

California: Good plonk on the West Coast

By Leila George

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The West Coast of the US is home to some of the country's best plonk, finds Leila George.

If California is the rock star of the American wine industry, the Sonoma and Napa valley regions are the A-list celebrities.

Home to more than 4600 wineries, the West Coast state makes 85 per cent of the wine produced in the US, but it's at the two parallel valleys just north of San Francisco where you'll find the top-quality plonk.

First up, you have to be careful not to get your counties and your valleys confused — Sonoma County is a huge area encompassing Sonoma Valley and multiple other AVAs (American Viticultural Areas), while Napa Valley is just one of the AVAs in Napa County. Both make up part of San Fran's "Wine Country" region, and one AVA, Los Carneros, straddles the two.

In terms of looks, as a newcomer you'd be hard-pressed to tell the difference between each region's picturesque rolling hills, but there are differences in attitude.

Attention-seeking Napa is flashier and more touristy, while Sonoma is more relaxed and less commercial.

The best times to visit are spring and autumn — in particular, the "fall" combines fine weather with the grape harvest and the start of the wine-making season.

The good news is that both are an easy day trip from San Francisco, but if you're short on time, which one do you point the car towards? Here's a quick run-down. (Note that many of the wineries have tasting fees and some are by appointment only.)

SONOMA VALLEY



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