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Day Trip: Katy Wilson LaRue Wines

Katy Wilson grew up on a walnut farm, learned how to drive a tractor before a car, and knew at age 18 that she wanted to be a winemaker. A graduate of Cal Poly, Wilson harvested the first vintage for her wine label, LaRue, in 2009 from a small sliver of land on the Sonoma coast. Now, 10 years later, Wilson also serves as winemaker for four other wineries and manages more than 50 vineyards. Here, she shares a typical (extremely long) day during harvest season.

6 a.m. Over the years, I've started waking up without an alarm, but I still set it! Luckily my boyfriend is also an early riser. I always start my day with a French press coffee—can't function without it.

7 a.m. Out the door and headed to my first stop of the day at Anaba Wines. This is where I make wines for Anaba, Claypool, LaRue and Reeve, so there's a lot going on here. I start by smelling all of the fermentation tanks to see how each wine is progressing. Every variety smells a little different. For Pinot Noir, a good fermentation smells fresh with fruit aromas of cherry, strawberry and sometimes darker fruits like blackberry. When a fermentation starts to go in the wrong direction, it gets reduction aromas of rotten eggs, cooked cabbage or burning rubber. I'll make any necessary changes to the day's plan based on how each tank smells. Then I squeeze in a bit of time to do the punch-downs and

pump-overs on my LaRue tanks. I could have the cellar crew do this, but I love having the personal connection with my wines. Next, I'm off to check on some vineyards.

9 a.m. I drive 35 minutes from the winery to Sonoma Mountain where I have two stops to make. At each vineyard, I take whole grape cluster samples from each block—sections of the vineyard that we pick separately. Different blocks can have different varieties, rootstocks, clones, etc. I end up taking samples from nine of them, trying to gather a representative sample of how each block is doing, and usually cutting about 20 to 30 clusters per block. It gets heavy, so I wear a backpack that can hold all the bags as I go.

11:30 a.m. From Sonoma Mountain, I drive 40 minutes to Sebastopol where I have three vineyards to visit. In the car, I spend a tremendous amount of time on the phone (with my Bluetooth, of course). There's a ton of coordination and logistics involved in running five wineries and more than 50 vineyards. I check in with vineyard managers, truck drivers, clients and, at least once a week, my grandma. I gather 12 more samples and I'm on my way to the next stop. Time flies during harvest, and I often forget to grab lunch. Luckily, I've been snacking on berries in the vineyard and almonds that I keep in my car. My family farms walnuts, but my dad is friends with a few almond growers and I have a sweet connection trading wine for raw almonds.

3 p.m. My next stop is Grand Cru Custom Crush where I make wines for Smith Story. Today we're pressing Sauvignon Blanc. The fruit arrived earlier this morning, but this is a custom-crush location where a lot of people make their wines, so we're not first on the line—our fruit has been in the cold room while we wait our turn. Luckily, my timing is great and they're ready to start sorting our fruit into the press. As it's loaded we take out any clusters that have botrytis (a mold). Once the press is full, we start it up and pump the juice into a cold tank. The press cycle is automatic, but I'm constantly tasting and checking the pH as it runs a two-and-a-half-hour cycle. I also go to each of the fermentation tanks for tasting and make a plan for the following day. When the press is done, it's back on the road!

6:30 p.m. I arrive back at Anaba and unload my 21 fruit samples, and the team and I get to work. We smash the grapes and measure the juice for brix (sugar) and pH (acidity). I taste through the samples and make decisions on when to pick or to sample again. I crack open a Modelo—a great palate cleanser from all of that sugar—and I taste through about 50 more samples that the team has collected from the fermentation tanks. I smell all of the tanks again, then make the plan for the following day.

9:30 p.m. After almost four hours of driving and a lot of smelling and tasting, I finally head home, where my boyfriend kindly has dinner made already. I take a shower, eat, and catch up on as many emails as I can before going to bed for a few hours of sleep and doing it all again tomorrow.