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TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK

Eat Drink Cook: A visit to Fortunati, making Mexican street corn

Dan Dawson

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I'm drinking and cooking in this week's Eat Drink Cook.

Drinking (tasting) at Fortunati Winery

In a way, recommending one winery to visit in Napa or Sonoma is like recommending one hot sauce in a New Orleans market. You may rightly ask, "OK, what's your angle?"

Sometimes I have one but in this case, I can't think of any as I write up Fortunati Vineyards & Winery in Napa.

I took my Eat Drink Cook members to Fortunati in April, so there is a relationship that in fact started in the 1990s when co-owner/maker Gary Luchtel poured me his earlier brand, Surh Luchtel. Since then, Gary and his wife Ellen have built a nice operation on Salvador Avenue in north Napa: bonded winery, vineyard, indoor/outdoor tasting house, a guest flat and their own home next door. Lots of spinning plates, yet when you step in, the feeling is cozy and quaint.



Dan Dawson

Visiting Napa, or live there and have friends or family coming in? Fortunati is in my top five wineries to visit and taste.* Walking the walk, I just went to Fortunati with my sister (in from New Hampshire), her friends and my mom. Great success. Here's why.

Moxie, my Aussie Labradoodle, is always welcome. Special privilege for Moxie that she knows the property well enough to roam about, inside and out, usually within view. The Luchtels' German shepherds make their rounds, so as long as Moxie pays them deference, all is well.

Liz Accardo runs the hospitality at Fortunati and hosted our tasting. A Napa native and nine-year member of the Fortunati team, Liz puts on a good show of a tasting that promotes

tangents and chitchat beyond the wine in your glass. I particularly like how she starts the tasting with the compact version of her story — meets the inevitable questions about her head-on, putting her in control of the tasting. Nice move.

I'm a big fan of the Fortunati wines. Gary Luchtel, for all intents and purposes a self-taught winemaker, imprints his style upon all the wines. Rounded corners, more silky, less firm, reds are made to age for 10 years and still are delicious upon release. New oak is carefully used.

Let's talk about variety and price.



Liz Accardo taps into a barrel of Fortunati Port Style Syrah 2022.

Dan Dawson photo

There are up to eight current-release wines available to purchase, and the tasting includes six of them. Rosé of Pinot Noir is a refreshing start, Chardonnay is on the richer side yet vibrant, and the Viognier is my personal favorite with its fresh peach and honeysuckle exuberance (you can see the Viognier vines from the tasting room, by the way). The Pinot Noir from the Santa Rita Hills and Dry Creek Valley Zinfandel are the not-Napa wines. Syrah, “Fortivo” Cab Sauv-based blend and Cabernet Sauvignon are all expressive of the grape and easy to like.

All the wines but one are under \$100. “Signature” Cabernet Sauvignon is \$95. In fact, all the other wines hover around \$50 a bottle except the Rosé, which is less. Join one of their wine clubs to get up to 25% off.



Gary and Ellen Luchtel at Fortunati Vineyards.

Dan Dawson photo

As a result of my visit, there are now *two* Fortunati wine clubs members in my family. Sister and Mom both signed up. Didn’t see that coming!

Tastings are \$50 per person and come with a smart cheese, nut and dried fruit pairing, with the fee waived with a six-bottle purchase or a wine club sign-up. Those are 2010 prices for what you get.

Ask for a taste of the Syrah port-style dessert wine at the end. It's poured from barrel and not for sale for a couple of years, even though they could bottle and sell it anytime.

Tastings by appointment can be made by appointment at **FortunatiVineyards.com**. Fortunati Vineyards is located at 980 Salvador Ave. in Napa.

