



RAISING A GLASS TO SONOMA/NAPA

High above the Alexander Valley, as aromatic, wild chamomile flowers squish beneath my hiking boots, I see rows upon rows of vines spread out before me like a giant swath of green corduroy. I'm enjoying the morning sun of a hot spring day as I stride downhill toward a lake just out of view. Over the next few hours, I'll hike a total of 3.5 miles past vineyards and olive orchards in the oak-dotted hillsides of Jordan Winery, in Northern Sonoma County outside of Healdsburg.

After building an appetite on this hike, our group will enjoy a picnic lunch including homemade charcuterie and local cheeses, paired with Jordan's signature wines.

The Jordan Vineyard Hike is a new way to experience the 1,200-acre Jordan estate. Sure, visitors can book reservations for the winery's cellar room or for a tour that leads to a tasting at the Vista Point Pavilion, the property's highest point. The hike, however, is an option for visitors who wish to combine indulgence with a little exercise. It also is a great way to get up close and personal with the vines and grapes themselves. The hikes tend to book up, so it is recommended that visitors check dates and reserve in advance via jordanwinery.com.



Jordan Winery hosts tastings in its French-inspired chateau, as well as guided hikes through its vineyards and olive groves, left.

NEW AND NOTABLE EXPERIENCES IN WINE COUNTRY BY MATT VILLANO

Hiking at Jordan exemplifies some of the changes to Sonoma County and Napa Valley wine country in recent years. While many wineries still have tasting counters at which guests can walk up and sample, a growing number of wineries also are offering options such as cave tours and underground tastings to broaden appeal to visitors.

Businesses such as restaurants and bars are differentiating themselves with atypical products and services, too—efforts designed to appeal to visitors who come for wine but are eager to explore other aspects of local living.

I live in this wine country region and like to keep up with the latest and greatest trends. Here's a closer look at some options worth exploring.

GOING UNDERGROUND

Dug deep into the earth, caves are nature's refrigerators. Historically, winemakers and winery owners throughout Napa and Sonoma counties used these subterranean facilities as ways to store and age products. A handful of wineries carry on this tradition today.

Far Niente Winery, in the Napa Valley town of Oakville, was founded in 1885—decades before Prohibition—and was reopened in 1979. On my recent visit, our group accessed the winery caves via a narrow, wrought-iron staircase in the ornate reception area.

On the eastern slope of the Vaca Mountains, Jarvis Estate is unique because the entire winery exists underground in a cave. Think of a place like Aglarond from “The Lord of the Rings” books: a glittering cave visitors must enter to achieve the ultimate experience. The cave system includes an underground waterfall and a “gallery” of a dozen oak fermentation tanks; all tours also include a seated tasting in an underground room.

The oldest caves in Sonoma County are in the town of Sonoma, at Buena Vista Winery. Most tours here are led by Count Agoston Haraszthy—or, at least, a character actor dressed up like him. Haraszthy (the real one) founded the winery in the 1850s. On tours today, George Webber, who portrays Haraszthy, emphasizes the engineering accomplishment.



“It took laborers three months to carve each cave out of stone,” Webber told me on a recent visit. “When you think about it, that’s pretty incredible.”

Haraszthy also used the caves as quarries to build the stone winery building.

Other notable cave experiences: Schramsberg Vineyards, in Calistoga; and Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars in the town of Napa, where the main cave boasts a Foucault pendulum. In Healdsburg, there are also caves in Bella Wines, as well as an underground cellar at Ferrari-Carano—both winegrowers of the Dry Creek Valley AVA.

The MacPhail Wines tasting lounge at The Barlow in the Sonoma County town of Sebastopol offers a spin on underground wine-tasting, too: In its “Soil Room,” the walls are lined with soil samples from the different vineyards where the grapes

Take a tour through Buena Vista Winery’s caves, led by an actor playing Count Agoston Haraszthy, above, or visit Far Niente Winery’s beautiful caves, top right.

WHERE TO STAY

The Sonoma County/Napa Valley area has experienced a bit of a hotel boom in recent months, with a spate of new properties opening and a host of older spots getting new life.

Among the newcomers, **Las Alcobas** in Napa Valley may be turning the most heads. This 68-room boutique hotel just north of downtown St. Helena opened this year and offers expansive rooms with breathtaking views of nearby vineyards. There’s also a highly regarded spa.

In Sonoma County, out on the coast in Jenner, **Timber Cove** also has drawn rave reviews; more than half of the 46 rooms and suites have unobstructed ocean views, and the on-site restaurant, Coast Kitchen, is famous for its seafood dishes.

Elsewhere around the region, long-time favorites have gotten upgrades. In Santa Rosa, **Vintners Inn** remodeled all 44 of its rooms to give them a subtle yet sophisticated feel, while the **Flamingo Resort** poured big bucks



Vintners Inn.

into redoing the pool area and guest rooms and suites. In Napa, **The Estate Yountville**—which comprises Vintage House and Hotel Villagio & Spa Villagio—recently finished a refresh on all guest spaces, while **Auberge du Soleil** renovated eight new suites, all designed by San Francisco interior designer Suzanne Tucker.

The region is also eagerly anticipating three other openings: the **Archer Hotel** in downtown Napa, the **H3 GuestHouse** in Healdsburg, and the **Four Seasons Resort and Private Residences Napa Valley** in Calistoga. The first of these should be open by mid-2017; the others in 2018 and 2019, respectively. —M.V.