

# LAGUNA BEACH

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# LONG WEEKEND IN *Wine Country*

*A quick trip to Sonoma is the perfect girlfriend getaway.*

*By Katherine Dionian*

**F**amily and work obligations can make it difficult to even grab dinner with friends, much less find time to go on a vacation together. But a long weekend away may be just what you need to reconnect. Sonoma Valley's colorful history, unique shopping and gourmet dining make it an ideal destination for some rest and relaxation with a fellow wine lover.





### HIT THE ROAD

Rather than traveling straight to Sonoma, treat the journey there as part of the vacation. A road trip through California's picturesque landscape will give you time to chat, while a side trip to Santa Barbara or San Francisco is a fun way to break up the drive.

In Santa Barbara, you can stretch your legs with a stroll along the 2,300-foot-long Stearns Wharf. The oldest working wooden wharf in California, it's home to 17 businesses, including a marine museum, exhibit hall, apparel stores and eateries. After an ocean-view seafood lunch at Santa Barbara Shellfish Co., a stop by Mother Stearns Candy Co. will satisfy any sugar craving. Fill a self-serve bag with a variety of candy to suit both of your tastes, and then share the sweets on the walk back to the coast.

The city also provides plenty of opportunities to get a jump on wine tasting. The Urban Wine Trail, just a short walk from the wharf, includes more than 20 tasting rooms and wineries throughout downtown. Modern tasting room AVA Santa Barbara takes you on a full-flavored tour of the county with small-batch wines from each of the region's five American Viticultural Areas (AVAs). As you sip the bright, acidic chardonnay from Santa Maria Valley, for example, you can examine the massive, hand-drawn chalk map of the county that decorates the wall behind the bar, and the soil samples housed in mason jars.

### HOME AWAY FROM HOME

The drive into Sonoma Valley offers unbeatable views. The road winds through rolling green hills covered with seemingly endless rows of grapevines—in fact, Sonoma is home to nearly 60,000 acres of vineyards. Even the grounds of MacArthur Place, a historic hotel near the center of the city, were once part of a 300-acre working ranch filled with vineyards and fruit orchards. Today the property is dotted with restored buildings and newly constructed cottages set amongst lush gardens, for a total of 64 rooms.

The wine reception, complimentary for guests, is a perfect introduction to wine country and a relaxing way to unwind after the drive. Held each day in the library from 5-6 p.m., it includes a variety of whites and reds accompanied by cheese, crackers and fruit. While sipping a glass of vino, peruse the selection of books, games and DVDs available to borrow. MacArthur thoughtfully combines historic charm with modern amenities in its accommodations; in addition to a DVD player, each uniquely designed guest room features an LED television, Keurig coffee maker and wireless Internet.

A trip to the hotel's Garden Spa is a refreshing way to begin the next day. Located at the heart of the property's gardens, the spa incorporates the fruits, flowers and herbs grown just outside the door into its treatments. The scents of the aromatherapy massage are tailored to your preferences



Clockwise from top left: Santa Barbara's Stearns Wharf, built in 1872; the downtown Urban Wine Trail in Santa Barbara, home to 20-plus wineries and tasting rooms; the Carriage House at MacArthur Place in Sonoma



Sculptures at Cornerstone Sonoma, a serene landscape filled with gallery-style gardens and art

and upcoming plans. Have a busy afternoon of shopping ahead? The masseuse may suggest peppermint oil to awaken your senses. With the 50-minute option, you're treated from head to toe, but it's fast enough to leave you feeling reinvigorated with plenty of time to tour the city.

If you're looking for more intimate accommodations, there are plenty of cozy options nearby. Try Hidden Oak Inn, a two-story house built in 1914, or An Inn 2 Remember, which includes six rooms across two vintage homes.

### SHOPPING AND ART

Sonoma Plaza is a short 15-minute walk from the hotel. Spanning 8 acres, it was established in 1835 and is designated as a National Historic Landmark. With more than 40 retail stores, galleries, 20-plus eateries and as many tasting rooms, you could easily dedicate the entire getaway to exploring it. But if you can only devote a day during a short trip, fuel up for shopping with breakfast at one of the local cafes. Baked goods at Basque Boulangerie Café are irresistible—the freshly baked croissant with ham, egg and your choice of cheese is massive (and economical at just over \$6).

The plaza exudes small-town charm and is filled with unique businesses. Sox de Vine focuses on feet, with novelty and fashion socks that run the gamut from bizarre to beautiful. Tiddle E. Winks Vintage 5 & Dime sells nostalgic finds like



Historic Sonoma Plaza offers a collection of retail stores, galleries and tasting rooms over 8 acres of land.

metal lunch boxes, as well as Sonoma souvenirs and playful gifts, like a set of mini mason jar shot glasses. And if you had to leave pups at home, they're sure to forgive your absence if you return with a fresh treat from Three Dog Bakery. Many, like the Harlequin Hearts, could easily be mistaken for gourmet pastries intended for humans.

