

FROM THE VINE

Kathy Marcks Hardesty: The unique Tolosa tour and tasting experience

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Tolosa vineyard with tour guide Mike Giese.

Kathy Marcks Hardesty, contributed photo

On a spectacular Central Coast morning in Edna Valley, cool breezes on a warm sunny day made it refreshing and delightful to be in wine country.

It was a perfect day for traipsing out into the lush green vineyard beside Tolosa winery's expanded garden patio to sip chardonnay. I was there for a tour and wine tasting, invited by a friend who had bid at a charity auction for a Tolosa winery excursion and won it.

Admittedly, I've visited Tolosa many times since it originally opened in 2004, but always as a media VIP. Thanks to Tolosa's consulting winemaker, Stephen Ross Dooley, who owns Stephen Ross Cellars in San Luis Obispo and who advised them on building the state of the art Tolosa, I observed their first grape crush. From the beginning, they provided custom crush work for large and small wineries up and down the state as well as producing their own premium brand.

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Touring the barrel room at Tolosa with Mike Giese while tasting Tolosa Pinot Noir.

Kathy Marcks Hardesty, contributed photo

This was a different opportunity that I happily accepted — a chance to experience tasting at Tolosa, consumer style. Our guide was Michael “Mike” Giese, certified specialist of wine (CSW), documented by the Society of Wine Educators. This means, he underwent a rigorous exam to prove his mastery in viticulture and wine production.

Not only was he quite knowledgeable about Tolosa and grape growing, he kept the information understandable for every level of consumer, from newcomer to longtime wine aficionado. He impressed us with his friendly attitude and patience as questions frequently interrupted his explanations. This was not his only job at Tolosa, Giese said. They also use others on the winery team to lead the tours.

With Giese, we started out in the tasting room where he poured a generous taste of Tolosa 2017 chardonnay stainless steel (no oak aging). Then, we followed him into the vineyard. Judging by freshness of a few trimmings still lying between the rows of vines, the grapevines had recently been pruned. I was surprised they had not yet undergone bud break, which is when the first new leaves of the 2019 vintage begin bursting open on the vines. Giese told us bud break was later this year due the cooler, wet winter we’ve had.

Tolosa has 728 acres of grapevines, yet only 120 acres of their best blocks of vines are used to produce Tolosa wines. The remaining fruit is sold to other wineries each year.

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Giese pointed out the transverse position of the hills in Edna Valley that run northwest to southeast, from the Pacific Ocean through San Luis Obispo County's volcanic hills, makes Edna Valley one of the coolest Central Coast wine appellations.

Vintner Robin Baggett purchased the Tolosa property in 1973. Originally, he wanted to be a cattle rancher like his grandfather. The Cal Poly alumni bought a historic estate to begin that dream. But with the region becoming established as a great site for premium winegrapes, particularly chardonnay and pinot noir, Baggett partnered with Bob Schiebelhut and viticulturist Jim Efrid to found Tolosa in 1998.

Giese explained that the three soil types of Tolosa represent the "holy grail" of ideal places to plant pinot noir: heavy clay, sandstone and clay loam and limestone. And that the winemaking team is dedicated to creating diverse wines of distinctive characters that best represent the soils and climate of the site where they are grown.

He led us back to the tasting room to taste the chardonnay 2017 oak aged version. Most of our group preferred this version, but I preferred the un-oaked chard. We followed Giese downstairs to the tank and barrel rooms where he explained their value in the winemaking process, then poured a taste of the 2016 pinot noir "1772," which pleased everyone.

After the production introduction, which none of the others had experienced before, we went back to the private tasting area they call the barrel loft. We would taste three more great wines, to the ecstatic surprise of the group. These were wines that are not poured in the tasting room, only for private tastings like the one we experienced.

Each wine was outstanding and impressed the entire group: the Tolosa pinot noir Apex, grown in the famed Francioni family's vineyard in the Santa Lucia Highlands (Monterey County), the Tolosa pinot noir Primera, their flagship Edna Valley-grown pinot noir and from their Spanish winery Perinet in the prestigious Priorat region near Barcelona.

The latter were wines not normally offered in the tasting room, but it was impressive enough to make anyone want to join their wine club.

I identified myself to Giese after the tasting and told him how impressed I was by the outstanding tour and tasting he provided for consumers.

Tolosa recommends that you make all tasting reservations through the concierge by calling 805-782-0500, ext. 152. It's located at 4910 Edna Road, in San Luis Obispo, across Highway 227 across from the airport. For more information, visit www.tolosawinery.com.