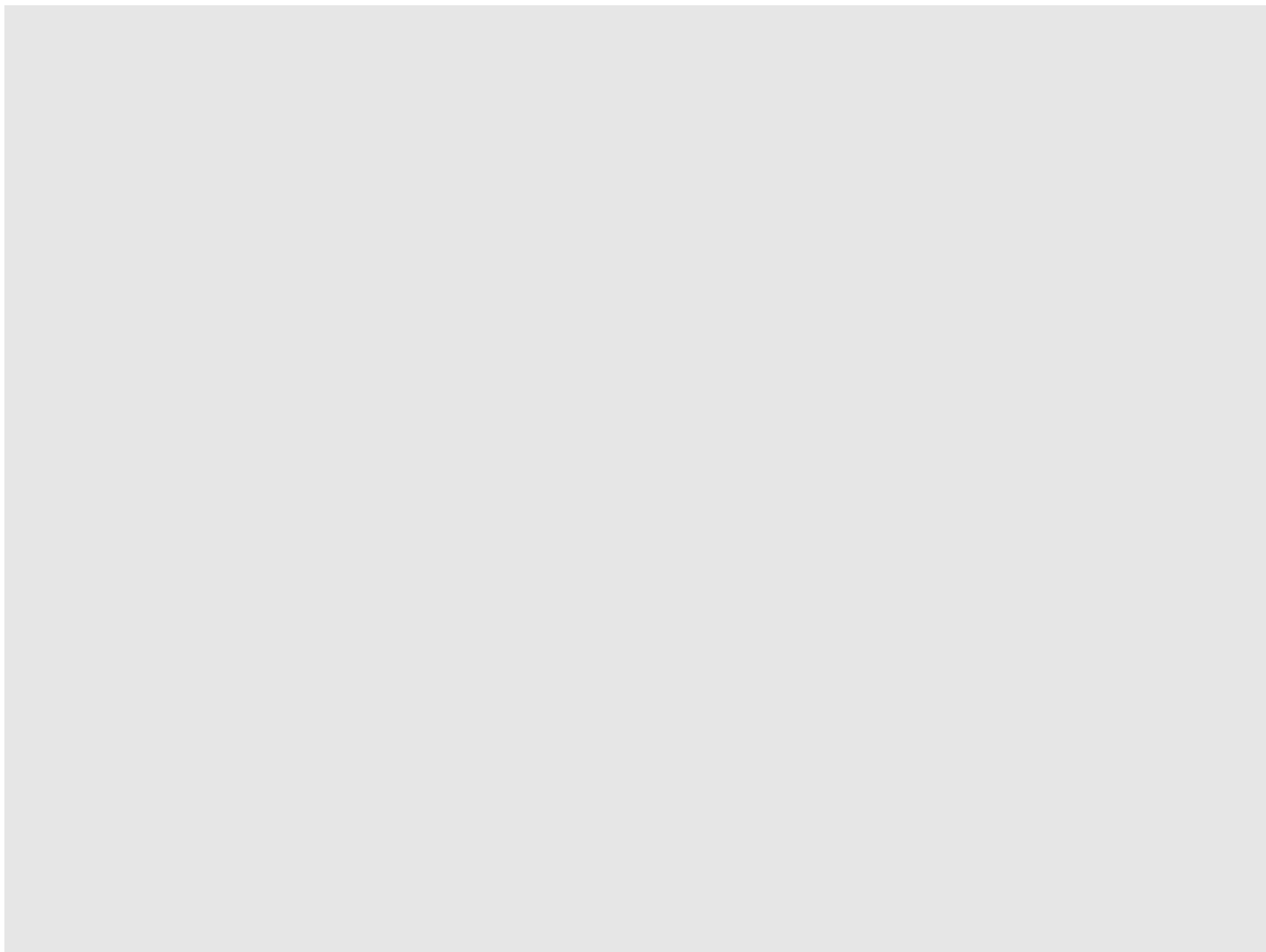
I wrote that I had no angle ... OK, there's one. Framed newspaper and magazine stories about Fortunati adorn the tasting room. Maybe Eat Drink Cook can join the party.

*The rest of my top five wineries to visit: White Rock, Tres Sabores, Biale, Green & Red.

Cooking elote, aka Mexican street corn

How do a recipe, cooking demo and wine pairing sound?

I made Mexican street corn on my last winery road trip. It was better than very good and matched well with Brockmeyer Family Sparkling Wine.



Elote, Mexican street corn, made by columnist Dan Dawson.

Dan Dawson photo

While bubbles are a good match, the best match I've had with Mexican street corn (also called elote, which translates simply to corn in Spanish, and can also refer to corn on the cob) is California or Oregon Chardonnay. Fortunati Chardonnay, with its buttered toast chorus, is dynamite with a heavily grilled elote. My favorite is cool-climate Sonoma Coast Chardonnay with a lemony edge and cut of acidity.

Use my recipe for elote, enjoy with the B. Kosuge Chardonnay Sonoma Coast 2023 (\$36), and tell me what you think. My recipe is an adaptation of a Melissa Clark recipe. Check out my technique on my YouTube channel.

For 6 ears of corn:

SAUCE: 1/4 cup mayonnaise, 1/4 cup sour cream or Greek yogurt, 1 teaspoon cumin, 1 teaspoon ancho chile powder (any type of chile powder will work — I particularly like ancho), 1/2 teaspoon salt, 2 teaspoons lime juice, 1/4 cup sweet onion finely diced. Mix them up and put in the fridge while you do the rest.

CORN: Peel back the husks without removing, and remove the silk*, loosely cover with its husks (my goal is to partially steam and partially grill the corn). Place corn on a hot grill for 15-25 minutes depending on how hot the grill is, turning every 3 minutes. Start testing for doneness when the corn has brown spots. Press on the kernels; when its resistance is like a tennis ball, take it off.

FINISH: Put one cup of finely grated cotija cheese in a pie tin (I buy Cotija Polvo from the store – it's ready to go) Remove husks, snap off the end, brush cob generously with sauce (I use about 2 teaspoons per cob), and roll in the cotija cheese. Once you have all your corn on a platter, sprinkle generously with chopped cilantro. Serve with lime wedges. (The lime wedges are *very* important.)

*If you want to serve half cobs, cut the cobs partially through so you can snap them in half after cooking and before you sauce them.

Dan Dawson writes about food and wine in the Napa Valley. Read more from him on his Substack newsletter "Eat Drink Cook."