

The Smart Traveler's Guide to Sonoma Wine Country

by Lettie Teague

The first in a three-part series on Sonoma, California

After visiting wineries over the county's million-plus acres, our wine columnist concludes that there are really three Sonomas. Here are the don't-miss destinations in each of them.

"I'LL BE IN NAPA for a few days and thought I'd stop by Sonoma. Can you recommend a few wineries to visit?" I've been asked some version of that question quite a few times, as have many Sonoma winemakers I know. Never mind that the Napa locales on these would-be travelers' itineraries may be hours distant from wineries in sprawling Sonoma.

While Sonoma may have wide name recognition, the county's topography remains surprisingly obscure. Bordered by the Pacific Ocean to the west, Napa to the east, and Mendocino and Marin counties to the north and south, respectively, Sonoma produces more wine than Napa, and its million or so acres equal more than double Napa's acreage.

In short, Sonoma is no side trip. I counsel friends planning a visit to conceptualize the county in three parts: southern, central and northern. Allotting a day or so for each is the best way to see Napa's neighbor next door.

Southern Sonoma

The southern end of Sonoma encompasses AVAs (American Viticultural Areas) such as Carneros, Sonoma Valley and Sonoma Mountain, as well as charming hamlets such as Glen Ellen, Kenwood and the town of Sonoma. The landscape is a mix of vineyards, lush forests and rolling hills, dotted with seemingly as many dairies and cows as there are wineries and grapes.

Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are important grapes here, but Merlot and Cabernet can be found as well, along with less-prominent varieties such as Syrah. In this part of Sonoma you can catch one of the frequent rock concerts at the historic Gundlach Bundschu Winery; visit the hipster Scribe Winery; and venture high up in the hills outside the town of Sonoma to the famed Chardonnay producer Hanzell Vineyards.

There are plenty of in-town tasting rooms, too. One of my favorites is the Glen Ellen location of Talisman Wine, across from the Glen Ellen Star restaurant. The latter has simply prepared, delicious fare but a too-brief wine list—best to BYOB. The restaurant at Glen Ellen Inn has a much longer list that includes sought-after Pinots at ridiculously cheap prices. In nearby



PHOTO: ALANNAHALE

GRAPE ESCAPE This vineyard view, near Healdsburg, Calif., awaits visitors to northern Sonoma County.

Kenwood, Salt & Stone restaurant has a fine list featuring Sonoma wines.

Central Sonoma

Pinot Noir and Chardonnay reign supreme in this part of Sonoma, home to one of the county's best known regions, Russian River Valley, and also its most remote, the proposed West Sonoma Coast AVA or, as winemakers call it, "the true Sonoma Coast." The name West Sonoma Coast distinguishes the western edge of Sonoma from the Sonoma Coast appellation, which vintners decry as too large.

The growing conditions in the West Sonoma Coast are unlike those in the rest of the Sonoma Coast or, for that matter, the Russian River. The landscape is rugged, the elevations high, the temperatures cool. The roads feature amazing coastal views—as well as precipitous drops. "There are a few routes that have messed with me," winemaker John Holdrege confessed.

Notable vineyards in the putative West Sonoma Coast AVA and Fort Ross Seaview (another small appellation in the area) include Peay Vineyards, Flowers Vineyards & Winery, Littorai Wines and Hirsch Vineyards. Hirsch recently opened a tasting room in Healdsburg, perhaps to placate nervous drivers.

Russian River Valley, the heart of Sonoma, is

home to some of its best known wineries. Merry Edwards Winery, Williams Selyem, Hartford Family Winery, J. Rochioli Vineyard & Winery and Martinelli Winery are all here. The wines tend to be more generously textured than those from West Sonoma Coast.

Central Sonoma towns of note include Forestville, best known for the upscale Farmhouse Inn and restaurant. In Graton, the unflashy Underwood Bar and Bistro is a favorite among winemakers—several of whom told me that having their wine on the (short) Underwood list is a particular source of pride. In trendy Sebastopol, The Barlow, an open-air market complex, features vintners and chefs; Pax Mahl Wines is a top destination for Syrah.

Northern Sonoma

Sandwiched between the warm Dry Creek and Alexander valleys at the north-central end of the county, Healdsburg offers some of Sonoma's most ambitious restaurants, such as Single-Thread Farms. Healdsburg also offers good, simpler options, such as the Charlie Palmer Burger served at the bar at the chef's Dry Creek Kitchen.

In-town tasting rooms on or near Healdsburg's main square tend to feature wines from big producers such as Jackson Family Wines. Those seeking a small-producer experience without leaving town can visit Arnot-Roberts and Holdrege Wines.

I'd also urge visitors to venture to wineries outside Healdsburg. Dry Creek Valley is quite close to town, and the wineries are mostly family-owned. At one of my favorites there, Nalle Winery, founder Doug Nalle, his son, Andrew, and daughter-in-law, April, can often be found behind the tasting room bar.

While Zinfandel is the key grape of Dry Creek, in Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon is the star. The wines compare favorably to Napa Cabernets, with considerably lower prices. The region is hilly, even mountainous. Larger, well-known wineries include Lancaster Estate, Jordan Vineyard & Winery and Stonestreet Estate Vineyards, as well as the new state-of-the-art Silver Oak winery, which boasts some pretty great Alexander Valley views.