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Wine-tasting and retreats at California monastery

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• What to know if you go



RICH PEDRONCELLI/STF (ENLARGE)

Brother Rafael Flores, a monk at the Abby of New Clairvaux, inspects grape vines at the monastery's vineyard in Vina, Calif.

VINA, Calif. — In a Northern California monastery, 25 monks following the teachings of St. Benedict rise hours before dawn to pray, work the land and make a serious syrah — a full-bodied red wine.

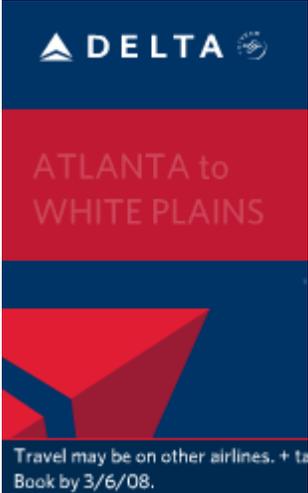
The men at the Abbey of New Clairvaux have opened the first Roman Catholic Cistercian winery in North America, though their vineyard has a storied place in California's wine history.

The 580-acre spread in this tiny town north of Chico was once owned by Leland Stanford — the railroad magnate, California governor and university founder — who ran what was considered the world's largest winery in the late 1800s, said Aimee Sunseri, a fifth-generation winemaker hired to help the monks start the winery.

Wine has been fine

The brothers' vineyards are more modest, but they hope wine sales will boost the monastery, where recruitment to the order has been hard and the monks must dig up ways to make cash.

"We need to work to keep going, but we don't want or expect to get rich. But the wine has done well — better than expected," said Father Harold Meyer, who has been at the abbey for 33 years.



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RICH PEDRONCELLI/STF
(ENLARGE)

Wine maker Aimee Sunseri smells a glass wine in the monastery's wine cellar



RICH PEDRONCELLI/STF
(ENLARGE)

Monks of the Abby of New Clairvaux sit in prayer at the abbey's chapel. They have opened the first Roman Catholic Cistercian winery in North America.

private, modern bathroom.

Guests are asked to observe silence at night but there are no religious requirements and no schedule to the stay. Guests are welcome to attend prayer services in the monastery's small church or worship as they wish in a quiet room.

Guests come for retreats

Retreats are booked months in advance and the stays are donation-based.

Some of the brothers are more outgoing than others, happy to talk to visitors. Others prefer solitude, meals alone and a day spent tinkering with farm equipment or making pottery.

"We get a lot of city people. We're intriguing, I guess," Meyer said, laughing.

The men follow the Roman Catholic teachings of St. Benedict, which advocate private and communal prayer and self-support through manual labor.

Trappist monks in Massachusetts sell jam and preserves, Benedictines in New Mexico brewed up plans to make beer and Cistercians have made wine in France and Germany for centuries.

Before settling on wine grapes, the Sacramento Valley monks dabbled with dairy, made a go at walnuts, then tried prunes and organic vegetables.

They now grow 10 varieties of grapes chosen specifically for the region's soil and climate,

While their quarters are kept private, they've opened the monastery to the public for three- and four-day retreats, tours and weekend wine-tasting.

The grounds are quiet most of the day except for the splashing of koi fish in a small fountain and the abbot speeding by in a golf cart. At 7:35 p.m., the monks say their last prayer before the "grand silence," which lasts until morning prayers at 3:30 a.m. the next day.

Grapes have a 'sacredness'

Then, it's time for work.

"There's a sacredness about working with grapes," Meyer said. "Wine is very special."

The monastery's property is bordered on one side by the Sacramento River. Century-old walnut trees create canopies over the retreat facilities, including a modest library, a small dining hall and a store offering the wares of other monasteries and religious books.

Most of the fields and simple buildings are named, but not all carry religious monikers. Guest rooms for visitors taking retreats at the abbey are labeled by virtue: Kindness, Goodness, Gentleness, Peace.

The rooms are austere, with a twin bed and desk. Each room has a

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including petite sirah, tempranillo, graciano, zinfandel, barbera, viognier and muscat blanc.

"The ground here is kind of sandy and rough, which is perfect for growing grapes," Sunseri said.

Monks came from Kentucky

Perfect for grapes, maybe, but not necessarily for those toiling in the fields. They have named and blessed the two fields: St. James and Poor Souls.

"Anyone that has to work that land is a poor soul," said Rafael Flores, one of the brothers.

The monks expect to make about 19,200 bottles of wine this year, twice as many as their first batch in 2002, Sunseri said.

That year, the monks harvested the first wine grapes at the Vina property since the close of the Stanford Winery in 1815, she said. Stanford's vineyards were torn out in the early 1900s and then prohibition kicked in. The land was eventually parceled off and sold in pieces.

The monastery moved here from Kentucky 51 years ago, building a church, a dining hall and residences. They are currently rebuilding part of an 800-year-old Spanish monastery William Randolph Hearst bought in the 1930s, dismantled and shipped to San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, where it was never reassembled.

The Abbey of New Clairvaux still uses Stanford's 100-year-old brick wine cellar to produce, age and bottle their wines.

"People will come at first because we're monks, but we want them to come back because this is a good place and we have quality goods to offer," Meyer said.

If You Go...

ABBEY OF NEW CLAIRVAUX: www.newclairvaux.org. Tasting room at 26240 7th St., Vina, Calif., open 11 a.m.-5 p.m. weekends. Reservations for retreats, call (530) 839-2434. Reservations are typically booked months in advance.

GETTING THERE: Vina is about 120 miles north of Sacramento.

COST: Wine is about \$10-20 per bottle. Retreats are donation-based.

SACRED STONES PROJECT: www.sacredstones.org. Information about the abbey's efforts to rebuild part of an 800-year-old Spanish monastery using stones from the original building that were imported to California in the 1930s.

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