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Weekend Escape

Bearing Fruit in Vineyards of Temecula

* Close to home, the region boasts a new B&B that's regal--if still a bit less than ripe.

By MARNELL JAMESON

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TEMECULA, Calif.--My Internet-sleuth husband was scouting for an unusual weekend getaway when he came across the new Inn at Churon Winery, Temecula's first B&B-winery combination.

Although pictures of the inn--billed as a "majestic French chateau"--weren't yet available online, we called the inn, and the staff promised that each of the 22 rooms had a fireplace, a large Jacuzzi tub, a granite and marble bathroom and a patio or terrace. Breakfast and an evening wine tasting were included. And because the inn was largely empty for the coming weekend, the reservations staff offered us a standard room Friday and Saturday night at midweek rates--\$130 plus tax per night, instead of \$195. (Suites run as much as \$275.)

The destination fit our criteria: close enough to drive and full of activities we enjoy--wine tasting and antique shopping. So we booked it.

Temecula is no Napa, but that turned out to be a good thing. It was less crowded, cheaper and not as snooty. Like many people, we appreciate wine but aren't fanatical about it, so it didn't matter that the labels here don't have the same prestige. And though Temecula made headlines in recent years because of a grape disease that wiped out as much as 30% of the vines, we found that the wineries are recovering nicely, the aftereffects invisible to the average visitor.

When Dan and I arrived at Churon one Friday last month, the inn was so new that landscaping was still being installed. We knew the place had recently opened, but we didn't know just how recently. It turned out the winery had been open a full month, but this was only

the second weekend of operation for the inn. Windows still had stickers on them.

Chuck Johnson bought the property with longtime friend Ron Tomas (hence Chu-ron), who also owns the Inn at the Beach in Ventura. They started the vineyard from scratch and hired seasoned winemaker Don Frangipani.

Johnson, who didn't know I was a travel writer, waltzed us around so proudly we expected him to hand out cigars. No two rooms are alike, but each features beautiful furnishings, mostly ornate replicas of antique beds, armoires and tables. The basics are impressive: 9-1/2-foot ceilings, crown moldings, floral wallpaper, carved mantels, tasteful floral wallpaper, down comforters. The bathrooms are as grand as any top-notch hotel's.

Though Johnson seemed to favor the room with his newest acquisition--a cherry four-poster bed--I chose a room with antique white reproductions of Louis XIV pieces. From the balcony, we overlooked the Churon vineyards.

Despite the luxurious appointments, the room showed signs of being a work in progress: no art on the walls, no plants, no phone. It lacked comforts one would expect, like conditioner to go with the shampoo, or bath gel for the big tub. I was surprised at the absence of touches like fresh flowers, chocolates on the pillow, a newspaper at our door in the morning.

But these were minor points we chalked up to the recent opening. Based on what we had seen so far, we expected these gestures would come someday. Meanwhile, we agreed with other guests we met who said the inn was an excellent value.

At the evening wine reception, the Churon tasting room was so beautiful and the guests and staff so delightful that we hardly noticed the wines were just OK--a respectable first effort.

From there we went to dinner at Nihon, a crowded Japanese restaurant down the road from the inn. I had a spicy tuna roll, which was good, and crisp tempura. The frazzled staff brought Dan the wrong dinner, and when he finally got his chicken teriyaki, it was dry.

Breakfast back at the inn Saturday morning wasn't much better. We had requested that our food be brought to the room between 8 and 8:30. Nothing arrived, so we went down to the dining room. No decaf coffee. Eggs were rubbery. Toast wasn't brown. "They're new," we told

ourselves.

We moved on to Front Street, the heart of Old Town Temecula, for antiquing. I'm no expert, but I do sometimes write about interior design, so I like to keep developing my eye and appreciation for furnishings. Though Temecula has a few stores that carry antique furniture (most notably Longbranch), most deal in collectibles--various items less than 100 years old. We didn't find that perfect Renaissance-era entry table or Italian curio cabinet I've been hunting for, but we did enjoy simply browsing.

Come lunchtime, we headed for the wineries. While still a minor player, with only 3,000 acres of vineyards compared with Napa Valley's 40,000 acres, Temecula does have an advantage: a welcome intimacy between vintners and their guests. Tastings are less intimidating. Even the relationships between wineries seem more cordial than competitive.

Since the mid-'90s those bonds have grown stronger as the region faced an infestation of the glassy-winged sharpshooter, a grasshopper-like insect that spreads the vine-killing Pierce's disease. Vintners had feared the region would be wiped out, but last year the pest seemed to be contained. The harvest was solid.

