





SONOMA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

New discoveries

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California's Sonoma County enjoys the reputation of being less crowded and more relaxed than Napa Valley, its sister over the Mayacamas Mountains to the east. • Part of this reputation stems from geography: Sonoma and Napa each have about 500 wineries, but Sonoma's are scattered across 1,600 square miles, about twice the size of Napa Valley. • There's simply more to explore, and much of the county feels like the road less traveled. • Sonoma wineries range from three hippies in a barn making obscure varietals to estates featuring all the modern conveniences: tours, tastings, pampered gardens, private parties, lavish architecture, merchandise. • But even at its most stylish, Sonoma County feels welcoming, without the brand name and worldwide tourism of Napa Valley, and that makes the county especially ideal for travelers who are new to wine.

Known for: Pinot noir, an expressive medium-bodied wine made from one of the world's most finicky grapes. Sip pinot at an organic winery, then head up the road for a bigger bolder red from one of Sonoma's mountain vineyards. If bubbles are your thing, some excellent sparkling wines emerge from the county's cooler climes. sonoma.com

For the first-timer: Decide which wineries you want to hit, consult a map, then anchor your trip in the closest town. Santa Rosa, the largest city in Sonoma County, offers affordable accommodations and is the most centrally located. It's a great spot for families and those who want the trappings of a city — grocery stores, bars, fast-casual restaurants and the like. The Sonoma County Airport is in Santa Rosa. Sonoma is a sleepy burg that's a 45-minute drive southeast of Santa Rosa. Its plaza, the historic town square, is surrounded by restaurants like The Girl & The Fig and tasting rooms. Sonoma also is home to 19th century adobe buildings — Mission San Francisco Solano and the Sonoma Barracks — once used by the Mexican military. Healdsburg is the swankiest town in Sonoma County, and is north of Santa Rosa — about a 20-minute drive from the county seat. The town, arranged around a charming square, is quite walkable, with tasting rooms, restaurants, bars and boutiques.

For the connoisseur: In 2003, DeLoach Vineyards, a pioneer in the Russian River Valley, began converting to certified organic and biodynamic farming. Biodynamics bans chemical pesticides and fertilizers

while incorporating diverse crops and native flora and fauna. The tasting room and grounds offer an enclosed terrace, local cheese, picnicking, a frog pond and a garden. Because many DeLoach wines are produced in small quantities, they're sold only at the winery. Ferrari-Carano Vineyards and Winery in Dry Creek Valley ranks among the most beautiful properties in the California wine country. Ferrari-Carano and its sister wineries draw from vineyards across Napa, Sonoma and the cool climes of Mendocino County to the north. You can taste wine daily at the bar in the Italianate Villa Fiore, in the Enoteca cellar beneath or on Il Terrazzo terrace overlooking the gardens and valley. For good luck, rub the nose of "Boardeaux," a 1,300-pound bronze replica of a wild boar that once roamed the Ferrari-Carano vineyards. deloachvineyards.com, ferrari-carano.com

Hidden gem: Merry Edwards was one of the first female winemakers in California. Merry Edwards Winery is outside Sebastopol. Walk-in tastings are available, but your best bet is to make an appointment for the in-depth experience. Her delicious sauvignon blanc is available only in the tasting room. Other standouts include the Olivet Lane chardonnay, Meredith Estate pinot noir and Georgeanne pinot noir. merryedwards.com

More than wine: Wine Road brings together nearly 200 wineries and more than 50 lodging properties in the Russian River, Dry Creek and Alexander valleys. The association sponsors several annual events, including Winter Wineland in January, Barrel Tasting in March, and the Wine and Food Affair in November. All offer

something new even to old wine-country hands.
wineroad.com

Where to stay: Santa Rosa, the county seat, lies roughly at mid-Sonoma, so it's a convenient — and likely the most affordable — place to stay. If your destination is Healdsburg, consider the Calderwood Inn, a few blocks from the downtown tasting rooms. The well-tended grounds are lovely for morning coffee or a nightcap, and the Pezzi King room has a relaxing soaking tub. Breakfast is served communally, so you can chat about your wine finds with other guests.
calderwoodinn.com

Where to eat: Celebrated chef Charlie Palmer runs the rustically elegant Dry Creek Kitchen in Healdsburg. The menu marries seasonal California cooking with Sonoma County wines. On warm nights, the oversize doors open to the ivy-draped terrace. Vintners Inn in Santa Rosa features John Ash & Co. restaurant, named for the chef who is a father of wine-country cuisine. A culinary garden and more than 30 local farmers provide ingredients. drycreekkitchen.com, vintnersinn.com

For a break: The savannah meets Sonoma at Safari West, a 400-acre wildlife preserve on a former sheep ranch near Santa Rosa. African-style safaris combine walking and riding to bring giraffes, gazelles, zebras, wildebeests and other animals up close. You can camp in luxury tents with polished wood floors, private bathrooms (including hot showers) and custom furniture. safariwest.com

Best mode of transportation: At 1,600 square miles, Sonoma is a vast area to explore and a car is essential (either your own or a driver you hire; Uber is an option). Allow for extra time. California 101, the main artery in Sonoma County, is legendary for traffic delays.

Best time to visit: Summer through the early fall harvest is peak tourist season. Winter and spring are quieter (with, notably, less traffic). In any season, midweek is less busy than weekends.

SONOMA COUNTY TIPS

Always call ahead to confirm tasting times, prices and policies. Some wineries require appointments.

Other resources: www.sonoma.com and www.sonomacounty.com



Above: Dry Creek Kitchen in Healdsburg, Calif., offers dishes by celebrated chef Charlie Palmer. Below: A couple shares a glass of wine and enjoy the view.

RGJ MEDIA FILE (ABOVE) SARA SANGER (BELOW)

