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Experience Wine Country in a Cave

Vintner Ken Simoncini welcomes wine lovers with new Spring Wine & Food Experience

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The cave at Simoncini Vineyards is rustic-chic, with chandeliers throughout and jazz often playing in the background. Yet that's all part of creating a welcoming, relaxed atmosphere for vintner Ken Simoncini's new Spring Wine & Food Experience in the cool cave at his Healdsburg winery.

"I'm Italian, and when you invite people to your house, you have to feed them," Simoncini said with a laugh.

The 66-year old vintner is also a lawyer, with a practice in San Jose. But at the winery you won't find him in a suit or tie. Here, he's dressed in a casual shirt, a Carhartt work vest, jeans and tennis shoes.

"Wine is the driving force here," Simoncini said, "and food enhances the product."

The new spring pairing menu showcases Simoncini's namesake label with five courses paired with his viognier, pinot noir, zinfandel, cabernet sauvignon blend and late-harvest muscat canelli.

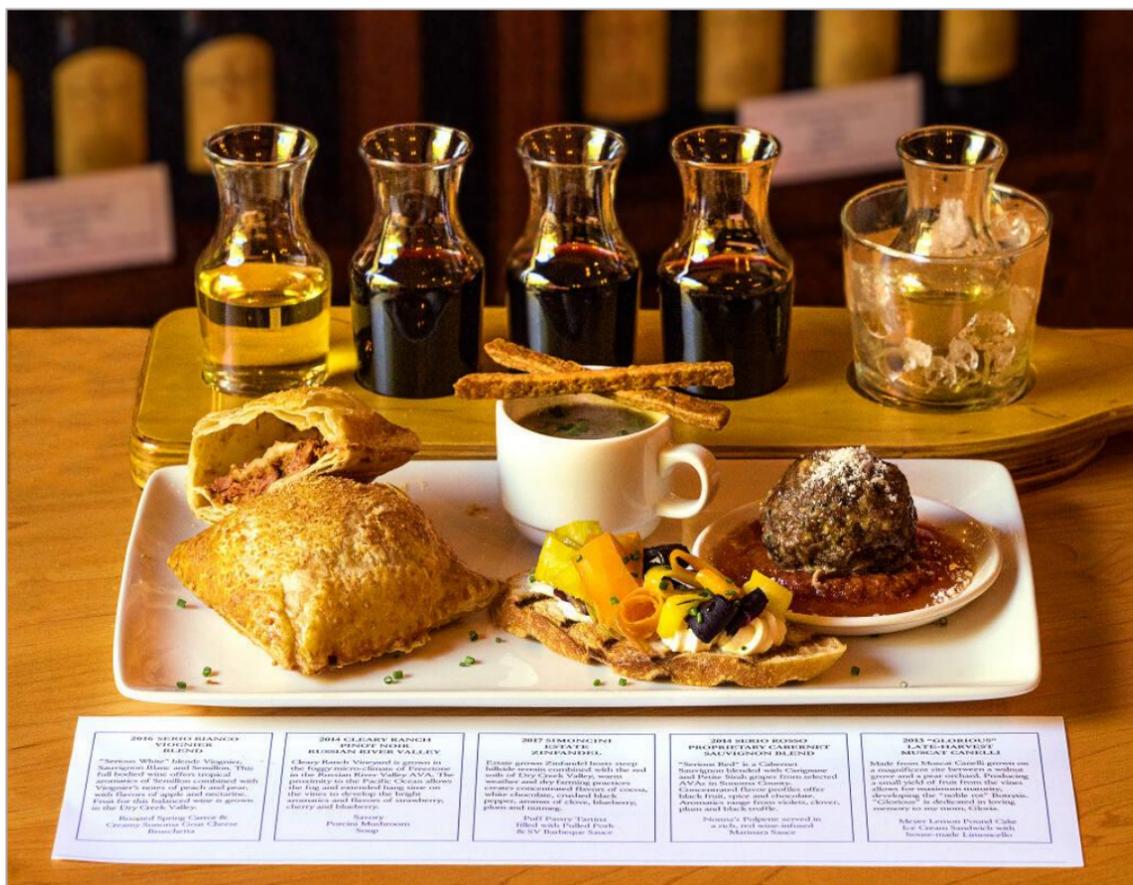
Dan Cuzzi has been helping craft Simoncini Vineyards bottlings since 2008, and as the full-time winemaker since 2012. "Dan really is an artisan winemaker," Simoncini said. "He does as much field work as he does lab work."

