

WONDERFULLY WHITE SOIREE'



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What happens when a gathering of Texans, celebrities, and politicians descend upon Sonoma's wine country for Andrea McWilliams 40th birthday destination celebration? Pure fun ensues. Here's a look at how the honoree and her team's "let's make this happen" point of view created a memorable success.

By Lance Avery Morgan

Photography by Briana Marie Photography

You're Invited

Wear "dazzling white" beckoned the invitation created by Ceci of New York, the go-to resource for celebrity invites, including P Diddy's annual White Party in the East Hampton.

"I'm not sure I've seen anything like this before. This is really something," film and TV star Don Johnson confided to me about the white milieu he joined at the zenith of the memorable destination birthday weekend.

It is true that Andrea McWilliams calls herself a cancer survivor, wife, mother, daughter and friend, well ahead of labeling herself a powerful lobbyist. As co-founder of McWilliams Governmental Affairs in Austin with her husband, Dean, both McWilliams like to be around important people and that was never truer than at her 40th birthday extravaganza in Sonoma. Dean's 40th was showered with glamour at the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum a few years back, so this weekend they wanted something entirely different. Something that was a dynamic destination and that would also be a crowd-stunner.

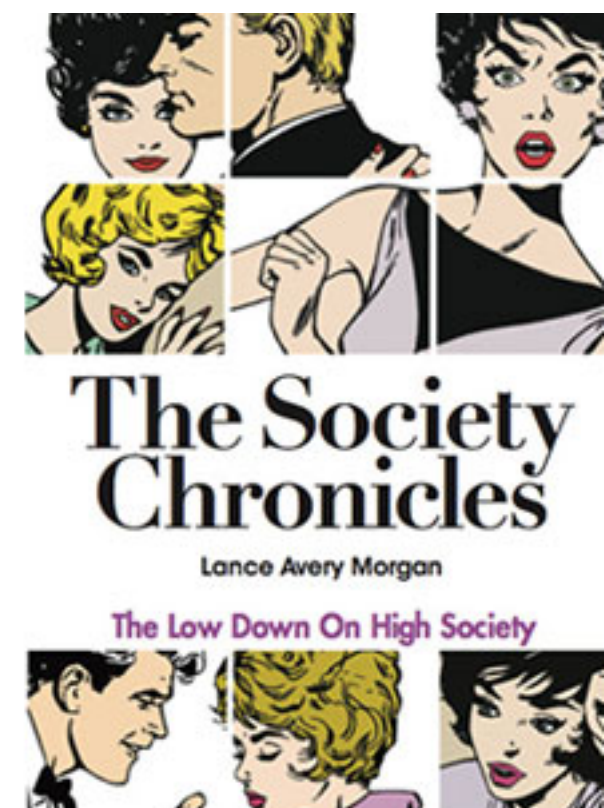
The acrylic save-the-date invites went out months ahead of the gala weekend so that the powerful invitees could plan their busy schedules around it to jet to the wine country of Northern California. The choice of Sonoma was helped in part because Texarkana-bred Dean McWilliams' family owns the Arista winery and vineyard. Set in the rolling hills about Healdsburg, the chicest little town in the area, Arista produces some of the region's most popular wines.

So, venue set, the planning was a year in the making so that every detail was as perfect as possible before 150 guests descended to the wine country. "I wanted to create the most inviting weekend for all our guests. That was a goal I think we achieved," muses hostess Andrea McWilliams. The guests were so important to McWilliams that she had a Little Black Book of the bios that guests sent in so that everyone was aware of whom they might see. Now that's being detail oriented.

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Finding an astute event producer is always Job One when creating an event, especially out of state for a special occasion of this size and stature. Enter Sarah Ghazzagh, founder of A Dream Wedding events in the Sonoma Valley area. Her reputation as the premiere event go-to person was the primary reason for the choice by McWilliams. After months of meetings, conference calls and Skype chats, the theme of all white was hatched. From there the real work began.

“For this festive weekend of celebration Andrea wanted to treat her guests to the incredible experiences and bounty of this great region,” says Ghaazzagh. “Our main goal was to harmonize with the natural surroundings using mirrored and clear modern furniture that not only upped the edgy contemporary vibe, but also reflected the natural elements.” Andrea agrees with her expertise and says, “This event simply would not have happened without Sarah’s expertise and the love and support of my immediate and extended family.”

