

Afternoon at a Winery

San Francisco was just a stopover for us, a place to rent a car and get organized for the trip north. But we enjoyed our night at the Mark Hopkins Hotel on Nob Hill and our dinner at nearby Union Square. The famous cable cars fan out around the hotel and go almost everywhere that would interest us. The cable car fare is a surprising \$5 nowadays for even a short ride. I seem to remember it was 5¢ in 1955, but I may be thinking of New York's Staten Island ferry. It was the Navy that first took me to these great cities on both coasts. An \$18 three-day pass will allow you to hop on and off the San Francisco cable cars as many times as you want. That would be cheaper. We'll buy the passes when we come back, at a time after our Japan trip this autumn. The next morning, we drove across the Golden State Bridge to the "Lone Sailor" bronze statue that gazes forever on the waters of San Francisco Bay, where so many sailors, over the decades, have passed beneath the famed bridge. Long ago and far away, when I was young and slim and cute, I wore a peacoat like that, until I was commissioned as a more spiffy shavetail ensign. We were headed for the Matanzas Creek Winery in the Bennett Valley near Santa Rosa. Below is the winery with its signature lavender fields in full bloom. The large winery building itself is nestled in the landscaped background. Bill and Sandra McIver, good friends of ours, spent more



than a quarter of a century developing the place. For me, there was more than just curiosity involved in the visit. I am Bill's editor. He has finished one long book on his boyhood and early manhood, and now he will start another on his winemaking, an enterprise that put him and Sandra into a cliff-top mansion on the Mendocino coast. I wanted to see the winery so I could better visualize what he will be writing about. Since Bill had made advance arrangements, we were cordially welcomed and shown around. A deck off the wine tasting room, shaded by magnificent California live oaks, provided a nice setting for a photo of Yoshi and me. For each of us, it was the first visit to a winery. Yoshi adores wine but I prefer the harder stuff, mostly leaving wine to those who love it. At the winery, I found myself interested in almost everything – the grape-crushing machinery, the huge tanks, the lab that dealt with the blending and chemical aspects of winemaking, the oak casks for aging, the bottling, etc. I even saw a topographical map that showed why the Bennett Valley is a few degrees cooler than other parts of Sonoma County and thus produces superior wine grapes. In short, there is a gap in the coastal mountains through which cooling marine air flows. After just a



single visit to a winery, I am not ready to become a wine writer, but I gained some insights that I didn't have before. People at Matanzas Creek Winery revere Sandra McIver. She was the real founder and innovator here, not Bill, who mostly devoted himself to production and finances. In the early 1970s, years before she even met Bill, she purchased a rundown Bennett Valley dairy farm and converted it to a vineyard. The first winery was the old barn shown at right, which served its new cow-less purpose until the imposing structure was built up the hill in the 1980s, about a decade after Sandra married Bill in a mature olive grove next to the vineyard's house. Also at right, housekeeper Joanne Mattos poses at the home's main entrance. It was Joanne who first told me that Sandra fell in love with Bill, sight unseen, when she heard his voice on the telephone. Later that day, in Mendocino where the McIvers now live, I verified this with Sandra. Look, I said, love at first sight is common enough, but love at first phone conversation? Come on! "No, it was the voice," she said. We were having dinner at a Mendocino restaurant. At one point, Bill mentioned his upcoming wine book, saying he would approach it as I had suggested months ago. "What did you tell him?" Sandra asked, turning to me. "I told him it was a love story," I replied. She reached over and patted my hand.



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