

AN INSIDER'S
TAKE
ON

Sonoma County

BY
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BOONE

Sunset over a Sonoma
County vineyard near
Cloverdale, California

Right: Many area
wineries offer dining
and other experi-
ences, such as this
dinner overlooking the
landscape at Jordan
Vineyard and Winery.

Photo courtesy
of Jordan Vineyard
and Winery

DISCERNING TRAVELERS, COUPLES, AND VINO ENTHUSIASTS SEEKING TO VISIT AMERICA'S MOST EXCITING FOOD AND WINE DESTINATION RIGHT NOW NEED LOOK NO FURTHER THAN SONOMA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA. NAPA VALLEY'S LESSER-KNOWN RIVAL HAS EVERYTHING TO OFFER TRAVELERS IN SEARCH OF FOOD, WINES, AND BEAUTIFUL SCENERY, ALL WITHIN A LAYERING OF UNDERSTATED LUXURY.

From the scalable mountaintops to the wild blue Pacific Ocean, the gorgeous surroundings keep people coming back to Sonoma—many even decide to make it home. They settle here to grow not only grapes, but also tomatoes, olives, mushrooms, fresh oysters, goats (for cheese), and much more. The climate is decisively Mediterranean and mild—sunny, clear days with temperatures in the seventies the norm much of the year. A handful of microclimates rule the day, though, as any good grape grower, winemaker, or chef will tell you. Some areas might drip in fog all summer long, while others absorb high heat. The diversity of terrain and terroir informs everything else.

At fifteen hundred square miles in area, the county is easy to maneuver and has fifty miles of coastline to enjoy. Sonoma and Healdsburg are good hubs, with central plazas filled with shops, restaurants, bars, and tasting rooms. Healdsburg is also an excellent place to see and enjoy the 110-mile Russian River, which meanders its way west to the ocean at Jenner.



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ppropriately, wine is everywhere, a testament to Sonoma's ability to do it all, from cool, coastal chardonnays and pinot noirs to historic old-vine zinfandels and structured, elegant cabernet sauvignons. Where there's good wine, good food follows (or is it the other way around?), and any visit should center mightily on this happy marriage.

Below and opposite: The guest house at Blue Rock Vineyard, run by owner and proprietor Kenny Khan (center), is the perfect home base for your Sonoma County tour. Stays at this exclusive property are available through Inspirato luxury vacation homes. Search for "Vintner's Cottage" at Inspirato.com to book.

Photos by Michael Housewright

A fine base for exploring the area, Blue Rock Vineyard's guesthouse in Alexander Valley is ten minutes north of the town of Healdsburg. Tucked away in an oasis-like nook, Blue Rock grows Bordeaux varieties like cabernet sauvignon on forty-six acres of rolling hillsides adorned with centuries-old olive trees.

Blue Rock's vines are farmed sustainably—a common theme in Sonoma County—and visited by wild turkeys, boars, and other wildlife. The guest accommodations are luxuriously cozy and old-world chic,

with a central indoor kitchen and outdoor brick oven the dual focus. Lucky guests will be cooked a meal by the proprietor himself, Kenny Khan, who grew up on a farm in Tennessee and is a gourmet chef by avocation.

From Blue Rock, head into the tiny town of Geyserville, where some of the best Neapolitan-style pizza and pasta in Northern California awaits at Diavola, a popular meeting spot housed within a historic landmark building. Salumi and sausage are cured and made in-house as well.

Nearly next door is Geyserville Gun Club Bar and Lounge, a neighborhood favorite for drinks and oysters that maintains an old-school jukebox and periodically hosts live bands. Another must for food is Catelli's, which dates back to the 1930s and is currently run by third-generation siblings. Handmade ravioli and seasonal carbonara are the main draws, while Nonnie's minestrone stays true to the founder's recipe.





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good spot for provisions is Jimtown Store, a landmark country store, deli counter, and unique gift shack that has long given life to the area. Boxed lunches may be ordered ahead for picnics and other outings or enjoyed on-site. Look for the red 1955 Ford truck out front.

Jimtown Store is a good before-or-after stop on the way to the soon-to-open Silver Oak Winery, a showcase for its Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. Surrounded by 113 acres of vines, the tasting room is modeled after Big Sur's beautiful Post Ranch Inn and will provide an immersive bird's-eye view of the property and an insider's look at the winemaking process.