The Grape Escape

Anyone who produces events (or heck, anyone who attends them often) realizes that keeping the guests occupied and enthralled is the secret to success. But for an entire weekend? We arrived a day early and enjoyed private tastings at the Michel-Schlumberger and Paul Hobson vineyards, courtesy of fellow guests Joe Ross and Anna Anami, who had VIP recommendations firmly in place before departing our Capital City.

As the plethora of other guest arrived Friday afternoon by both private and commercial jets, we were all treated to luxurious accommodations, courtesy of the McWilliams, at several of the town’s finest hotels. Then, the perfect antidote to a cross country flight was strolling a few blocks to the welcome reception at the Spoon Bar, a local favorite, where McWilliams greeted guests in a Chanel dress that set the tone for the weekend: clearly defined elegance. Passed canapés were paired with cocktails that would perplex most chemists from master mixologist Daniel “Cappy” Sorrentino, including the crowd-pleasing French 75 beverage made of St. Germaine, vodka and champagne. Guests then separated for individual dinner plans in the town square of Healdsburg and if Italian is your forte, you are in luck because it seems to be the most common fare in the Sonoma area.

Since money rarely sleeps, Saturday morning at 10:30 the weekend’s guests met for the chauffeured transportation was emblazoned with McWilliams’ custom-designed party logo, which was everywhere including the welcome gift bags, took us to Mauritson Wines at the Westphall Ridge Vineyards attired appropriately in “Vineyard Chic” for the adventure. The group received an insider’s very VIP experience with the acclaimed Mauritson Winery family, whose vineyards have graced the hills of the Dry Creek Valley since 1868. Many guests pursued the option of taking a hands-on blending seminar with Clay Mauritson, who is a 6th-generation farmer/winemaker in the barrel room of Mauritson Wines. We were able to become mad scientists by creating a “perfect blend” using the various types of the vineyards red wines including Merlot, Cabernet and several others.

Austin-based film producer Jonathan Osborne and his wife, Brigette won the heated contest that was complete with beakers, measuring syringes and a host of the vineyard’s wines from which to combine. Former Dallas mayor Laura Miller and her husband, former State Representative Steve Wolens sat across from us and played the activity to win, as did the room of the other guests seated at two Continental-style tables to share and mingle in the process.

Other guests embarked upon a behind-the-scenes walking tour of the vineyard, the estate terroir and production facility which actually bottled wine during the visit. Tromping through the vineyards provided a one-of-a-kind experience for those unfamiliar with the grape growing and cultivating methods for the lucky few that pursued it.

Garnering all this wine country knowledge can create an appetite and with this group, it certainly proved true. Leaving no detail unnoticed, the McWilliams whisked guests up into the hills of the awe-inspiring backdrop of the exclusive Westphall Ridge Vineyards for a catered picnic lunch and entertainment with unmatched views of both forks of nearby Lake Sonoma. Dave Blakey playing contemporary tunes on his classical guitar along with Zach the Caricaturist creating fun renderings of guests added to the playful afternoon in the sun-drenched vineyard. “I think this is just about one of the coolest things I’ve ever done, don’t you?” asked Austin-based investment expert Stephen Jones of his fellow guests, to a resounding ‘yes’ from us all.

Picnic lunches of tasty sandwiches, fruit, Couscous and baked goods served in burlap bags and certainly, served with plenty of the local wine, aided the experience of taking in the awe-inspiring view during a coolish afternoon of visiting with new and old friends. As the day progressed, guests pursued bicycle rides, quick runs, massages and yes, naps before the evening’s Fabulous 40 Fête that would be the crown jewel of the weekend at the nearby winery venue.

Fashionably Hip

As the sleek, black shuttles again transported the guests into another world of experience, the white attire request almost exclusively adhered to by the gathering. Guests only knew to expect the best and there was no disappointment from the moment we disembarked at the McWilliams family’s Arista Winery for a white-hot



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soiree' began with a energizing Akris runway show presented by Neiman Marcus. The models, clad in the stunningly simple clothing donned platforms as sashayed during the cocktail hour.

"The very stylish Andrea McWilliams knows how to throw the most fabulous event. The fashion show, produced by Sandy Marple and executed by Greg Collard, was an amazing start to an outstanding evening," shared guest Nancy Nichols, the Neiman Marcus Austin general manager.

