

SFO

WINE COUNTRY, RENEWED

A year after the fires, memories of blazing hillsides are fading, and Sonoma County is as beautiful as ever.

BY DANA REBMANN



A vineyard in Sonoma County.

I WAS STANDING in the middle of Ecuador's Chocó-Andean Cloud Forest, learning the difference between a red-eyed vireo and a long-wattled umbrellabird, when my phone unexpectedly buzzed. It was a text from my neighbor that read, "Are you evacuating? I'm freaking out."

It was October 9, 2017. The world, it seemed, was watching as my backyard, Northern California wine country, burned out of control. I couldn't get home soon enough, though I feared I wasn't ready for what would be waiting for me. I'd lost count of the number of friends whose homes—and everything in them—had been destroyed

by the firestorm long before my flight touched down.

The enormity of the devastation was difficult to grasp. Santa Rosa, Sonoma County's largest city, was hit hard: two neighborhoods devastated, thousands of homes burned. I was one of the lucky ones. I had a house to return to. Why my family escaped the devastation is a question I've asked myself more than once.

But amazing things can happen in the face of adversity, and the power of community prevailed. People forged friendships with neighbors they'd never met. Facebook groups formed, offering strangers everything from meals and clothing to spare bedrooms. Still under construction, The Astro Motel got permission to swing open its doors early, housing evacuees at no cost. Local celebrity chef Tyler Florence headed up The Grateful Table, a pre-Thanksgiving meal that straddled the Napa-Sonoma County line and raised nearly \$150,000. At Safari West, a 400-acre African tent camp and private wildlife preserve, owner Peter Lang refused to leave his animals. Initially armed mostly with garden hoses, he lost his home—but every animal was saved.

It was hard to see images of charred debris and torched trees and not think that all of wine country had gone up in flames. The majority of the devastation, however, took place in residential areas. The wineries that make wine country the sought-after tourist destination it is (and sustain so many livelihoods) emerged mostly unscathed, with vineyards acting as natural firebreaks.

Of Sonoma County's more than 425 wineries, only one, Paradise Ridge, burned down completely. Though buildings were lost, the estate vineyards and sculpture garden, including a 20-foot-tall *LOVE* sculpture, survived. When the garden reopened this summer for weekend visits, it gave many a reason to smile. For now, Paradise Ridge is pouring wine in a small satellite tasting room spared by flames in nearby Kenwood. Neighboring Napa Valley also lost just one winery, Signorello Estate. As plans to rebuild take shape, an interim tasting space—with views of the 39-year-old chardonnay

vines—is allowing guests to sip and swirl wine once again. A sense of normalcy is returning.

Lined with trees and vines, the drive along Highway 12 toward the city of Sonoma always has been one of my favorite stretches in wine country. If you know where to look, scorched patches of earth, along with faded, hand-painted signs thanking first responders, still can be found, but these days it's the fall colors of the vines that garner your full attention. It's beautiful, maybe almost shockingly so to some. The fire left scars, but every day Mother Nature makes them harder to find.

And since more than 90 percent of Sonoma County wasn't affected by the

wildfires, there's plenty for visitors to experience. Harbor seals continue to lounge about on Goat Rock State Beach. At Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve, you can still hike among ancient coast redwoods; the Colonel Armstrong Tree—the most senior in the grove—is estimated to be more than 1,400 years old. Flames didn't reach here, or anywhere in the famed Russian River Valley, for that matter.

So much is missing, yet at the same time so much is present. Recovery will take time, but it's happening—thanks in great part to a resilient community that's looking forward but also taking the time to reflect and raise a toast to the past. ▼

SPOTLIGHT



A Pyrenean desman at the University of Porto in Portugal.

In Danger: Pyrenean Desman

What looks like a mouse, swims like a fish, has webbed feet like a duck and a nose like an elephant's trunk? It's the Pyrenean desman! Rarely seen, this little aquatic creature that feasts on insects is one of the least-known animals on earth. And it's just a step away from extinction. Originally thought to be widespread across the mountains of France and Spain, today Catalonia's Alt Pirineu Natural Park may be its final frontier. For millions of years, the group of animals known as *Desmaninae* flourished, but pollution of streams and rivers could bring this hamster-sized swimmer to the end of its evolutionary line. Scientists and conservation organizations, including National Geographic, are working hand in hand to save it. — **COSTAS CHRIST**

For more information on the endangered species included in National Geographic's Photo Ark project, led by photographer Joel Sartore, visit natgeophotoark.org.

ROCCO CESELINI/SONOMA COUNTY TOURISM

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