nearby attractions.

Concentrating on San Luis Obispo county, Ms. Badger hit the road just at the time wineries were gearing up for harvest, armed with her notepad and her editor's advice. "Tom advised us always to be specific: to describe the 'experience' and sensory aspects of each tasting room, whether a grand estate or a bare bones cellar," she recalled. She scheduled interview appointments at each winery's tasting room for one to four hours. "I prepared questions for each based on the information available," she said. "My goal was to suss out the salient and unique qualities of each winery and the people behind it, to find out how each story was different, why and how they got into the wine business and what they liked best about it."

The challenges did not end there, particularly with an established deadline. "The sheer logistics of preparing questions for twenty-nine different winery owners, driving to the far flung facilities and then transcribing all those interview notes proved a bit daunting," Ms. Badger explained. "Probably the most challenging part

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# Books meant to get people out into the world

## ■ WINERIES

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of the book was . . . to carve the text down to such bare bones information, while conveying a lively sense of place. I had too much to say in just 250 words, so much more of the story to tell, so many more anecdotes and historical tidbits to relate." But the economy of scale, and words, seems to have served her well in maintaining a compact focus on the stories each winery had to tell.

A twenty year resident of Santa Barbara county, Ms. Badger moved to San Luis Obispo county six years ago "and this project offered me a great opportunity to explore the wine scene up here," she said. While co-authoring the book was a lot of work, she also admits having a great time doing it. "By far, the most fun was visiting the wildly varying wineries, from the homespun and

resort like, and getting to know the personalities behind them. Everyone had a different story to tell about how they got into the wine business, but all were thrilled to be a part of it and devoted to its culture and craft."

Doing such detailed traveling and touring, she naturally developed some favorite winery destinations. "I love Carhartt because it's such a bootstrap operation, with Brooke and Mike Carhartt doing all the work themselves. Calcareous, because of its stunning location and architecture and the fact that the late founder's daughters, who are carrying on in order to fulfill their father's vision, have created such a fun place. And Whalebone, for the sheer delight the owners take in their land, vineyard and winery visitors," she said. Among her other favorite stops were L'Aventure, Still Waters, Tablas Creek and Jack Creek.

There are many more wineries on the Central Coast — Ms. Badger puts

the number at over 300 — than could be included in one book. Among the interesting ones that weren't, she cites Kalyra (where she worked in the late '80s when it was Santa Ynez Winery), Pipestone for its sustainable farming and wildlife habitat and Bedford-Thompson for its multitude of creative cultural events.

But a remedy is already in the works for that. "There are certainly lots more terrific wineries than we were able to include in the first edition," explained Mr. Silberkleit. "However, we hope to feature many of those in the second edition."

That first edition, just now released, is a handy, up to date wine touring resource, a visitor's guide that gives a reader both descriptive and visual entry to both famous and lesser known wineries, as well as all the appropriate details. Full page maps of the profiled destinations are provided, pinpointing an additional hundred wineries as well. Short

chapters on wine making, reading a wine label and the etiquette of wine tasting are also included. Every page is illuminated by prize winning photographer Robert Holmes' striking images that beckon you to pack your picnic fixings and head out on a wine tasting day trip.

Which is exactly what Mr. Silberkleit intended. "The goal of our books is to get folks up and out of their armchairs and into the world," he said. While Ms. Badger defines it even further as being "a quality guidebook to introduce newcomers to the area, give them a few places to start, as well as to tell locals a little more about some of their favorites." By all accounts, "The Directory of California Wineries, Central Coast," succeeds in its missions.

*Wine expert Dennis Schaefer's column appears every other week in the Food section. E-mail: [life@newspress.com](mailto:life@newspress.com).*