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SONOMA

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STEEPED IN HISTORY, SONOMA VALLEY

is an intimate wine country destination, less developed than Napa Valley, its neighbor to the east, but appealing to many for that very reason. • At its heart lies the city of Sonoma, arguably the birthplace of California. The surrounding oak-studded countryside is home to the state's oldest vineyards (1824), the oldest commercial winery in California (Buena Vista, 1857) and California's oldest still-family-owned winery (Gundlach Bundschu, 1858). Roots run deep here,

and farming is the lifeblood for many. The Bundschus, Benzigers, Kundes, Sangiacomos and others have kept their family winegrowing businesses thriving for several generations.

Touring the area, it's easy to imagine how it looked 100 years ago, with many historical structures—some dating to the Mission period—well-preserved. And while wine tourism has increased the hustle-bustle of late, there are few luxury resort-style lodgings and lavish, châteaulike wineries. Instead, the pace of life in Sonoma is slower and more down to earth.

"It's kind of the place that time forgot," muses Chris Benziger, Benziger Family Winery vice president of trade relations, who was a teenager when his family moved to the hamlet of Glen Ellen in the northern part of the valley in 1980.

The landscape is remarkably diverse and beautiful. Flanked by the steep Mayacamas mountain range to the east and the bumpy

you can find his new place tucked behind a pizzeria in downtown Sonoma. Just off the plaza, Katie Bundschu blends wine tasting with retail, offering apparel, home decor and other novelties at her recently opened Abbot's Passage.

Of course, few folks were on the sidewalks in the last three weeks of October 2017, as fires raged in the hills above. Sonoma Mayor Rachel Hundley recalls those tense times, when volunteers packed up artifacts from the Mission barracks, chapel and museum within the Sonoma State Historic Park on the north side of the plaza and covered the buildings in flame retardant.

"The fire came within a half mile outside the northeast corner of the city," says Hundley, noting that it's easy to look back in disbelief now that winter and spring rains have returned the landscape to its seasonal hues of green, and much of the valley has returned to its habitual daily rhythms.



From left: Historic portrayal at Buena Vista winery; Mission San Francisco Solano, part of Sonoma State Historic Park; Sebastiani Theatre, built in 1933

Sonoma Mountains to the west, the valley spans 17 miles from the vine-clad rolling hills of Carneros in the south to its northern tip on the border of the city of Santa Rosa. The Sonoma Valley AVA also includes the four subappellations Sonoma Mountain, Moon Mountain, Bennett Valley and Los Carneros, and their many microclimates allow a variety of grapes to be grown.

When a new restaurant or shop arrives, Sonomans are abuzz. In this story, we highlight one of the recent additions, Salt & Stone in Kenwood; it's hard to get a table at this popular restaurant, so be sure to make a reservation. Winemaker Jeff Cohn recently gave up his urban tasting room in Oakland for a more intimate spot where guests can sample his bold Zinfandel and Rhône blends;

At press time in April, visitors too had returned in droves, wandering the plaza alongside the resident ducks and geese, nibbling samples at the Sonoma Cheese Factory and sipping Glariffée cocktails at the Swiss Hotel. (A drink reminiscent of a chilled Irish coffee, the signature Glariffée was created by proprietor Helen Dunlap, now 92, who has kept the recipe a secret for more than 50 years.)

There are more than 70 tasting rooms around the valley and dozens of restaurants worth trying, as well as other tourist destinations and outdoor activities to enjoy. In the following pages, we offer a few suggestions for places to eat, drink and stay, both old and new, for a quintessential Sonoma experience.

PAST MEETS PRESENT

Just a few miles east of the Sonoma Plaza lie the historic Buena Vista and Gundlach Bundschu wineries. The wildfires threatened both. The Bundschu family lost a house on their property, but the winery survived. The fire burned up to the doorstep of Buena Vista Winery, but firefighters stood with their backs against the walls of the building and were able to tame the flames to within 6 feet of the structure. A visit to either producer is a true Sonoma experience that provides insight into how the region's past has shaped its contemporary wines.

California wine pioneer and Hungarian count Agoston Haraszthy, one of the first to plant vineyards in Wisconsin, moved to California following the gold rush in 1848. Founding Buena Vista Winery in 1857, he began experimenting with viticulture and winemaking techniques such as using redwood for barrels and planting vines closer together and on hillsides.

Not far away, Jacob Gundlach began his own vineyard plantings, dubbing his estate Rhinefarm, inspired by his Bavarian homeland. Shortly after Gundlach's death in 1894, the winery was renamed Gundlach Bundschu. For six generations, the family has kept its heritage alive.

Buena Vista Winery

18000 Old Winery Road, Sonoma
Telephone (800) 926-1266 **Website**
www.buenavistawinery.com **Open** Daily,
10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; tours by appointment
Cost Tours and tastings \$20-\$100

Wine is paired with history at Buena Vista. Tastings are held daily in the Press House, the former winery site, and an array of tours and tastings showcase Buena Vista's storied past. The Historic Wine Museum Tour and Tasting, offered three times daily, focuses on California's winemaking origins, with an exhibit of antique tools and an audio-visual show. Don't be surprised to find the staff dressed in period clothing, and you may even meet "the Count," an actor portraying Buena Vista's illustrious founder, Agoston Haraszthy. Current-release wines are poured, and the tour also includes a stroll through the Champagne cellars and other hidden parts of the winery. —A.R.

Gundlach Bundschu

2000 Denmark St., Sonoma **Telephone**
(707) 938-5277 **Website** www.gundlachbundschu.com **Open** Winter, daily, 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; summer, daily, 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; tours by appointment **Cost** Tours and tastings \$20-\$85

Gundlach Bundschu is a favorite with tourists and is often packed on a Saturday afternoon. For a more intimate visit, make an appointment for the Heritage Reserve Experience. This warm and authentic tasting is hosted in the Bundschu Family Homestead, which dates to the 1920s. This seated tasting pairs

small bites with a medley of Bundschu's Heritage Selection wines, which showcase old blocks or heritage clones from the 250-plus acres of estate vines and are sold only at the winery. Sitting at the dining table in a room evoking 150 years of history, you'll feel like you're part of the family. —A.R.

NORTHERN HIGHLIGHTS

Highway 12 is the main thoroughfare in Sonoma Valley. A drive north from the town of Sonoma still reveals the wildfires' wrath. The formerly densely oaked forests have been reduced to sparseness. In some places, only foundations remain where homes once stood.

Fewer than a dozen miles north of Sonoma, the town of Glen Ellen is tucked into hills just west of the highway. As you drive down its main street, which meanders along a creek, turn-of-the-century buildings and wooded lanes create a sense of tranquility. A visit to Glen Ellen isn't complete without a stop at Jack London State Park. Its 800 acres include 29 miles of hiking trails and remnants of London's ranch, and the cottage where the author produced many of his later writings can be visited.

Despite Glen Ellen's small population (under 800), there is a handful of tasting rooms and wine-friendly restaurants, including new additions such as Kivelstadt's rustic yet high-tech tasting room,



Gundlach Bundschu



Benziger