Sonoma Valley

Sonoma Valley is often thought of as the "other" Wine Country, forever in the shadow of Napa Valley. It's true that Sonoma Valley doesn't have as much going on as Napa Valley. You won't find as many wineries, shopping outlets, or world-class restaurants here. But its less developed, more backcountry character is exactly its charm. Besides, there is more than enough to do here to fill your vacation time.

Sonoma Valley is far more rural and less traveled than its neighbor to the east, offering a more genuine away-from-it-all experience than its more commercial cousin. The roads are less crowded, the pace is slower, and the whole valley is still relatively free of slick tourist attractions and big-name hotels. Commercialization has, for the most part, not yet taken hold. Small, family-owned wineries are still Sonoma Valley's mainstay, just as in the old days of winemaking, when everyone started with the intention of going broke and loved every minute of it. (As the saying goes in these parts, "It takes a large fortune to make a small fortune.")

Unlike in Napa Valley, in Sonoma Valley you won't find palatial wineries with million-dollar art collections, aerial trams, and Hollywood ego trips (read: Niebaum-Coppola). Rather, Sonoma Valley offers a refreshing dose of reality, where modestly sized wineries are integrated into the community rather than perched on hilltops like corporate citadels. If Napa Valley feels like a fantasyland, where everything exists to service the almighty grape and the visitors it attracts, then Sonoma Valley is its antithesis, an unpretentious gaggle of ordinary towns and ranches. The result, as you wind your way through the valley, is a chance to experience what Napa Valley must have been like long before the Seagrams and Moët et Chandons of the world turned the Wine Country into a major tourist destination.

1 Orientation & Getting Around

Sonoma Valley is some 17 miles long and 7 miles wide, and it is bordered by two mountain ranges: the Mayacamas Mountains to the

east and the Sonoma Mountains to the west. One major road, Highway 12 (also known as the Sonoma Hwy.), passes through the valley, starting at the northern edge of the Carneros District, leading though the communities of Sonoma, Glen Ellen, and Kenwood, and ending at the southern boundary, Santa Rosa. Conveniently, most of the wineries—as well as most of the hotels, shops, and restaurants—are either in the town of Sonoma, along Highway 12, or a short distance from it. Of the numerous side roads that branch off Highway 12, only Bennett Valley Road to the west and Trinity Road (aka Oakville Grade) to the east lead over the mountain ranges and out of the valley, and neither is easy to navigate. If you're coming from Napa, I strongly suggest that you take the leisurely southern route along Highway 12/121 rather than tackle Trinity Road, which is a real brake-smoker.

ALONG HIGHWAY 12: SONOMA'S TOWNS IN BRIEF

As you approach the Wine Country from the south, you must first pass through the **Carneros District,** a cool, windswept region that borders San Pablo Bay and marks the entrance to both Napa and Sonoma valleys. Until the latter part of the 20th century, this mixture of marsh, sloughs, and rolling hills was mainly used as sheep pasture. (*Carneros* means "sheep" in Spanish.) After experimental plantings yielded slow-growing yet high-quality grapes—particularly chardonnay and pinot noir—several Napa Valley and Sonoma Valley wineries expanded their plantings here, eventually establishing the Carneros District as an American viticultural appellation. Although about a dozen wineries are spread throughout the region, there are no major towns or attractions—just plenty of gorgeous scenery as you cruise along Highway 121, the major junction between Napa and Sonoma.

At the northern boundary of the Carneros District, along Highway 12, is the centerpiece of Sonoma Valley: the midsized town of **Sonoma**, which owes much of its appeal to Mexican general Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo. Vallejo fashioned this pleasant, slow-paced community after a typical Mexican village—right down to its central plaza, Sonoma's geographical and commercial center. The plaza sits at the top of a T formed by Broadway (Hwy. 12) and Napa Street. Most of the surrounding streets form a grid pattern around this axis, making Sonoma easy to navigate. The plaza's Bear Flag Monument marks the spot where the crude Bear Flag was raised in 1846, signaling the end of Mexican rule; the symbol was later adopted by the state of California and placed on its flag. The 8-acre

park at the center of the plaza, complete with two ponds that are populated with ducks and geese, is perfect for an afternoon siesta in the cool shade. My favorite attraction, however, is the flock of brilliantly feathered chickens that roam unfettered through the streets of Sonoma—a sight you'll *definitely* never see in Napa.

