

VAGABONDING LULU

DIVINE INTERVENTION IN THE U.S.'S OLDEST WINEGROWING REGION

ARTICLE & PHOTOS BY STACEY WITTIG, TRAVEL WRITER

When the International Wine & Spirit Competition IWSC announced Gruet Winery as the 2010 U.S. Producer of the Year last fall, I figured it was high time for a road trip to New Mexico. I wanted to learn what was going on over there.

So off I cruise with fellow wine-enthusiast Melanie Nelson to Gruet Winery in Albuquerque. Over a glass of award-winning Gruet Blanc de Noirs we ask Regina Wilson, Gruet's Tasting Room Manager, about the buzz. "We were up against big names like Robert Mondavi. It is exciting for the entire region to have such recognition," exclaims Wilson.

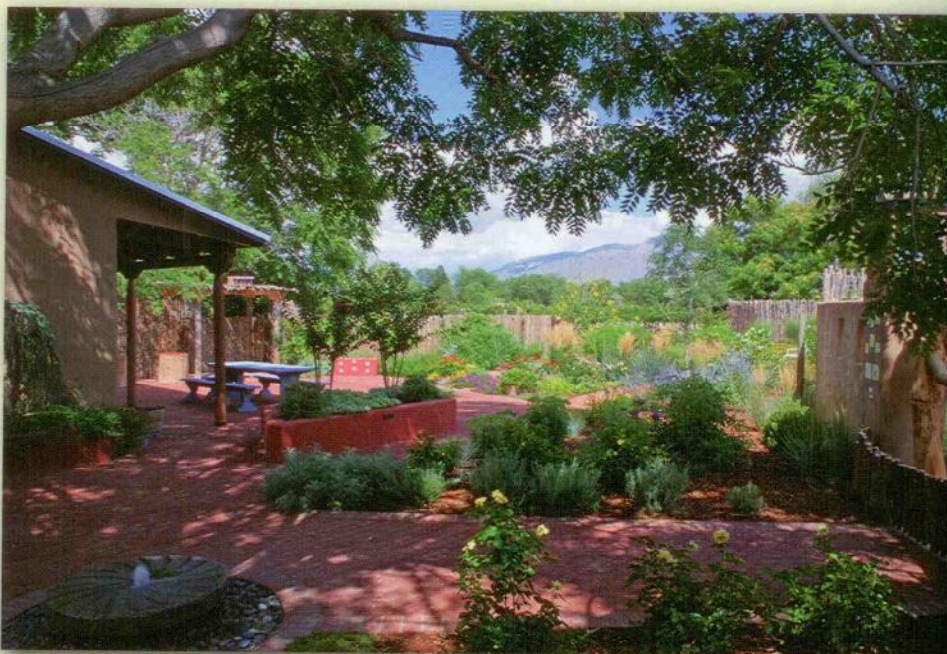
The Old World warmth of the tasting room surprises me – it's right off gritty Interstate 25 – until I learn that the Gruet family is from the Champagne region in France. No wonder the European ambience, or that their bubbly is so acclaimed. "It's a real American Dream story," explains Wilson reaching over the wine bar's deeply-carved oak panels to pour another taste.

It seems that after travelling through New Mexico on a family vacation, French winemaker Gilbert Gruet decided to plant an experimental vineyard near Truth or Consequences, NM. "He was astonished by the rugged beauty, the terroir and the affordability of land," says Wilson. "His vision was to have the whole family involved. So his children moved to New Mexico to begin planting the vineyards. Just imagine, they didn't speak English and lived in a small trailer in the hot desert." Now, thirty years later, their internationally-recognized sparkling wine is distributed in 49 states.

Gilbert Gruet was not the first European to recognize New Mexico's winegrowing potential. In fact, New Mexico is the oldest viticultural region in North America. According to Christian Gallagher, our host at Casa Rondeña Winery, "In 1629, Fray Marcos Garcjada de Zuniga smuggled the first European grapevines to New Mexico. He celebrated the first vintage in 1633, over 200 years before vinifera vines were planted in the Napa Valley of California!" Because the Spanish Crown had no way to tax wine produced in the New World, they wouldn't allow vines to be transported and thus the smuggler's ploy.

Casa Rondeña Winery's lush grounds and Old World architecture make a favorite backdrop for outdoor gatherings. I recommend joining the locals around the picturesque pond to sip Casa Rondeña's internationally-awarded wines.

Just up the road, the Village of Corrales is situated on a historic Spanish Land Grant. This romantic agricultural area sported vineyards, apple orchards and chilies but no English-speakers until the 1920s. We spend two relaxing nights at the Chocolate Turtle Bed and Breakfast in the heart of Corrales wine country.



