

National Park Trips



7 Outdoorsy Vineyards Where You Can Sip Right Off the Trail, River or Park

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If you're more comfortable in hiking boots than heels, these vineyards near national parks, hiking trails and scenic drives will make you feel right at home.



My first impression of Napa Valley was intimidating. I was 10 years old and tagging along with my parents and relatives on a family visit and the grand estates, hushed tasting rooms and swirling glasses stuck with me into my adult life. As someone most at home in hiking boots and covered in a layer of trail dust, everything about wine tasting intimidated me. That is, until I moved to Europe. It took mere weeks for me to stumble upon the first grapevines along the hiking trail. The winemakers didn't care that I was wearing Lowas. They, too, were dressed in clothes that were made for being outside. Their faces were suntanned, their pants were dusty and they were passionate about not only the wine they were pouring into my glass, but the land they were stewarding.

My entire perception of wine changed and when I moved back to the U.S., I began to hunt for vineyards that fit my style. Unpretentious places where I saw my love of nature mirrored back at me. I found them near my favorite mountain biking trails in Colorado and under Sedona's red rocks, but my first taste of Napa still had me feeling nervous about trying wine in America's premier growing region. But then, I was introduced to Larkmead. A vineyard named after my favorite bird, the Western meadowlark whose song always sends a chill up my spine and reminds me of falling in love with nature as a kid, running barefoot through prairie grasses.

When 86-year-old proprietor and artist Kate Solari Baker was growing up at Larkmead, she says Napa Valley was a very different place. "The valley was still rural and unpretentious and there were relatively few wineries," she remembers. "People thought of themselves first as farmers, committed to growing good grapes and making good wine. My earliest memories of Larkmead are really memories of being outdoors—of the vineyards, the grasses and wildflowers, the Napa River and its creeks, and the mountains surrounding us. That landscape is still what I love most about this place."

That love inspired Kate and the following generations of Bakers to create what I'd call first and foremost a vineyard for outdoor lovers. Along with her daughter Ann, a landscape architect, Kate and Larkmead focused on restoring the soil, increasing biodiversity and achieving organic certification. In the past few decades Larkmead has restored eroded banks on creeks and rivers running through the property, replaced invasive species with native plants that have drawn pollinators and wildlife, and installed bluebird and owl boxes. A walk through Larkmead will reveal the classic cabernet sauvignon grapes the valley is known for, but also beavers, otters and its namesake Western meadowlark.

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Kate is an artist and you'll spot her artwork on the labels of Larkmead's Research Block wines. The labels feature "plants people often pass without noticing." Rabbitsfoot grass, Queen Anne's lace and teasels are plants some might dismiss as weeds. "Growing up here taught me that a vineyard is not simply a collection of vines; it belongs to a much larger living landscape," reflects Kate. The Research Block wines come from a three-acre plot focused on exploring how a more diverse range of grape varieties might perform as the climate changes. The Estate Chenin Blanc is one of these wines that's already been met with an exciting response.

"When visitors spend time outdoors here, I hope they experience some of what generations of my family have loved about this land—and understand why we feel so strongly about caring for it," Kate shares.

In Larkmead, I recognized the same qualities I fell in love with in Italy and Croatia. A place where the vineyards were part of nature, not separate from it. A place where a crunchy editor who writes about national parks could enjoy learning about and drinking excellent wine.

Start with a visit to Larkmead on your way to Yosemite, but if you're looking for other vineyards where you'll feel at home surrounded by nature lovers, whether you just got off the trail or are heading to a national park, these are the spots for wine tastings I'd recommend as an outdoor lover.



Immerse Yourself in Native California Gardens at Larkmead Winery in Napa

Southeast of Calistoga, visit Larkmead Vineyards, nestled on 115 acres between two mountain ranges, creating a cinematic setting. You'll need to make an appointment to visit, but planning ahead is worth it. Opt for the Estate Tasting, where you'll go on a guided walk through the property and get a deeper look into the family's sustainable growing practices and commitment to regeneration. Larkmead specializes in cabernet sauvignon and cabernet blends, but you'll also find sauvignon blanc, merlot and the special Research Block Chenin Blanc—a tart and juicy experiment in the future of Napa wines—on the menu, depending on the season. Tastings aren't cheap starting at \$90 per person for a seated experience and \$150 for the walking tour with tasting and charcuterie, but it's well worth it. From Napa it's easy to continue on to all manner of outdoor adventures from wandering through redwoods at Muir Woods to heading to Tahoe to hit the slopes, or hiking in Yosemite. www.larkmead.com