



New cookbook celebrates North Bay wineries' culinary gardens and chefs

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As North Bay wineries open their gates this summer, it's a perfect time to visit a few that give culinary inspiration in the form of artistically raised beds, espaliered fruit trees and trellises for climbing veggies like beans.

Although not exactly money makers, the winery gardens of Napa and Sonoma counties and Livermore Valley offer a continuous supply of fresh produce for winery chefs and visual beauty for the visitors who come to enjoy the "country" in Wine Country.

In her latest cookbook, "Gather: Casual Cooking from Wine Country Gardens," Napa food writer Janet Fletcher celebrates these culinary gardens with more than 60 wine-friendly recipes from vintners, chefs and gardeners, illustrated with 200 color photographs.

"Cooking, gardening, wine and food people ... it was the perfect project for me," Fletcher said. The seed for the project was planted a few years ago when she wrote a story on a couple of winery gardens for NAPA Magazine.

"It occurred to me there were probably more and this would make a beautiful book," she said. "It was so fun to see how the chefs made good use of what was coming out of those gardens."

The custom book is a collaboration between Fletcher and book designer Jennifer Barry, who has designed and produced cookbooks for wineries such as Stone Edge Farm in Sonoma.

"Getting to see the different ways the wineries incorporated their gardens into their culinary programs, visitor experiences or employee perks was really inspiring," Barry said. "I was delighted by the incredible diversity of garden designs and unusual plantings as well as the innovative ways the winery chefs and owners used their garden bounty in the recipes."

Seasons in the gardens

The gardens range in the book from Skipstone in Geyserville and Alexander Valley Vineyards in Healdsburg to Wheeler Farms and Clif Family Winery in St. Helena. "Gather" also includes the 25-year-old garden at Wente Vineyards in Livermore, although that garden has since been discontinued.

The winery gardens were photographed in the spring, summer and fall, yielding different dishes that reflected the shifts of harvest across the seasons. One winery, Regusci Winery in Napa, provided dishes for a Thanksgiving feast.

"When you're talking about gardens, you are tied to what's coming out of the garden," Fletcher said. "I felt like that was a real plus, that we were working with fresh-as-it-gets produce."

One interesting feature of winery gardens is that chefs often try to grow unusual produce they can't buy, from peppers like Espelette and Jimmy Nardello to orchard fruits such as quince and pomegranates.

At Skipstone in Geyserville, owner Farhi Diner plants and harvests almonds, a crop rarely found in Northern California, Fletcher said.

The son and grandson and olive growers, Diner planted the garden to reflect the landscape of his native Cyprus, with its olive trees and Mediterranean vegetables like peppers, eggplant, beans and cucumbers.

"He's an international businessman, and his wife is Swiss," Fletcher said. "It's really planted with his diet in mind. ... Breakfast is a cucumber and some yogurt."

The Skipstone garden includes hot peppers and cilantro planted specifically to help feed the crew and produce food for the Mexican kitchen.

"A lot of the produce goes to their employees," Fletcher said. "Nobody wants to see it go to waste."

Wheeler Farms Winery

Over in St. Helena, Fletcher was also impressed with Chef Sarah Heller of Wheeler Farms Winery, an historic agricultural property that was first planted with grapes in 1865. When Prohibition hit in 1919, about 100 acres of grapevines were replaced by fruit and nut orchards, mostly prunes and walnuts. The property was not planted to grapes again until the 1960s.

In 2014, longtime Napa vintners Bart and Daphne Araujo, founders of Araujo Estate, bought the property and, in an nod to agricultural legacy, planted a small orchard of heirloom stone fruit trees and vegetables in raised beds of varying heights in front of the winery.

"There's a lot of thought to design in many of these gardens because there are visitors, so you want it to look beautiful for them, all the time," Fletcher said. "Daphne Arujo was a landscape architect, and they have these raised beds that are really deep."

One way winery gardens manage to look stunning all year is with seasonal flowers, which also draw beneficial insects.

"I saw a lot of interplanting of flowers, like borages and marigolds," Fletcher said. "The chefs use the flowers to decorate the plate."

That gave Fletcher the idea to plant more flowers in her own garden, including nasturtiums and alyssum, which attract bees. The chefs also inspired her to start using every part of the plant.

"The chef from Clif Family Winery is really good at that," she said. "He uses the roots, the stems, the seeds, at every stage. So I look at my vegetables that way now."

For people who are gardeners, the book may provide inspiration for new design ideas as well a desire to go visit the gardens themselves, Fletcher said.

The book is available for \$45 at participating wineries as well as at janetfletcher.com, where shipping is free.