For an artistic outing, head to Cornerstone Sonoma, the first gallery-style gardens in the country. The ever-changing acres are filled with installations that creatively combine landscape and art, such as Andy Cao and Xavier Perrot's "Bai Yun" (White Cloud)—cumulus clouds crafted from wire mesh, with thousands of clear crystals for the rain drops. After working up an appetite traversing the gardens, grab lunch at on-site restaurant Park 121. Its menu features local ingredients and changes with the season. The tomato-basil soup is delightful on a cool afternoon.

If the garden installations inspired you to add an artistic flair to your space back at home, check out the unique decor at Artefact Design & Salvage. The store feels more like a gallery, with antique furniture, a carefully curated selection of sculptures and paintings from prominent artists in the area, and other unusual pieces. If you're lucky, you may also get a chance to say "hi" to Axel, Artefact Design owner Dave Allen's bulldog and Cornerstone's unofficial mascot. (We dare you to try to take away his beloved bucket.)



Park 121, the on-site restaurant at Cornerstone Sonoma, serves seasonal fare.

## DELECTABLE DINING

Ask around about the best Sonoma Valley dining options, and you're almost certain to hear about LaSalette Restaurant in Sonoma Plaza. The eatery serves "cozinha nova Portuguesa," new Portuguese cuisine, incorporating local, seasonal produce. The menu's smart selection of roughly 20 small plates, which may include tender escargot, smoked sturgeon, crispy pig ears and fried goat cheese, pair brilliantly with wine. A set of five is served with accompaniments like spiced almonds and bread, perfect for ensuring that not a drop of the escargot's garlic-infused sauce is lost. The chef may even send out a few complimentary tastes, such as a bite of olive, cheese and linguica as an appetizer, or a chocolate almond truffle for a dessert small enough to be savored by even the most satiated appetite.

For an unforgettable dinner to conclude the trip, head to the girl & the fig, also located in the plaza. The atmosphere is elegant yet relaxed, with plenty of personality—paper covers the tablecloths, and playful metal-flower centerpieces stand in for the more traditional fresh arrangements. The servers are friendly and knowledgeable: When you're torn between entree options (duck confit, or flounder meuniere?) or waffling about which cocktail to sip (Sonoma mule, or Fig Fashioned?), their expert insight can guide you to the best pick.

It's tough to say no to wine in wine country, but the Fig Fashioned is an excellent choice if you'd like a respite. A fresh take on an Old-Fashioned, it's crafted with Buffalo Trace bourbon



Basque Boulangerie Café in Sonoma Plaza

and house-made bitters and fig liquor. It's an ideal accompaniment to The Works plate, which includes a variety of cheeses—sheep, cow and goat—and a selection of meats cured in-house, with additions such as spiced nuts and fig cake.

The charred Brussels sprouts are a must-try starter. Covered in a blanket of braised bacon, this preparation will even win over diners who have despised the vegetable since childhood. For the main course, the two-leg option of the tender duck confit is a perfect portion when shared. But make sure to save room for dessert: The warm brown butter pear tart, served with cinnamon ice cream and candied kumquats, is exceptional, especially when paired with a dessert wine.

## HISTORY AND WINE

With more than 400 wineries in the area and limited time for the trip, it's difficult to choose which to visit, but history buffs can't miss Buena Vista Winery. A registered California Historical Landmark, it was the first premium winery in a state that now has a lofty reputation for wine-making. It feels as though each step on the path leading to the Old World-inspired establishment takes you further back in time. Informational plaques along the way provide details on notable figures from George Washington to "California wine heroes" like André Tchelistcheff, known as the "dean of American winemaking," and Col. Agoston Haraszthy, the self-proclaimed Count of Buena Vista, who founded the winery in 1857.

The tour of Buena Vista covers its colorful



The first wine caves in California were completed at Buena Vista Winery in 1864.



JASON TIMACCI

The Count, a red blend, is available near Laguna.

history, including the flamboyant life of the Count, who immigrated to the United States from Hungary in 1840. A man of many firsts, he was the first to farm hops in Wisconsin, became the first sheriff of San Diego in 1849 and excavated the first wine caves in California. The Count's death was as unique as his life. As legend has it, he perished after falling into an alligator-infested river in the jungles of Nicaragua in 1869. Today, a life-size alligator—with a top hat gripped in its jaws—hangs from the ceiling of the tasting room's first floor.

Visitors are guided through the winery's Champagne cellars, where tool marks from the excavation in 1864 can still be identified on the limestone walls. Closed for many years following an earthquake, they underwent a massive restoration led by Jean-Charles Boisset after Buena Vista was acquired by Boisset Family Estates four years ago. They're now filled with oak barrels aging some of Buena Vista's Private Reserve and small lot Vinicultural Society wines. Upstairs, the new wine tool museum (scheduled to open March 24) focuses on the winery's history; it's filled with a collection of artfully arranged historic viticulture tools from France.

The visit to Buena Vista wouldn't be complete without a tasting in the Press House, which includes samples of the wines aged in the caves right next door. When you return home, you can relive your visit by celebrating girls' night with Buena Vista wines that are available locally, including The Count, a red blend, and Carneros Pinot Noir, which are available at Total Wine & More in Laguna Hills and other nearby retailers. LBM