

# SF WEEKLY

## Wine: A Beginner's Guide to Napa and Sonoma

By [Brad Japhe](#)

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*It's not that scary. Really, it's not.*



Regardless of your thoughts on wine, if you live in San Francisco, a weekend excursion to Napa and Sonoma is obligatory sooner or later. Thankfully, there's a trove of viticultural experiences enjoyable for the novice and the snob in equal measure. And with a new generation of state-of-the-art tasting rooms and welcome centers reshaping the wine country landscape, there's plenty more to appreciate than just the juice itself. When you're ready to take the plunge, consider these scenic outposts and eateries.

Sonoma is to Pinot what Napa is to Cabernet. The resilient varietal flourishes in the cool, crisp ocean air. Underappreciated until recently are the earthy, peppery Zinfandels fashioned there. Wind your way through the sloping hills of Dry Creek Valley to explore a multitude of small-scale wineries that excel in this popular style. Or take a pitstop at the charmingly rustic [Dry Creek General Store](#) to enjoy

Italian-inspired paninis alongside a wax-dipped bottle of **Beran Zinfandel**, a standout selection from nearby **Copper Cane Wines**. Craft beer enthusiasts will find it impossible to pass up an ice-cold bomber of Pliny the Elder, the legendary double IPA from Santa Rosa's own **Russian River Brewing**.

For more of an Old World feel, meander several miles further up Dry Creek Road to arrive at the estate of **Michel-Schlumberger Winery**. The drive itself is the stuff postcards are made of. But the Spanish colonial-style mansion, complete with a reflecting pool at the center of a terra cotta laced courtyard, is similarly stunning in its serenity. After marveling at the architecture, make some time for an hour-long tour of the landscape, culminating in an extended tasting in the barrel room — starting at 1 p.m. and 3 p.m., Friday through Sunday.

Later in the afternoon, depart to Healdsburg's **DaVero Farms & Winery**: a family-owned, fully functional, biodynamic farm, 10 minutes down the road. ("Biodynamic" refers to an agricultural approach that emphasizes ecological harmony through the use crop rotation, eschewing pesticides, and leaving some percentage of a farm's land as a biodiversity preserve. It's more organic than organic farming, in other words.) DaVero's property features olive trees imported from Tuscany, freely wandering chickens, and an irresistibly cute pig named Patsy. Mingle with the livestock before entering their unassuming tasting room, where you're welcome to sample their unique and accessible Mediterranean-inspired wines. But it's the world-class olive oils and fresh fruit jams that set this place apart. Their 2013 estate-grown Extra Virgin easily holds its own against any of its Italian-bred counterparts.

When dinner is calling, amble across the street to **Madrona Manor** in time to take in a proper Sonoma sunset from the stately outdoor porch. This Michelin-starred restaurant and inn, situated in an historic (and possibly haunted) Victorian mansion, excels at minimalist molecular gastronomy. As it to be expected in these parts, they come with a gobsmacking collection of wines to pair with their five-course chef's menu. But what you may not see coming is the artful array of house-made cocktails, enticing enough to supplant the desire for wine. Even more shocking, Madrona's accomplished mixologist, Pam Bushling, fixes these curiosities behind a truncated space that bears more resemblance to a kiosk than a bar. You may not believe in ghosts, but you'll surely find yourself possessed by the spirits you encounter here.

Conclude your dining experience with Madrona Manor's trademark ice cream, assembled tableside through the use of liquid nitrogen. It's an appropriately sweet reminder that even in the heart of wine country, you hardly need a sommelier's expertise to get the juices flowing.

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