

The Register-Guard

Wine lover's paradise

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HEALDSBURG, Calif. — For centuries, it has been tradition in Spain and Mexico that a town be built around a central plaza, or *zócalo*. Even today, the older communities of California and the Southwest demonstrate that tradition. After all, as late as the 1840s they were Hispanic enclaves. Yet nowhere, perhaps, is a plaza more charming, more lush, treated with more civic pride, than in Healdsburg, at the northern end of the Sonoma Valley, an eight-hour drive south of Eugene.

Ironically, the Mexican government already had left California by the time Healdsburg was founded, only a year before California achieved statehood.

Harmon Heald, an Ohioan who hadn't done well as a miner in the California gold rush, found his niche in real estate. He was still a squatter in 1857 when he built a store and post office and proceeded to lay out a town grid focused on a central plaza, imitating others he had seen. Healdsburg was incorporated in 1867, a railway came through in 1871, and by the 1880s the stylish town was imagining itself as the San Francisco of the North.

The great earthquake of 1906 ironically underscored the San Francisco connection, as every original plaza building came tumbling down. But the Healdsburg Town Plaza survived and the town rebuilt. Today, 110 years later, the town of 11,300 is experiencing a new boom of luxury hotels and high-end restaurants.

Positioned at the hub of the Alexander, Dry Creek and Russian River valleys, three great wine-production districts of upper Sonoma County, it is an inviting destination not only for San Francisco weekenders, but for vacationers up and down the West Coast.

Plaza precincts

It's 500 miles from Eugene to Healdsburg, but most of the journey can be rapidly accomplished via Interstate 5, and the town is a great base for a long weekend of wine tasting and fine dining.

Plant your bags at the luxurious Hotel Healdsburg or at one of the many fine bed-and-breakfast inns in Healdsburg. I chose the Camellia Inn, a short walk east of the Town Plaza. Built in 1869 in Italianate Victorian style, it was one of Healdsburg's first houses; today, it's a B&B of vintage flavor and modern amenities. More over three decades it has been owned and operated by the Lewand family, whose marvelous landscaping — more than 80 varieties of signature camellias surround a village-style swimming pool — gives the property a character of its own.

I began my exploration of Healdsburg at the plaza, of course. There's a summer-long Tuesdays in the Plaza series, with live music and a farmers' market, around a new bandstand. A full-acre square, the plaza nurtures dozens of species of trees, from redwoods to palms, providing ample shade for strollers on its paths and readers on its benches.

Having long ago given up its San Francisco aspirations, Healdsburg now sees itself as the “Carmel of the Wine Country.” It’s not quite there yet, but its fine art and photo galleries, home décor shops and boutiques that frame the plaza are delightful.

There are also more than two dozen winery tasting rooms within two blocks’ walk of the plaza. Many of them bear names well-known to wine lovers, such as Murphy-Goode and La Crema. I enjoy making new discoveries: Among my favorites are Thumbprint Cellars, Longboard Vineyards, the Selby Winery and Williamson Wines, its Bordeaux and Rhône varietals offered with tastings of cheeses, mustards, jams and jellies.

Wine by bike

Most visitors use Healdsburg as a base of exploration for the surrounding wine country. I suggest choosing a particular varietal and an appellation district — Alexander Valley for rich cabernets, for instance; the cooler Russian River for chardonnays and pinot noirs — and focusing a day’s adventures in that area. If you have a second day for wine tasting, choose a second district and varietal.

I invested a full day in an exploration of the Dry Creek Valley, noted for its zinfandels, north and northwest of Healdsburg. And I did so on a bicycle, rented from Wine Country Bikes . Miles of low rolling hills around the edge of this valley provided me with moderate exercise broken up by visits to a variety of farms, vineyards and wineries.

The wine caves at Bella Vineyards tunnel deep into the earth of Lily Hill, its proud zinfandel vines among the earliest to bud and to be harvested in the region. The caves keep a constant year-round temperature for barrel storage and a classy tasting room.

The Dry Creek Vineyard , established in 1972, is often credited as having coined the “old vines” phrase to designate zinfandel vines that are more than 100 years old. They may be found throughout the valley, including at Quivira Vineyards and Winery , where I was able to enjoy a picnic lunch of Sonoma-grown fruits and locally produced cheeses before continuing my ride.

The five acres of parterre gardens surrounding Ferrari-Carano Vineyards & Winery (ferrari-carano.com) feature more than 2,000 species of trees and shrubs and dozens of bronze sculptures. These are merely an introduction to Villa Fiore, the winery’s hospitality center. The elegant Renaissance-style building offers the finest facilities in this part of the Sonoma wine country. Ferrari-Carano is perhaps best known for its fume blanc and chardonnay.

Trattore Farms has fine wines itself, but it is perhaps better known as the home of the Dry Creek Olive Company . High-density orchards of Spanish, Italian, French, Greek and native Californian olives have cloaked its hills since the mid-1800s, and its traditional olive-oil mill was imported piece-by-piece from Italy’s Perugia region. This is the real deal, as a wine-and-oil tasting proves.

As with Trattore, a visit to the 1,200-acre Jordan Vineyard & Winery is about more than the wine. I appreciated a three-mile guided hike to a hilltop with a broad panorama of the Russian River, and across the Alexander and Dry Creek valleys. The hike wove around a wildlife habitat and secluded lakes, vineyards and olive orchards, a cattle ranch and the chef’s garden to a wine tasting at the Winery Chateau.

Dining options

After a day of exercise, I was hungry. Fortunately, there are numerous excellent places to eat in Healdsburg, many of them within a couple of blocks of the Town Plaza.

My favorite lunch is at Shed: A Modern Grange . I especially enjoyed the colorful snapper plate with clams, kale, cabbage, cauliflower and brassica broth.

For dinner, I was particularly impressed by Valette Healdsburg . Chef Dustin Valette's citrus-cured hamachi sashimi, and the Peking spiced duck breast with pickled ginger and tamarind jus, were outstanding. Also outstanding is Campo Fina , with traditional Italian cuisine ranging from grilled baby octopus to sugo calabrese with braised beef and pork ribs.

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