Find a more intimate experience at tiny Garden Creek, a husband-and-wife operation on the eastern benchlands of Alexander Valley along Geysers Road. First planted in the 1960s with red bordeaux varieties, it also has scheurebe and a handful of Rhône-style whites, such as grenache blanc. The couple's flagship proprietary blend is called Tesserae. Given plenty of time in the bottle, it illustrates the commitment to making old-world, slowed-down wines.

On the other end of the Alexander Valley appellation, closer to Healdsburg, lies Jordan Winery, where a cornucopia of culinary and vinous experiences awaits. Jordan was founded in the early 1970s by Tom and Sally Jordan and is now run by their son,



John. Winemaker Rob Davis has been making the elegant, food-centered wines—a cabernet sauvignon and a chardonnay—since nearly the beginning. Experiences by appointment run the gamut from intimately guided library tastings to far-reaching three-hour tours across the property, including a hands-on exploration of the winery's vast gardens.

As you head into Healdsburg, the food options explode. Chalkboard is a don't-miss for happy hour. There you'll find cocktails centered around many of the fresh ingredients grown at the restaurant's sister property, Chalk Hill Winery Estate. Many of those ingredients make it to Chalkboard's array of well-considered small menu items that drip in culinary creativity.

EXPERIENCES BY APPOINTMENT RUN THE GAMUT FROM INTIMATELY GUIDED LIBRARY TASTINGS TO FAR-REACHING THREE-HOUR TOURS ACROSS THE PROPERTY, INCLUDING A HANDS-ON EXPLORATION OF THE WINERY'S VAST GARDENS.

Down the street is the Brass Rabbit, an intimate space with a supper-club vibe that's open for lunch and dinner; it has a menu of hearty fare and more great cocktails. Drinks-first destinations include Duke's, a classic watering hole that shouldn't be missed.

A truly in-the-know dinner spot is Valette, run by Healdsburg local Dustin Valette with the help of his brother. Don't be surprised if every other table (and every seat at the bar) is taken by hungry winemakers and their friends.

Great morning fare abounds at Downtown Bakery & Creamery, which first opened in Healdsburg in 1987, well before the town had become such a hot spot for tourists. The sticky buns are the stuff of local legend.

The place for savory cured meats is Journeyman Meat Co., the second act of Italian American wine scion

Pete Seghesio. Located on the ground floor of the same building as the mighty Single Thread (which we'll get to), Journeyman is a butcher shop and salumeria with a tasting bar. The meat comes from family-run farms, and the animals live outside in the fresh air.

Meanwhile, world-renowned Single Thread is a restaurant and inn built around its culinary farms, the vision of chef Kyle Connaughton and his farmer wife, Katina. The inn contains five suites, and the Japanese-inspired restaurant has already garnered two Michelin stars. Bookings must occur ahead of time via a ticketing system, the better to enjoy the eleven-course tasting menu.

DaVero Farms' motto is "Grow what belongs here. Be patient." It has sangiovese and sagrantino grapes on its Biodynamic property along Westside Road and groves of olive trees imported from Tuscany. Walk-in tastings are allowed, but make the time for a sense of place terroir tasting or farm tour, where you can take a more comprehensive dive into growing things.



Left: The Jordan Winery Chateau's dining options wouldn't be complete without the perfect wine pairings!

Opposite right: The Winery Chateau

Photos courtesy of Jordan Vineyard and Winery

Opposite left: Park yourself at the bar at Duke's Spirited Cocktails for a departure from wine tastings—although they *do* have a great selection of wines.

Photo by Nat & Cody



Rochioli Vineyards and Winery is another must; this historic family property along the Russian River grows and produces chardonnay, pinot noir, and old-vine sauvignon blanc and is open daily. Keep riding along for a visit to Gary Farrell Winery; its hillside tasting room reveals stunning views of the sprawling valley below. Guided tastings may be booked for the terrace, the salon, or a series of private rooms.

Ditch the bike and come back later for a spa treatment and dinner at the luxurious Farmhouse Inn tucked along River Road. The wine-centric restaurant is among the most lauded in Sonoma County, and the winemaker dinners are standouts.

More casual (but just as delicious) is Backyard, located in the nearby tiny town of Forestville. It offers lunch and dinner, as well as weekend brunch. The dishes focus on seasonal, sustainable ingredients that are plucked, caught, and raised locally. Fresh pies are best procured farther down the road along Highway 116 between Forestville and Graton at Kozlowski Farms. A third-generation family business, it all started with Gravenstein apples, the local variety that so defined the area before pinot noir and chardonnay.

