

SONOMA WINE COUNTRY: *More Than Wine*

This Northern California region may be renowned for its wine, but it has more to offer travelers looking for a one-of-a-kind experience

BY VIRGINIE BOONE

With more than 400 wineries and a history of winemaking that goes back to the early 1800s, Sonoma County is a renowned location for wine lovers. In contrast to its Napa Valley neighbor to the east, Sonoma County is a place that feels intimate, allowing visitors the unique opportunity to meet the people who have lived, worked, and played here for generations. In fact, more than 85% of the wineries and vineyards here are family owned and operated.

Add in 55 miles of rugged coastline, nearly 60,000 acres of parks, and plenty of special food experiences, it doesn't take long to realize that this Northern California region has much more to offer.

About an hour's drive from San Francisco, Sonoma County boasts its own airport in Santa Rosa, providing easy access for private and commercial flights. The centrally located Charles M. Schulz Sonoma County Airport (STS), named for the creator of the beloved Snoopy comics who lived in the area for many years, is surrounded by vineyards and farms.



Make Blue Rock Vineyard Your Wine Country Basecamp

A short drive from the airport, Blue Rock Vineyard and Winery is a 100-acre estate in the Alexander Valley just north of Santa Rosa. Host and owner Kenny Kahn has owned the property since 1987, maintaining its original olive trees (some are more than 100 years old!) and sustainably farming 46 acres of grapevines. Bordeaux varieties rule here, from cabernet sauvignon to malbec, as well as a small planting of syrah.

The stone-walled Vintner's Cottage dates back to the 1880s and has been restored to a luxurious grandeur with period antiques, a full gourmet kitchen, heated pool, outdoor fireplace, and more set in 8 acres of private gardens. The winery is known for The Vintners' Table Winemaker Lunches, a four-course meal made with local ingredients, each created to complement one of Blue Rock's wines.

Blue Rock also happens to be the perfect

basecamp for a multi-day adventure. Whether you're planning a Sonoma County trip for wine tasting or would like to enjoy other activities as well, here are a few favorite local spots to discover this uncrowded authenticity for yourself.

Choose Your Own Adventure

See Sonoma County from above with a private helicopter tour with outfitter Helico Sonoma. Tours soar over several viticultural areas and include vistas of the Alexander Valley and the Russian River as it meets the Pacific Ocean (depending on the tour). For a longer trip, enjoy a 2-3-hour wine tasting flight that combines a scenic tour with a stop at one of their partner wineries.

Another fun way to see the vineyards is via horseback at The Ranch at Lake Sonoma, where adventurers can meander through 17,000 acres of park overlooking the Dry Creek Valley, Lake Sonoma, and Rockpile. Tours can accommodate everyone from thrill-seekers to first-timers.

Drive just down to the road to the Lake Sonoma Resort Area to rent a boat and spend a day on the water, reserve a day-use area for a family barbecue, or cast a line from the shore for your chance to reel in bass, Sacramento perch, catfish, sunfish, and more.

Head out to the coast to explore the secluded coves and natural arches along the jagged coastline in Sonoma Coast State Park. Wrights Beach is one of the longest stretches of sandy beach in the area and Coleman Beach is a fun place for kids to look for shells and other life in tidal pools.

To the south, Bodega Bay offers a quiet experience protected from the ocean. Rent a kayak or stand-up paddleboard and meander through the bay, lower Russian River, Estero Americano tidal estuary, or Salmon Creek for the opportunity to look for waterfowl, marine birds, shorebirds, and songbirds. Plan your trip for March through June and bring your binoculars to spot grey whales during their northbound migration. The spring is

the most popular time for whale watching, but you can also see whales during their southbound migration in October and November (they just swim farther away from the coast!).

Thirty miles up the Pacific Coast Highway, the 3-mile Bluff Top Trail at Gualala Point Regional Park is a wonderful way to walk through cypress groves and bluff top meadows en route to a secluded beach with sandy coves, tide pools, and interesting sandstone formations.

Closer to Blue Rock in Healdsburg, rent a bicycle (electric, hybrid, or road) from Getaway Adventures on Front Street and ride through the Dry Creek or Russian River Valley. They also offer a Sip 'n Cycle Tour that includes cycling and wine or beer tastings. About 13 miles outside of town at SUTRO Wine Co.'s Warnecke Ranch and Vineyard, founder and winemaker Alice Warnecke Sutro guides 45-minute nature hikes through her incredible site to share the story of her wines from soil to glass, followed by a tasting.

Unique Experiences for Foodies

Cool nights and temperate days make it an ideal region for growing a wide range of products in addition to its famous grapes. For every acre of vineyards, there are 2 acres of diversified agriculture, including pears, apples, figs, dairy, poultry, and more.

DaVero Farms and Winery outside of Healdsburg is a special place where biodynamic farming and natural winemaking are highlighted in not just the Italian-inspired wines, but olive oil, citrus, lavender, and produce. A tour here is a soul-filling exploration of all the senses, with farm animals to boot, the longtime vision of founders Ridgely Evers and Colleen McGlynn.

An array of posh tour and tasting options abound at Jordan Vineyard and Winery, near Healdsburg. A historic place centered around a Bordeaux-inspired chateau, it boasts 1,200 acres of rolling hills and vineyards, most of it left to open space. Grazing cattle, two lakes, olive trees, honey

bees, and culinary gardens are among the residents.

Broaden your tasting horizons at Spirit Works Distillery in The Barlow in Sebastopol. Run by husband-and-wife team Timo and Ashby Marshall, Spirit Works makes outstanding grain-to-glass gin, rye and wheat whiskey, vodka, bourbon, and sloe gin. Tours take place Friday through Sunday twice a day and offer an in-depth look at spirit making and aging, including a room of barrels listening to music (on headphones) while they chill.

Last but not least, for a life-changing cheese experience, drive south to the tiny hamlet of Tomales for Ramini Mozzarella. Owner/farmer Audrey Hitchcock not only makes authentic buffalo mozzarella here, she nurtures a herd of water buffalo who produce the milk. She'll tell you the story of this unlikely dream, slice up some cheese, and introduce you to these gentle creatures, who love to be brushed and are named after female rock stars. ♦