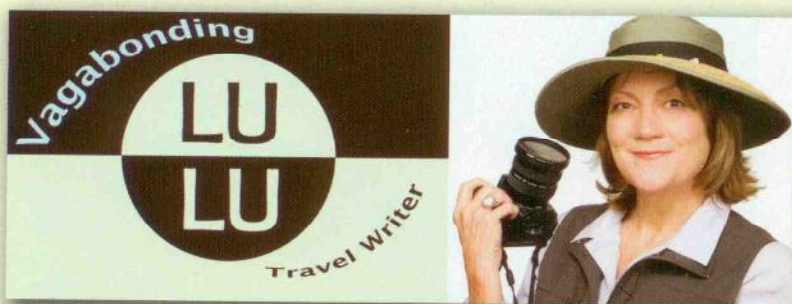
Milagro Winery in Corrales, NM

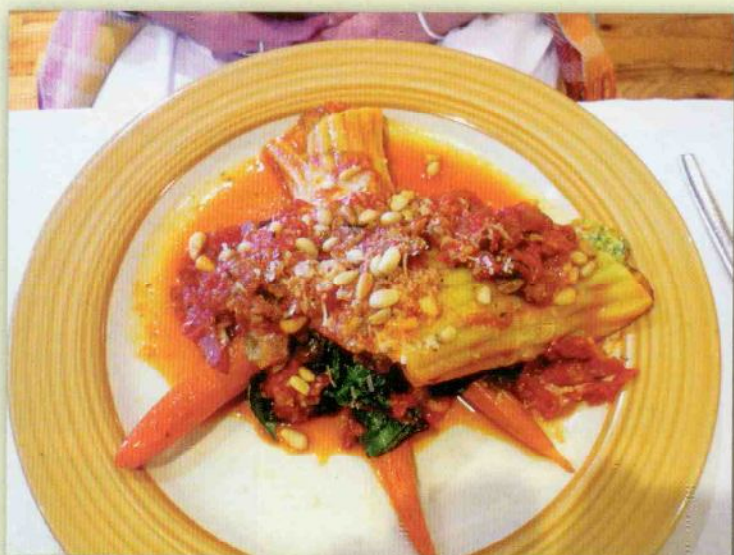
The enchanting getaway decorated in bright Southwestern colors is the perfect wine lovers' retreat. We bring our own, and innkeepers Dallas and Nancy offer wine glasses, opener and fridge.

With breakfast we get a plethora of insider tips: "Hanselmann Pottery in the village is a must-do. It's open 24/7 and set up on 'The Honor System,' you find what you like and drop your money in the box. They are so concerned with security that they keep the cash box bolted to the table," Dallas laughs.

We've called ahead for reservations at Milagro Vineyards and Winery and drive to the cute adobe tasting cottage. "The wine making methods we use could be commonly found in France. My interest is in having the grapes show up in the wine... we have an oak component but the oak is not overly done," says vintner Rick Hobson who meticulously uses sustainable agricultural practices. Preferring to keep alcohol levels lower, he explains, "I like wine, and the lower the alcohol, the more I can drink."

"A lot of divine intervention comes into wine making in New Mexico," smiles Rick's wife Mitzi. Hence the name: Milagro,





Simply Divine: Baked Vegetarian Manicotti at Zinc's

Spanish for miracle. "We want our wines to reflect the taste of New Mexico." In Milagro's crisp Chardonnay I taste the wet slate of the surrounding hills. I could stay in this garden-surrounded haven all day, but we must move on.

At Corrales Winery, former materials engineer Keith Johnstone explains the subtleties of New Mexican grape growing. "This is a fairly severe environment. There's hot growth in the daytime and a total shutdown at night. It just makes the grapes different.

"Altitude is a little challenge for growing grapes and the unpredictability of spring freezes is also a problem. Last year we lost our entire Muscat vineyard. On April 30, it got down to 25 degrees for six hours. Everything was dead to the ground." The Muscat is a Corrales flagship wine. "There is none better," claims Johnstone. "It completes the palate from front to back with peach, apricot and pear flavors forward and a citrus finish. The peach and apricot depends on annual growing differences."

After driving around looking for Acequia Vineyards & Winery -- my Droid GPS keeps losing service in the hinterlands -- we leave Corrales to make it on time for dinner.

At St. Clair Winery & Bistro, we started with a nosh of cheeses, olives, chocolate, grapes and homemade crostinis and tastings of their three brands: D.H Lescombes, Blue Teal and St. Clair. Whenever in northern New Mexico, I'm looking for northern New Mexican cuisine (God's food) so I have to order the grilled chicken breast topped with cream sauce, green chiles and cheese: Chicken Picado (\$13.) Had I'd known that the owner is French, I might have tried the French Country-inspired dishes. Melanie enjoys pork tenderloin with raspberry chipotle sauce (\$13) and we both love the Lounge Jazz music and the restaurant's energetic vibe.