Then, guests were asked to start walking down the hill for dinner and what a site to see. A sea of al fresco white tables and chairs, laden with fine white bone china and tableware and adorned with towering white floral combinations The florals that adorned every dining table top were dramatic displays of Dendrobiums, Phalaenopsis, all in their flashy glory.

"The floral designer, Jessica Swithala owner of Fleurs de France, did an extraordinary job playing up the casual elegance translated in a modern way with mercury glass, clear glass cylinders and incredible unstructured displays," says event designer Ghazzagh. The variety of white flowers that was summoned filled the air with a fragrance that complimented the fruitful wine served before the meal.

Before dinner began, Dean McWilliams gave a loving toast to his wife, while Andrea took the microphone, lest it turn into a "rehearsal dinner" to thank the myriad of guests for attending, as well as her oncologist, Dr. Joyce O'Shaughnessy who was recognized as the main reason for Andrea's resounding victory over cancer while pregnant with her third child, and for attending that evening. Tears dabbed, the dinner progressed with a sweet summer corn soup Amuse Bouche, followed by coursing of pan seared scallops over pea shoots, Heirloom tomatoes with Gioia burrata cheese, arugula and choice of herb-crusted tenderloin with tarragon-pepper butter and Point Reyes Farmstead cheese and a Ling cod steamed in fig Leaves and Pine Nut Agrodolce. Chef Bruce Riezenman, owner of Park Avenue Catering, prepared a four-course menu that rivaled offerings of any Michelin rated restaurant in which I've ever dined.

Our table, which had Don Johnson, State Representative Jim Pitts, Austin media tycoons philanthropist duo Steve and Donna Hicks, among others seated at it, shared the lively meal with even more lively conversation that focused on politics, pop culture and the stunning Sonoma weather that turns quite chilly after sundown. As the female guests reached for their wraps and perhaps a quick lip color refreshing, male guests who wore white blazers were thankful we weren't in shirtsleeves as the breeze hovered at 50 degrees.

"Much of the heavy design lifting, so to speak, was done with incredible displays of light," shares Ghazzagh. "Strands of lights over the dining lawn and at the pavilion cast a soft warm glow over the spaces. Precise up-lighting of the aged oak trees that surrounded the property at Arista were highlighted in dramatic shades of blue light. As the last rays of the autumn filtered light faded out revealing an ominous blue night sky – the blue up-lighting on the oak trees took on a cool ice feel." Cool indeed.

Party Like A Rock Star As is if dinner wasn't enough, the buses delivered the guests at the winery's Pavilion built for special events. The goal? To have the best time possible dancing amongst the vines, surprise performances and artisanal confection collection. Whispers had been circulated about who the surprise musical guest would be and few weren't astounded with "Wild Thing" began beaming from the sound system by none other than early 90's rap sensation Tone Loc. His segue into "Funky Cold Medina" kept guests dancing to the endless memories of the singer's huge hits.

As the rapper wound down, another surprise occurred with Don Johnson took the stage to introduce a very special musical guest, Madison McWilliams, ten-year-old daughter of the host couple. Singer Adele's hit "Rolling In The Deep" was belted out by the singing prodigal to much applause and wonderment that a child so young could land a superstar's notes with such accuracy. Immediately following, Johnson led the audience in a rousing "Happy Birthday" to Andrea, who stood with tears in her eyes, surrounded by the outpouring of well-wishers.

Cover band Notorious took the stage fully as guests danced to songs by today's top hit-makers while the white wonderment of a sweets-infused pavilion offered everything from peanut butter cake pops to Red Velvet cupcakes, meringue dream icicle desserts satiated with, of course, flowing wine from the vineyard. As guests encircled the exterior fireplace, declarations of getting together again in Texas, or perhaps an annual Fabulous 40 Fête reunion plans were discussed for the future to try to recapture at least some of the magic of the weekend.

"It was magical. There was a familiar warmth as the guests meandered through each of the event spaces/venues," comments Sarah Ghazzagh whose event planning skills are unmatched in the wine country. "Many of these guests knew each other, others were meeting for the first time, yet there was such a constant thread of familiarity and warmth. Perhaps I can attribute it to Texans, but more probably it is the circle of dynamic and warm people that Andrea McWilliams surrounds herself with that made it incredible."

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By Sarah Ghazzagh, A Dream Wedding

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