When in the area, it's imperative to make time for a stop at Iron Horse Vineyards, another long-standing family business devoted to producing world-class sparkling wines from estate-grown grapes. Reservations are required, but visits are relaxed, usually conducted from the family's casual redwood barn overlooking the cool-climate vineyards.



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ore in-depth fun awaits at Relish Culinary Adventures, where classes like the Snout-to-Tail Pork Butchering Workshop are not unusual. If it's wood-fired cooking you're looking to master, indulge in one of Mugnaini's three-day culinary getaways for a chance to make a

bevy of delicious dishes in an open-hearth pizza oven. The experience is hosted and taught by Andrea Mugnaini herself at her Alexander Valley farmhouse. If time doesn't allow for that, do a three-hour demo class at the showroom/production facility in town.

Those interested in bike rentals for forays into the Alexander, Dry Creek, or Russian River Valleys should look into Spoke Folk Cyclery in Healdsburg, which rents a range of bicycles, including tandems and child trailers by the hour, day, or week.

The bikes will come in handy for exploring pretty Westside Road along the Russian River. Start the day in Healdsburg and plan for a stop at Arista Winery, which offers sit-down, guided Taste of Terroir experiences by appointment. Guests are treated to tastings of unique wines and a plate featuring seasonal produce from the on-site gardens.



Photo by Eric Wolfinger

Above: Since 2016, Single Thread Farm has brought exquisite wines, fine dining, and exceptional accommodations to its guests.

Photo courtesy of Single Thread

Opposite: Katina and Kyle Connaughton, head farmer and chef, respectively, at Single Thread with farm dog Murray

Photo by Roman Cho



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Keep heading south, and the highway will eventually lead to the charming town of Sebastopol. There, within a shopping and dining complex known as the Barlow, lies Spirit Works Distillery, a husband-and-wife grain-to-glass distillery that makes gin (including a sloe gin and a barrel-aged gin), vodka, and whiskey. The tasting room is the place to sample, and tours of how it's all done are conducted Friday through Sunday at 5:00 p.m. and include a tasting.

Before or after, consider getting ice cream at Screamin' Mimi's, which makes everything in-house. Flavors change daily with seasonality in mind, but Mimi's Mud, made with espresso ice cream cookies, chocolate, and homemade fudge, is the perennial bestseller. Greater Sebastopol is also a good base from which to rent canoes for jaunts along the Russian River. From its headquarters under a stand of redwood trees, Burke's Canoe Trips operates typically between May and October, offering both canoes and kayaks for a day out on the river.

THERE, WITHIN A SHOPPING AND DINING COMPLEX KNOWN AS THE BARLOW, LIES SPIRIT WORKS DISTILLERY, A HUSBAND-AND-WIFE GRAIN-TO-GLASS DISTILLERY THAT MAKES GIN (INCLUDING A SLOE GIN AND A BARREL-AGED GIN), VODKA, AND WHISKEY.

Off the boat, a short car ride to Petaluma leads to lots of cheese makers and places to visit. Find a full list at Cheesetrail.org. Achadinha Cheese Company makes goat cheese and offers a ninety-minute tour of its ranch, cheese-making classes, and tastings. Reservations are a must.

No trip to Sonoma County would be complete without at least one foray to the coast. Take Highway 1 west of Petaluma and drive north to Jenner, where the Russian River meets the mighty Pacific Ocean.



The appropriately named River's End, whose website is found at ILoveSunsets.com, is the perfect place to while away the late afternoon at the Redwood Bar with fresh oysters and a martini in hand. ■

BOOK YOUR STAY AT BLUEROCKVINEYARD.COM AND START YOUR INSIDER'S TOUR OF SONOMA COUNTY SOON!

Virginia Boone, a longtime resident of Sonoma County, reviews and writes about the wines of Napa and Sonoma for Wine Enthusiast Media. She began her writing career with Lonely Planet travel guides, writing guides to the American South, South America, Northern California, and the Loire Valley, which led in a roundabout and perfectly sensible way to California-focused wine coverage for the Press Democrat, Savor magazine, Sonoma magazine, and others. She is a regular panelist and speaker on wine topics in California and beyond.

Left: Executive chef Todd Knoll of Jordan Winery picks fresh produce from the garden on the property.

Photo courtesy of Jordan Vineyard and Winery

Opposite: The stylish kitchen at Single Thread Farm

Photo courtesy of Single Thread