



How to Taste Wine With a Large Group Like Civilized Human Beings

Pro-tips: Eat lunch, don't steal the glassware, and use common sense

by [Jess Lander](#) | May 25, 2018, 8:16am PDT

When Amy Poehler and her crew of IRL pals, including Tina Fey, Rachel Dratch, Maya Rudolph, and Ana Gasteyer, sip their way through Napa Valley for Poehler's upcoming directorial debut "[Wine Country](#)," fans can also expect a seriously entertaining "guide to everything you absolutely should not do when wine tasting."

But in the meantime, as the Valley waits with bated breath to find out exactly what kind of trouble they'll get into — Skinny dipping in vineyard reservoirs? Accidentally derailing the Wine Train? — we asked some Wine Country hospitality experts for their advice on wine tasting with a large group. Here's how to ensure your Wine Country trip doesn't end in disaster.

Don't show up unannounced

Think about wine tasting like going to a restaurant. If you're showing up with a big group, it's in everyone's best interest to call ahead and make a reservation, even if it's a place that generally accepts walk ins.

It's also important to be upfront about your expectations and whether you're celebrating an occasion, as many wineries have the flexibility to customize experiences. "Help us understand your group," said Kara Chamberlain, manager of the [JCB Tasting Salon](#) and the new JCB Salon Privé in Yountville. "If it's 16 people and they're there for a wedding party, they likely won't be as focused on wine tasting, and we can customize it and make it more fun, verses an educational party that wants to take it more seriously. Just be honest."

Eat lunch

And breakfast, too. It's Drinking 101, but it's still surprising how many people skip this step. Don't think for a second that the palate cleanser crackers, or even a cheese and charcuterie board are going to soak it all up.

"Food is really critical," said Rose Kapsner, Director of Group Sales & Events at [Beau Wine Tours](#), who first and foremost, always builds a group's itinerary around a lunch stop. Another option is to visit a winery that offers a [wine and food pairing experience](#).

Limit your day to three wineries max

Those two ounce pours may look small, but similar to shots of tequila, they add up quick and before

you know it, you're using the spittoon (the vessel people spit wine into) as a puke bucket. "You start drinking at 10 a.m. and your body isn't used to drinking that early in the morning, so it gets to you pretty fast," said Kapsner, adding that the tour company slaps a \$500 fine on anyone who vomits in the vehicle.

People also often underestimate how much time they will spend at each winery, especially with a larger group, which can be like herding cats. "Don't book too many appointments in one day, so you can relax and enjoy each winery visit," said Michelle Perry, VP of Visitor Programs at [Robert Mondavi Winery](#). "For large groups, visiting two to three wineries per day hits the sweet spot."

When creating your itinerary, a good rule of thumb is to allot for at least 90 minutes at each stop. This way you won't have to feel rushed, or cancel on other appointments. If you are running late, call the winery and let them know. "You've got to give yourself wiggle room for things like purchasing wine, using the restroom and loading everyone back on the bus. Leave that buffer time," said Chamberlain.

Respect the wine (and the people that make it and pour it)

Yes, wine is alcohol, but it's also an expression of art that is painstakingly handcrafted by a team of people over several months, if not years. Treat your winery visit like something in between an art museum and a bar. You don't have to whisper or take things too seriously, but you're also there to learn some things, so listen to your host and don't make them repeat themselves over and over again. If all you want to do is socialize, get drunk and take a million selfies with your friends — a big pet peeve of tasting room staff members — go to a bar.

Also, the "[wine thief](#)" — a long, curved glass tool used during barrel tastings to extract wine from the barrel — is not a toy. "It's usually the bachelorette groups trying to use the wine thieves as inappropriate stuff, or they want to drink the wine straight out of it," said Desiree Del Dotto, COO and Marketing Director of [Del Dotto Family Wineries](#), which has three properties in Napa Valley.

Buy wine

Wineries aren't making money off those tasting fees. Their main objective when you visit is to get you to join the wine club or buy wine (which is why they'll often waive the tasting fee with a purchase). Moreover, the person attending to your group is often working on commission. If you're with a large group that ends up being a little rowdy or disruptive to others, the least you can do is leave with a bottle or two for later (it doesn't go bad, after all). Gratuity isn't ever expected, but "definitely goes a long way," said Chamberlain.

Ultimately, have fun, but don't get too drunk

Wineries don't want to discourage fun or large groups from visiting. They simply request that you stay mindful, respectful and don't get so intoxicated that you fall asleep or steal the glassware, both of which Chamberlain has witnessed. And just like at a bar, you can get kicked out.

"We've had to ban some very good customers, but they were completely inappropriate and out of control, cussing at my staff and being extremely rude," said Del Dotto. "It takes a lot, but if you're degrading my staff, cussing at my staff, and disrupting other people, sometimes you unfortunately have to make those kind of calls. It's a fine line. It's really uncomfortable and it's hard, but sometimes you have to do that."