



by Elaine Warner

B&B Road Trip

Heavenly Healdsburg

The Honor Mansion
Healdsburg, California

Sonoma Wine Country's
Romantic Resort

Wine lovers will find heaven in Healdsburg, a charming little town tucked into some of California's finest wine country. With the Alexander Valley to the north, Chalk Hill to the east, the Russian River Valley to the south and the Dry Creek Valley to the west, Healdsburg is the ideal home base for exploring the area.

The nearest major airport is San Francisco. From there it's an easy hour's journey up State Highway 101. The other option is flying into Sonoma County Airport in Santa Rosa, just 15 minutes away.

My hosts were innkeepers Steve and Cathi Fowler, owners of Honor Mansion, an over-a-century-old Victorian beauty. The Fowlers have found the perfect balance of gracious hospitality and California casual living.

I stayed in the two-story Tower Suite, housed in an 1883 water storage tower. The sloping walls gave a slightly through-the-looking-glass air to the rooms while pale sage walls and white woodwork and shutters created a light and soothing atmosphere. Luxurious linens and piles of pillows decorated the comfortable queen-sized bed.

The bathroom featured cream tiles with high relief classical motifs. A European-style double-headed shower provided

good, clean fun but the best was yet to come. There's something delightfully decadent about taking a bath under the stars and this is the place to do it. The Tower Suite has its own private sundeck and garden spa tub for two, complete with rubber duckies.

If the décor and amenities weren't enough, on my doorstep early each morning, I found a basket with a carafe of hot chocolate, biscotti and the newspaper – perfect for an early riser. Between 8 and 10, the gourmet breakfast buffet included great entrees like Honor Mansion signature Grand Marnier French Toast and Eggs Benedict. And how about a Mimosa menu?

The Honor Mansion, over-a-century-old Victorian beauty.



There are five rooms in the main house. The Squire's Cottage, Tower Suite, Poolside Suite, Garden Suite and four Vineyard Suites are nearby. Activity areas on the grounds include a swimming pool, PGA putting green, bocce ball courts, tennis court, croquet lawn, jogging trail and a basket ball half-court.

It's tempting not to leave the Mansion, but that would be a mistake. There's a lot to do and see in the area. The number one attraction is the wine – the vineyards and tasting rooms. But I started with an overview – and I do mean overview!

It was still dark when I headed south toward Santa Rosa to meet up with the folks



Honor Mansion's inviting and relaxing pool.



Nightfall at the Honor Mansion.

from Aerostat Adventures for a hot-air balloon trip over the vineyards of Sonoma County. The sun was just over the horizon as the crew started the inflation. Like a multicolored caterpillar, the envelope of the balloon began to snake across the ground. It writhed, rippled and expanded until it triumphantly lifted off the ground. We quickly clambered into the wicker basket and prepared for the ascent.

We hovered above the ground and then cleared the tops of vines and trees, startling

a jack rabbit. We sailed above the Russian River and could see the towns of Windsor and Healdsburg. Far to the west were glimpses of the Pacific Ocean. We soared to a maximum of 1300 feet and traveled about six miles in our hour aloft. The ride was way too short but my disappointment was assuaged by an excellent champagne breakfast.

The champagne was a reminder that I was sitting in the center of a major wine region and needed to do some exploring. There's a winery around every corner in this area. I chose the Armida and Alderbrook Wineries, both very close to Healdsburg. Bruce and Steve Cousins, owners of Armida, are quality conscious, environmentally aware and possess wicked senses of humor. Try their Poizin – "the wine to die for."

Their facilities are a bit off-beat, with three funky geodesic domes housing their tasting room, fermentation and aging cellars. I loved the shady deck overlooking a small pond. Picnic tables make it attractive to visitors who bring their own sandwiches and add a bottle of one of Armida's fine wines.

Alderbrook Winery, very close to Healdsburg, is best known for Zinfandel and Pinot Noir wines but also produces a number of other wines. Their tasting room/wine store is stocked not only with

their wines but with some marvelous wine and chocolate sauces that turn fruit or ice cream into gourmet delights. Colorful pottery, silver serving pieces, sparkling glassware and wine accessories are among the many gift items available.

Unlike the typical road trip from place A to place B, this road trip was more like drawing a daisy. The Honor Mansion was my home and center and each day I made looping forays out and back, leaving plenty of time to enjoy the pool or a quiet read by the shady koi pond. A light afternoon tea is set out between 3:30 and 4 o'clock – hot tea, fruited ice tea and citrus water accompany tasty cookies and sweets. At 5 o'clock Cathi serves an array of appetizers with a selection of local wines.

