

# TRAVEL + LEISURE

## 36 Places, Things, and Ideas That Are Changing the Way We Travel

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# Suddenly, Sonoma

No longer in the shadow of Napa, the gorgeously laid-back California county is booming with new restaurants, inns, and tasting rooms that are giving travelers a fresh reason to visit. **BY TED LOOS**

Fort Ross  
Vineyard &  
Winery



## SAVE THE DATE

October is peak harvest season, which means there are plenty of activities and events happening all over Sonoma. Here are our favorites.

### OCTOBER 7-9

#### **Sonoma Music Festival**

This annual three-day celebration takes over the Field of Dreams in downtown Sonoma. John Fogerty and Andy Velo will headline. [sonomamusicfestival.com](http://sonomamusicfestival.com).

### OCTOBER 15

#### **Fort Ross-Seaview Harvest Festival**

The daylong party at Fort Ross Historic State Park includes apple picking, a wine tasting, and an à la carte lunch with pairings. [fortross.org](http://fortross.org).

### OCTOBER 22

#### **Seghesio Family Vineyards Venom Release Party**

The Seghesios will celebrate the 2013 Venom, a Sangiovese made from 106-year-old vines, by pouring their top vintages. [seghesio.com](http://seghesio.com).

### OCTOBER 23

#### **Pinot on the River**

Limited-production Pinot Noirs from all over the West Coast get the star treatment at this festival, which features seminars, tastings, and tours. [pinotfestival.com](http://pinotfestival.com).

### OCTOBER 29

#### **Healdsburg Wine Country Half Marathon**

Sweat off your hangover by running (er, walking?) for 13 miles through the vineyard-lined Alexander and Dry Creek valleys. [destinationraces.com](http://destinationraces.com).



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# Lay of the Land

If Sonoma had a Facebook status, it would probably be: "It's (slightly) complicated." The county is more than twice the size of Napa and home to 17 distinct appellations, or AVAs (American Viticultural Areas). A geography lesson on the main regions will help you budget your time and pick where to stay.

**ALEXANDER VALLEY** This mountainous AVA follows the path of the Russian River, which flows from Mendocino County to the town of Healdsburg on the valley's southern edge. Gravelly soil means that Cabernet Sauvignon is king. **Must-visit wineries** Silver Oak ([silveroak.com](http://silveroak.com)) is known for Cabs

with sweet oak accents. At Jordan Winery ([jordanwinery.com](http://jordanwinery.com)), the Cabs have a velvety texture.

**DRY CREEK VALLEY** You're in Sonoma's big-sky country, a rural appellation with zero stoplights and plenty of wide-open spaces. Zinfandel, the grape that Sonoma does better and in much bigger quantity than almost anywhere else in the world, rules the roost. **Must-visit wineries** Make a beeline for Mauritsen Wines ([mauritsenwines.com](http://mauritsenwines.com)) and Ridge Vineyards ([ridgewine.com](http://ridgewine.com)) for their well-balanced Zins.

**RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY** Low-lying and forested, this AVA, which also incorporates Green Valley, has roads lined with redwoods and emerging food towns like Guerneville and Sebastopol. Pinot Noir and Chardonnay thrive here. **Must-visit winery** Emeritus Vineyards ([emeritusvineyards.com](http://emeritusvineyards.com)) makes fruity, fresh Pinots.

**SONOMA COAST AND FORT ROSS-SEAVIEW** The strong cooling influence of the Pacific Ocean is felt everywhere in these two appellations, where Pinot Noir and Chardonnay are the main attractions. **Must-visit winery** Littorai ([littorai.com](http://littorai.com)) focuses on biodynamically farmed Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

**SONOMA VALLEY** This narrow, 17-mile-long valley is home to the quaint town of Sonoma, more than 100 wineries, and Jack London Historic State Park.

Wine-wise, it's incredibly versatile, with just the right hot and cool spots for growing Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Chardonnay.

**Must-visit wineries** For Burgundian-style Chardonnay, visit Hanzell Vineyards ([hanzell.com](http://hanzell.com)); for robust Zinfandel, it's Ravenswood ([ravenswoodwinery.com](http://ravenswoodwinery.com)) all the way.



What to Do Beyond Wine

**DAVID RAMEY**

Winemaker at Ramey

Wine Cellars ([rameywine.com](http://rameywine.com))

"I'd recommend beginning with a hike to the top of Bald Mountain in Sugarloaf Ridge State Park ([sugarloafpark.org](http://sugarloafpark.org)) and following it with pizza or pasta at Café Citti ([cafecitti.com](http://cafecitti.com)), in Kenwood. In the afternoon, I like to drive to Healdsburg, where my winery is based, to shop; I always find great housewares and gifts at Lime Stone ([limestonehealdsburg.com](http://limestonehealdsburg.com)), which is owned by chef Charlie Palmer and his wife, Lisa. There are also two great independent bookstores in town: Copperfield's ([copperfieldsbooks.com](http://copperfieldsbooks.com)) and Levin & Co. ([levinbooks.com](http://levinbooks.com))."

## COME ON, STAY AND SIP AWHILE

With most tasting rooms, you can be in and out in under an hour. But these standout spots are worth lingering over.

**1 Fort Ross Vineyard & Winery** is the only tasting room in the Fort Ross-Seaview AVA. And though it's an adventurous drive up twisty roads to get here, your rewards include jaw-dropping Pacific Ocean views and crystal-clear-tasting Pinot Noirs. Sit on the deck, enjoy a charcuterie board, and watch the fog roll in. [fortrossvineyard.com](http://fortrossvineyard.com).