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The next morning, we toast the success of our New Mexico road trip with a glass of Gruet sparkling wine during a fabulous brunch at Zinc Wine Bar & Bistro. Don't miss this dining establishment for its tempting menu and exquisite service. I am blown away by the Hacienda Breakfast Skillet with green chile hash and espanole sauce, a simple sauce made from veal broth and flour (\$12) while Melanie gobbles the Baked Vegetarian Manicotti (\$13). Again the warm, New Mexican ambience makes it difficult for us to leave.

On our way home, one hour west of Albuquerque, we stop at San Fidel for our last tasting of the road trip. Antonio and Lucinda Trujillo welcome us to the 300-case Guadalupe Vineyards at the foot of Mount Taylor, revered by the Navajos as one of four sacred mountains.

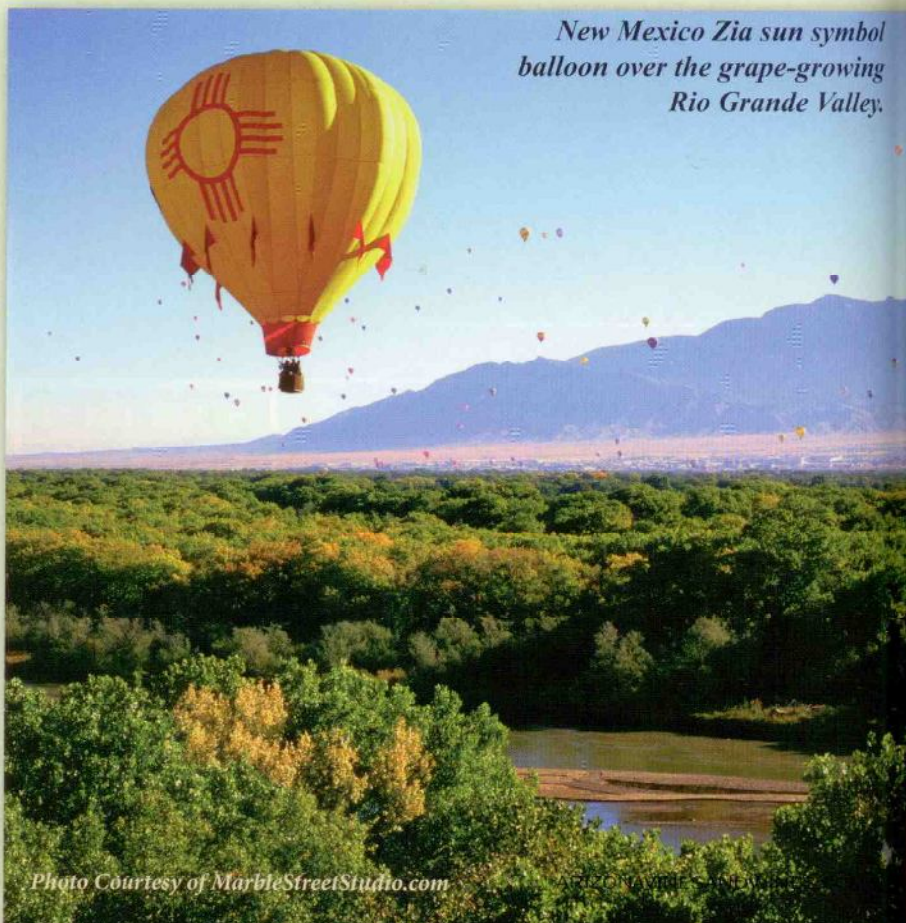
"The year [vintage] is the personality of the wine, and it takes on the personality of the person managing the vineyard," says Antonio opening a bottle of dry Riesling, the 2010 Gold Medal winner of the Eastern International Wine Competition in New York.

"Heavenly..." I murmur at my first sip.

"Funny you should say. He used to bless the wine, now he makes it," reveals Lucinda.

"Yes, I was the Franciscan priest for Acoma and Laguna," Father Antonio smiles sheepishly. "I wanted to grow and farm. First we tried corn, but what inspired us to grow grapes were three neglected 70-year-old vines we discovered on the property. We are so blessed."

"Wine is an experience. It slows us down -- it helps us to talk and to share." The couple reveals that they are anxiously awaiting the results of the San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition, the largest competition of American Wines in the world. Their 2010 Gewürztraminer is entered. Melanie buys a bottle for good luck. Later that week we learn that it won a Silver. Divine intervention?



New Mexico Zia sun symbol balloon over the grape-growing Rio Grande Valley.