As good as everything is at the Mansion, save room for dinner. The number and



Breakfast on the upstairs back porch.



B&B Road Trip

Healdsburg, California

Continued



Villa Fiore at the Ferrari-Carano Winery is spectacular.



The Syrah Restaurant in nearby Santa Rosa is an outstanding choice.

variety of excellent eateries in and around Healdsburg is more than impressive. I loved Zin in Healdsburg. Owners Jeff Maul and Scott Silva approach food with the verve and enthusiasm of school boys turned loose with the family car. The menu reads like Bubba meets Julia Child – entrees like Spice Meat Loaf wrapped in Hobbs' Applewood Bacon with Wild Mushroom Gravy or Corn Husk Grilled Shrimp with Anchiote Lime Butter.

Syrah in Santa Rosa is also an outstanding choice. Their cheese plates, served with quince paste, local honey, house made crackers and toasted almonds, feature over a dozen choices of cheeses including many local varieties.

Try lunch at Costeaux French Bakery in Healdsburg for a panini or focaccia sandwich, soup or salad. Desserts are the biggie here – and they are fabulous. Or visit the Oakville Grocery. They have an amazing array of deli meats, local cheeses,

olives – everything. You can eat there or take it with you.

Another day, another winery – so little time, so much wine. Just about 15 minutes northwest of the Honor Mansion is the Ferrari-Carano Winery. This is a “must” stop for both oenophiles and gardeners. I closed my eyes and when I opened them I was in Tuscany – rolling vine-covered hills, tall Italian cypresses overlooking flower-lined paths. Formal beds, in the Italian/French parterre style, radiate color. Spring visitors are treated to thousands of tulips and daffodils.

The Villa Fiore, the winery's hospitality center, is the elegant centerpiece of the property. The two-story, peach-colored Mediterranean villa is topped with a Roman tile roof. Inside, the tasting room is a work of art featuring a curved mahogany and black granite bar. Guests can tour the gardens and visit the tasting room on their own. Formal tours (Monday through Sat-

urday at 10 a.m.) are by reservation only. After a tour and tasting, it was time to think about eating again. Do not, I repeat, do not leave this area without going to the Jimtown Store. Heading for southeast Healdsburg, turning on State Highway 128, I arrived at a little 1893 building touched with real magic. Housed inside is an eclectic aggregation of nostalgic gewgaws – dime store toys, old-fashioned candy, souvenirs so funky they're irresistible – and gourmet items like local wines, olive oils and the Jimtown Store's own



Be sure not to miss the Jimtown Store.



Zin Restaurant in Healdsburg has a wonderful selection of food served in a great atmosphere.

products. These creative concoctions include Chopped Olive Spread, Fig and Olive Spread and Artichoke, Olive and Caper Spread. You can also order killer sandwiches and boxed lunches.

In any other hands, the store would be worth visiting. But owner Carrie Brown has imbued the place with her own combination of joie de vivre and gentle goodness. It's a special spot.

On the way back to the Mansion, I made a necessary pilgrimage to the Seghesio Winery. Eduardo and Angel Seghesio, immigrants from Northern Italy, planted their own vineyard in the Alexander Valley in 1895. Today there are eight family members, representing the third, fourth and fifth generations, involved in the daily operations. The combination of some of the oldest vines in America with some of the most modern genetic testing and propagation procedures produce formidable wines with a distinguished heritage.

There are other things to do besides eating, sleeping and tasting. Healdsburg's boutiques and shops carry everything from artwork, jewelry, cookware and decorating items to antiques, fabrics, books and beauty products. A short drive takes you from the valley into the foothills of the Coastal Range with woodlands of oak, alder, bay, madrone and redwood. Blue Lake Sonoma offers opportunities for boating, water-skiing, swimming, camping, biking, hiking, camping and picnicking. Stop along the way to visit local farmers and artisans. The Healdsburg Chamber of Commerce can give you a Farm Trails map and guide. Flowers, fruit, veggies, olive oil, cheese, even fresh bread is available at interesting little places throughout the county.

Then there's just hanging out – kicking back, breathing deeply and simply enjoying the blue sky, the fresh air and the gorgeous scenery. Healdsburg may not be heaven, but it has to be one of the closer spots on earth.



Try lunch at the Costeaux French Bakery in Healdsburg.

The Honor Mansion

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