Our first stop was Mount Palomar, the prettiest tasting room we visited and a good place for lunch. We ordered roast turkey and smoked Gouda sandwiches and a couple of bottles of cream soda from the deli counter, then took the food to picnic tables overlooking the valley of vineyards. After lunch, we tasted. We bought four bottles of Shorty's Bistro, a red named after the proprietor's dog, before moving on.

Most wineries charge \$3 to \$6 per person for tasting, which often includes an etched glass. But at Maurice Carrie, the tasting is free. I bought several bottles of what I thought was a nice Sauvignon Blanc, later reading that a top wine reviewer agreed, singling it out as among his top picks for the region.

At Wilson Creek Winery, the eye-opener was the almond champagne. At Hart, the surprise wasn't the reds, for which the winery has a good reputation, but the fact that the server wouldn't talk about his favorite pours, as other wineries' servers had done. His recommendation: "They're all good." I think he just wanted to close.

But there was still time for Miramonte, our last stop for the day, where I squeezed in one final sip of a fine Chardonnay.

Visiting so many wineries, we were careful to take small sips, dump anything that didn't thrill us and take a midafternoon break at a coffeehouse.

That night we set our sights on Thornton Winery, not for the tasting room but for its restaurant. Cafe Champagne has a romantic Old World ambience--upholstered walls, burgundy tablecloths, dark woods and beamed ceilings--and a menu best described as French fusion.

The starters were excellent. Dan's bisque was nicely finished with a drizzle of red pepper coulis. My pear salad was refreshing.

For an entree, Dan selected crisp roast duck with ginger-lavender-honey sauce that was aromatic and savory. I ordered grilled Hawaiian ahi, sesame-crust and served with a wild mushroom butter sauce that overpowered the flavor of the fish. For dessert, we shared a mocha mousse in a cup formed of solid chocolate, nicely paired with a cinnamon scone and fresh raspberries.

We woke Sunday to see some of the area's most popular attractions, hot-air balloons, sailing over our balcony. I stepped out to wave at one group so close that we had a conversation.

"Looks like a great party!" I hollered to about 10 people in a basket, which beared a "Happy Birthday" banner.

"Climb aboard!" someone shouted back.

A good jog burned off the previous day's gluttony. Or so we convinced ourselves. Soon we were back in the Churon dining room. I had a Denver omelet made with sauteed fresh vegetables. Dan had the yogurt, which was meagerly drizzled over fruit in a fluted champagne glass. The accompanying granola mentioned on the menu turned out to be prepackaged snack bars. The coffee was cold.

"They're new."

We went back to the antique stores. I picked up eight hand-painted amber juice glasses, four dessert plates trimmed in 22-karat gold, four hand-painted porcelain egg cups and two miniature porcelain dolls--all for \$85. A crusty old guy selling patio statuary and fountains had vintage window frames to hang in a curved stairway in my home. Sold, for \$100 each.

Before leaving town, we visited one more winery that we had resisted on principle. We like to support underdogs, and Callaway is the nation's 15th largest winery. It produces 350,000 cases a year, more than all the region's other wineries combined.

I'm a little embarrassed to say I liked many of the wines, especially the 2000 Sauvignon Blanc--an \$8-a-bottle wonder, if you ask my humble taste buds. Which sadly proved two things: I like what the masses like. And my principles are for sale.

We left town with a trunk full of new wines and old treasures, plus a plan to return--not just to Temecula but to Churon, which after some time will no doubt come into its own, like a well-aged wine.

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Budget for Two

Inn at Churon Winery, two nights...\$285.90

Dinner, Nihon...46.64

Lunch, Mount Palomar...15.09

Dinner, Cafe Champagne...137.15

Wine tasting, four wineries...32.00

Gas...11.75

FINAL TAB...\$528.53

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Inn at Churon Winery, 33233 Rancho California Road, Temecula, CA 92591; (909) 694-9070, fax (909) 676-8634, www.innatchuronwinery.com.

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GRAPHIC: Map: Temecula, CA.

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PHOTO: The 22-room Inn at Churon Winery is set on 11 acres

in the Temecula Valley. Though the service needs polishing, the facilities are luxurious.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: DON KELSEN / Los Angeles Times

PHOTO: Jan Olson of Redwood Valley, Calif., awaits a Chardonnay in the tasting room at Churon Winery.

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PHOTO: WEEKEND ESCAPE: No Snob Appeal--Temecula, with its Old Town antique shops and its new winery and inn, is no Napa, thankfully. L5

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TOURISM