

Taste wine at the cool caves of Sonoma's Buena Vista Winery.

Wine Caves

Notes From the Underground

UNDERNEATH VINEYARD-COVERED HILLSIDES, WINE CAVES PROVIDE PRISTINE CONDITIONS FOR MAKING—AND TASTING—WINE. TODAY, MORE AND MORE VINO LOVERS ARE HEADING UNDERGROUND TO STROLL, SWIRL, AND SIP.

BY DANA REBMANN

COURTESY OF BUENA VISTA WINERY



1. Buena Vista Winery: Explore California's first wine caves. **2. Kunde Family Winery:** Marvel at ancient volcanic lava flows at this underground retreat. **3. Bella Vineyards and Wine Caves:** Take in the caves at this Healdsburg winery, with or without a reservation. **4. Benziger Family Winery:** Go underground to learn about the estate's organic farming.

1. KEITH CHERRILL; 2. TRAVIS BRUNDA; 3. COURTESY OF BELLA VINEYARDS AND WINE CAVES

COURTESY OF BENZIGER FAMILY WINERY

SONOMA COUNTY

Bella Vineyards and Wine Caves, Healdsburg

The caves at this family-owned vineyard are some of the easiest to see in Sonoma County, with walk-in tastings daily. It costs only \$15 to sample the winery's small-lot Zinfandel and Rhône varietals, but the best way to see the inner workings of the caves is to reserve a spot on the Unleash the Beast tour. Tastings typically include seven pours, finishing with a chocolate peanut butter cup paired with a late-harvest Zinfandel.

Drink: The 2014 Lily Hill Zinfandel is made with grapes from vines first planted in 1915. *Unleash the Beast* tours cost \$35 per person and are limited to eight people. 9771 West Dry Creek Rd., Healdsburg, (707) 473-9171, bellawinery.com.

Benziger Family Winery, Glen Ellen

All tours at Benziger visit the caves, but the Estate Wine Cave seated tasting takes part almost entirely underground. During the cave walkabout, discover Benziger family history and its approach to organic farming. You'll be treated to a show-and-tell of photos featuring the estate's cow and sheep pastures, as well as Mason jars filled with soil samples. Seated tastings are held in an alcove that's kept warm, so you may not need that sweater here. As staff pour wine, they highlight where the wine's grapes were grown with maps. The Estate Wine Cave seated tasting typically includes six pours.

Drink: The 2014 Tribute. Made entirely from estate-grown grapes, this Bordeaux blend of predominantly Cabernet Sauvignon was the first Demeter-certified Biodynamic wine from Sonoma County and one of the first from North America. Tours are \$40 per person and are limited to eight people. 1883 London Ranch Rd., Glen Ellen, (707) 935-3000, benziger.com.

Buena Vista Winery, Sonoma

Founded in 1857 by Agoston Haraszthy, Buena Vista Winery dug the first wine caves in the state. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Buena Vista Winery is open for walk-in tastings daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., but you must be on a tour to visit the Champagne Cellars. The Historic Wine Museum tour and tasting includes the cellars, but to get the most out of your journey underground, reserve a spot on the Barrel Tour and Tasting. Empty wine glasses are refilled frequently as you make your way through the recently renovated caves to the Press Room.

Drink: Sheriff of Buena Vista. This blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Petite Sirah, Grenache, Petit Verdot, Syrah, and Merlot is a must-try. (For every bottle sold, a portion of the proceeds is donated to the National Sheriffs' Association Educational Foundation.) Historic tours cost \$25 per person; Barrel tastings cost \$40 per person. Both are typically limited to 15 people. 18000 Old Winery Rd., Sonoma, (800) 926-1266, buenavistawinery.com.

Kunde Family Winery, Kenwood

Passageways in the aging caves at Kunde Family Winery extend half a mile through ancient volcanic lava flows 175 feet below Syrah vineyards. Free guided tours run throughout the day, but the Mountain Top Tasting takes you to spots like the VIP room, where a section of five-million-year-old volcanic rock can be seen. Guests enjoy wines on a scenic mountaintop next to a vineyard with vines planted in 1882, then return to a private area for a chocolate and wine pairing.

Drink: The 2014 Reserve Century Vines Zinfandel. You've seen the vines; now taste the final result. Complimentary cave tours are available daily, without appointment, for a group of 10 or less. The Mountain Top Tasting costs \$50 per person; contact the winery for a group of 10 or more. 9825 Sonoma Hwy., Kenwood, (707) 282-1531, kunde.com.

Schug Carneros Estate, Sonoma

A short drive from the intersection of Highways 116 and 121, the German-style post-and-beam building at Schug Carneros Estate may not fit the typical winery mold, but its hillside caves impress. With a focus on Pinot Noir and Chardonnay varietals, the caves can be explored on private tours. Better yet, the experience is fully customizable; caves tours are available with or without tastings.

Drink: Schug 2014 Carneros Pinot Noir, Estate Grown. It is grown, aged, and bottled on-site. A private tour and tasting is \$55 per person; private tasting only is \$35; private cave tour only is \$20. Schug recommends tours be booked 24 hours in advance. 602 Bonneau Rd., Sonoma, (800) 966-9365, schugwinery.com.



Tip: Book your reservations for cave tours as early as you can—they fill up quickly