**2** Located in the Barlow, Sebastopol's popular mini-mall and market, **Wind Gap** draws a young, groovy clientele, with Edith Piaf on the stereo and reclaimed-wood paneling. But it's also serious about its wine, offering bottlings of rare grapes ('Trousseau Gris, anyone?) along with crowd-pleasing Chardonnays. Want (lots of) vino to go? Buy one of their refillable growlers. [windgapwines.com](http://windgapwines.com).

**3** **Three Sticks at the Adobe** is the first-class experience the county has been missing. Set in an adobe building redone by society decorator Ken Fulk, this by-appointment-only spot in downtown Sonoma offers four- or seven-flight tastings. You can also book a three-course, \$200 per person private lunch. [threestickswines.com](http://threestickswines.com).

### HOW TO SIP CORRECTLY

**Skip the perfume and the gum.** Other scents and flavors distract from a wine's true characteristics. **Look before you drink.** To really appreciate a wine, you have to check out its appearance first. Red or white, it should be brilliantly clear and an appealing color. **Aerate the wine.** Press the base of the glass down hard while you swirl. Lots of pressure and a quick movement will prevent sloshing. (But try it with a white first!) Smell the wine to pick up its aromatics. **Hold the glass by the stem.** Never the bowl. This prevents the wine from heating, and allows you to assess the color.



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## County Rest Stops

Sonoma's hotel scene ranges widely, with luxurious digs and cheap and cheerful spots equally beloved. Each of these five has a distinct vibe.

### TALK OF THE TOWN

Location, location, location: people flock to the 56-room **Hotel Healdsburg**, which is still going strong after 15 years, because it's right on the town square (so you can have that third glass of wine and still walk home after a dinner out). And then there are the amenities: a gym, a pool, and co-owner Charlie Palmer's Dry Creek Kitchen. [hotelhealdsburg.com](http://hotelhealdsburg.com); doubles from \$429.

### THE FOODIE HIDEAWAY

Chef-owner Kyle Connaughton describes his new Healdsburg venture, **Single Thread Farms**, as a "restaurant with rooms, not a hotel." Connaughton and his wife, Katina, the head farmer on the property, have created 11-course menus (\$225) that spotlight ingredients grown on site. The AvroKO-designed rooms all have fireplaces. [singlethreadfarms.com](http://singlethreadfarms.com); doubles from \$600.

### THE TIME WARP

Set in the heart of Sonoma Valley, **Beltane Ranch** is a family-owned, working ranch from 1892, with five simple rooms in the main house and an adjacent cottage. Nothing beats watching the sunset from the front porch or strolling the grounds, which include poppy-filled gardens and olive orchards. Breakfast eggs come from the property. [beltaneranch.com](http://beltaneranch.com); from \$185.

### THE OUTDOOR GEM

**AutoCamp**, a two-month-old campground in the heart of the Russian River Valley, gives the glamping trend a distinct twist. It features 24 shiny, customized Airstream trailers and 10 stylish tents surrounding a reception pavilion. Each suite has a barbecue pit and a campfire, and the river is accessible from the property. [autocamp.com](http://autocamp.com); from \$175.

### THE ROMANTIC

Hands-down Sonoma's most luxurious property, the **Farmhouse Inn** is perfectly located on the way to and from many top Russian River wineries, and offers 25 rooms in soothing tones of cream and white. The recently renovated spa uses ingredients harvested on site, including herbs and apples (try a Body Melt with alfalfa, lavender, and chamomile poultices). [farmhouseinn.com](http://farmhouseinn.com); doubles from \$695.

# DINNER SPOTS TO SUIT YOUR MOOD

## IS IT DATE NIGHT?

Reserve a table for two at **Valette**.

It's only a year old, but chef Dustin Valette's restaurant is arguably the best in Healdsburg. His food is both precise and playful—witness the English pea fondue and the delicious Australian versus American lamb duo, a contest with no losers. You can also dive in to smart local wine offerings, like a Radio-Coteau Syrah Las Colinas 2013. [valettehealdsburg.com](http://valettehealdsburg.com); entrées \$25–\$37.

## ARE YOU PARTYING WITH A GROUP?

Do it up at **Barndiva**.

The dishes at this lively Healdsburg spot are locally sourced, expertly executed classics such as crispy duck-leg confit. Sipping cocktails like the gin-based Funny Face might result in you ordering the BD frites—maybe the best crinkle-cut fries in the world. [barndiva.com](http://barndiva.com); entrées \$28–\$42.

## IS IT ALL ABOUT THE WINE?

Sip at **Willi's Wine Bar**.

An upbeat Santa Rosa roadhouse, Willi's offers flights like "I Love Sonoma County Wines," which spotlights three glasses of hard-to-find local vino, including the Croix Pinot Noir Narrow Gauge Russian River 2014. The bar food is stellar, too: try the foie gras poppers and mushroom-soup shooters. [starkrestaurants.com](http://starkrestaurants.com); small plates \$5–\$16.

### What to Do Beyond Wine

**REGINA MARTINELLI**

Co-owner, Martinelli

Winery & Vineyards

([martinelliwinery.com](http://martinelliwinery.com))

"First thing in the morning, drive toward the Pacific and the town of Duncan Mills, where you can get warm-out-of-the-oven cinnamon rolls at **Gold Coast Coffee & Bakery** ([duncansmills.net](http://duncansmills.net)). On the way back, hike in **Armstrong Redwoods** to see all those majestic ancient trees. My next stop would be the Barlow in Sebastopol, where there are some delightful boutiques, like the **Mad Mod Shop** ([madmodshop.com](http://madmodshop.com)), which sells vintage women's clothing and accessories—I call it feisty fashion. Also don't miss the **Osmosis Day Spa Sanctuary** ([osmosis.com](http://osmosis.com)), in Freestone. They have Japanese cedar baths and invigorating treatments."