The vintner said Cuzzi has a penchant for identifying the best grapes and then making astute picking decisions. With the goal of playing up Cuzzi's lineup of wines, chef Deirdre Francis is behind the pairings.

"The wines are very food-friendly," Francis said. "When you taste the wine with food, you get more flavors out of the wine and it elevates the experience. You get more out of both the wine and the food."



Highbrow comfort food



Francis' first course — Roasted Spring Carrots & Creamy Sonoma Goat Cheese Bruschetta — is paired with Serio Bianco, 2016 Viognier Blend.

"The springtime carrots have a little sweetness, and they work well with the floral viognier," Francis said. "The goat cheese also has a little acid, a tart acidity that helps the floral aspects of the viognier shine." Another winning combination, Francis said, is Nonna's Polpette (meatballs) served in a rich, red wine-infused marinara sauce with the Serio Rosso, 2014 Proprietary Cabernet Sauvignon Blend.

"The cabernet is concentrated, and the meatballs are a little spicy and they complement each other," Francis said. "I use a lot of the wine in the marinara sauce."

Simoncini said the winery's sweet spot for hosting groups is between 25 and 40 people. In early April, a group of about 25 women lawyers rode to the winery on bikes for a tasting. "We did the tasting in the cave, and the women tasted our late-harvest zinfandel dessert wine with chocolate," Francis said. "We served the wine in hollow chocolate eggs because the zinfandel pairs perfectly with chocolate."



The weather, Francis said, plays a key role in whether a tasting will be in the cave or in the bucolic outdoor picnic area that straddles a creek. Inside the cave, a small group of eight or fewer might inhabit a small tasting room with arched redwood doors that open to the creek. For bigger groups, there's a large conference room available, or long tables can be set up through the middle of the cave. The tasting, \$145 per person, has 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. seatings Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. See the full tasting menu at simoncinivineyards.com. Reservations are required (call 707-433-8811).

Simoncini said he purchased the property in 2002 and began building the cave in 2006. It took six years to complete the cave, which also houses a lab and a bottling line. The cave has radiant heating built into the flooring, air monitors to keep a constant check on carbon-dioxide levels and a picture window to showcase the rock wall, a blend of shale obsidian and quartz.



With a lineup of roughly 15 wines, the winery produces about 1,500 cases a year. "We practically put the winery in with a shoehorn," Simoncini said. "We were careful not to even take a tree out. ... My parents (the late Robert and Gloria Simoncini) told me I could do anything, and I believed them."

Food roots for vintner and chef

For Simoncini, food was central to his Italian upbringing. "Italians know how to live," he said. "(They) close their doors at noon and open them at 3 p.m."

Both sets of his grandparents, Simoncini said, immigrated to America from towns in northern Italy in the early 1900s. He grew up watching them savor the Venetian custom of cicchetti, snacking on small plates of food like seafood or meatballs, paired with a little glass of wine.

With a cicchetti mindset, it's not surprising Simoncini would design his winery with the kitchen as a focal point. When people enter the tasting room, there's a big window into the kitchen, with a clear view of the lengthy wooden table. And to enter the cave, guests walk right through the kitchen.

"We paid incredible attention to the details to make sure we could keep it clean and attractive," Simoncini said. With this goal in mind, Francis pointed out a key feature — two 90-second, high-temperature dishwashers in the kitchen. "We wash a lot of glasses around here," she said, with a broad smile.