About 7 miles north of Sonoma on Highway 12 is the town of **Glen Ellen,** which, though just a fraction of the size of Sonoma, is home to several of the valley's finest wineries, restaurants, and inns. Aside from the addition of a few new restaurants, this charming Wine Country town hasn't changed much since the days when Jack London settled on his Beauty Ranch, about a mile west. Other than the wineries, you'll find few real signs of commercialism; the shops and restaurants, located along one main winding lane, cater to a small, local clientele—that is, until the summer tourist season, when traffic nearly triples on the weekends. If you're as yet undecided about where you want to set up camp during your visit to the Wine Country, I highly recommend this lovable little town.

A few miles north of Glen Ellen along Highway 12 is the tiny town of **Kenwood**, the northernmost outpost of Sonoma Valley. Though the Kenwood Vineyards wines are well known throughout the United States, the town itself consists of little more than a few restaurants, wineries, and modest homes recessed into the wooded hillsides. The nearest lodging, the luxurious Kenwood Inn & Spa, is located about a mile south. Kenwood makes for a pleasant day trip—lunch at Café Citti, a tour of Chateau St. Jean, dinner at Kenwood Restaurant & Bar—before returning to Glen Ellen or Sonoma for the night.

A few miles beyond Kenwood is **Santa Rosa**, the county seat of Sonoma, home to more than 150,000 residents, and the gateway to northern Sonoma wine country. Historically, it's best known as the hometown of horticulturist Luther Burbank, who produced more than 800 new varieties of fruits, vegetables, and plants during his 50-year tenure here. Today it's a burgeoning city and the gateway to northern Sonoma wine country. Unless you're armed with a map, however, it's best to avoid exploring the large, sprawling area and its rural surroundings, as it's easy to get lost.

VISITOR INFORMATION

While you're in Sonoma, stop by the **Sonoma Valley Visitors Bureau**, 453 1st St. E., in the Carnegie Library Building (© 707/996-1090; www.sonomavalley.com). It's open daily from 9am to 7pm in summer and from 9am to 6pm in winter. An additional **visitors**

bureau is located a few miles south of the square, at 25200 Arnold Dr. (Hwy. 121; © 707/935-4747), at the entrance to Viansa Winery; it's open daily from 9am to 4pm, and from 9am to 5pm in summer.

TOURING SONOMA VALLEY BY BIKE

Sonoma and its neighboring towns are so small, close together, and relatively flat that it's not difficult to get around on two wheels. In fact, if you're not in a great hurry, there's no better way to tour Sonoma Valley than via bicycle. You can rent a bike at the Goodtime Bicycle Company \mathcal{F} (© 888/525-0453 or 707/938-0453; www.goodtimetouring.com). Goodtime will happily point you to easy bike trails, or you can take one of its organized excursions to Kenwood-area wineries or to southern Sonoma wineries. Not only does Goodtime provide a gourmet lunch featuring local Sonoma products, but it will also carry any wine you purchase while you ride, and it will help with shipping arrangements. Lunch rides start at 10:30am and end at around 3:30pm. The cost, including food and equipment, is \$99 per person. Bike rentals cost \$25 a day and include helmets, locks, and everything else you'll need (including delivery to your local hotel). Bikes are also available for rent from Sonoma Valley Cyclery, 20093 Broadway, Sonoma (© 707/935-**3377**), for \$6 per hour or \$25 a day.

FAST FACTS: Sonoma Valley

Hospitals The Sonoma Valley Hospital, 347 Andrieux St. (© 707/935-5000), in downtown Sonoma, is a district hospital that provides inpatient, outpatient, and continuing care to the public. Its emergency room is supported by state-of-theart equipment and is staffed 24 hours a day by physicians and nurses who are specifically trained in emergency treatment. SVH also has an intensive care unit and a pediatric center, and it provides surgical services.

Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital, 1165 Montgomery Dr. in Santa Rosa (© 707/546-3210), about a 30-minute drive north from Sonoma, offers 24-hour emergency service as well as complete inpatient and outpatient services, a cardiac center, pediatric services, and a dental clinic.

Information See "Visitor Information," above.

Newspapers/Magazines The main newspaper in Sonoma Valley is the **Press Democrat**, a New York Times publication that is printed daily and distributed at newsstands throughout Sonoma, Lake, Napa, and Mendocino counties. Sonoma's local paper is the **Sonoma Index Tribune**; published twice a week and available at newsstands around town, it covers regional news, events, and issues. Also available around town is the **Sonoma Valley Visitors Guide**, a slender free publication that lists just about every sightseeing, recreation, shopping, lodging, and dining option in the valley, as well as a winery map.

Pharmacy The pharmacy at Long's Drugs, 201 W. Napa St., Sonoma (© 707/938-4730), is open Monday through Friday from 9am to 8pm, Saturday and Sunday from 10am to 6pm. If you prefer a more personable place to get your prescription filled, try Adobe Drug, 303 W. Napa St., Sonoma (© 707/938-1144), a locally owned drugstore that claims to be Sonoma's "Prescription Specialists" and will even make deliveries; it's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 7pm, Saturday from 9am to 6pm.

Post Offices In downtown Sonoma, the post office is at 617 Broadway, at Patton Street (© 707/996-9311). The Glen Ellen post office is at 13720 Arnold St., at O'Donnel Lane (© 707/996-9233). Both branches are open Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 5pm.

Shipping Companies See "The Ins & Outs of Shipping Wine Home," in chapter 3.

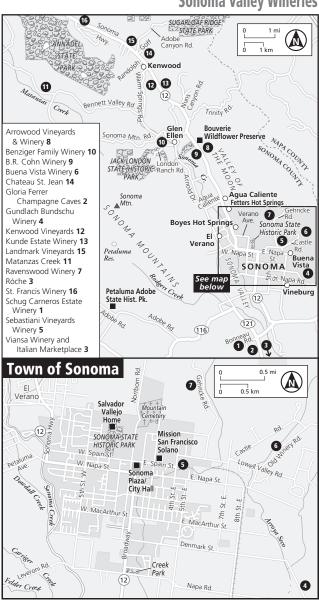
Taxis Call A-C Taxi at (2) 707/526-4888.

2 Touring the Wineries

Sonoma Valley is currently home to more than 40 wineries (including California's first winery, Buena Vista, founded in 1857) and 13,000 acres of vineyards, which produce roughly 40 types of wine.

Unlike the rigidly structured tours at many of Napa Valley's corporate-owned wineries, tastings and tours on the Sonoma side of the Mayacamas Mountains are low-key, often free, and include plenty of friendly banter between the winemakers and their guests.

11:32 PM



The towns and wineries covered below are organized geographically from south to north, starting at the intersection of Highway 37 and Highway 121 in the Carneros District and ending in Kenwood. The wineries here tend to be a little more spread out than they are in Napa Valley, but they're easy to find. Still, it's best to decide which wineries you're most interested in and devise a touring strategy before you set out so you don't find yourself doing a lot of backtracking. (For more on this, see "Strategies for Touring the Wine Country," in chapter 3; and check out the map "Sonoma Valley Wineries" on p. 131 to get your bearings.)

Below is a great selection of Sonoma Valley wineries. If you'd like a complete list of local wineries, be sure to pick up one of the free guides to the valley available at the **Sonoma Valley Visitors Bureau** (see "Visitor Information," above).

THE CARNEROS DISTRICT

Róche The first winery you'll encounter as you enter Sonoma Valley, Róche (pronounced *rosh*) is typical of the area—a small, family-run operation that focuses on one or two varietals and has very limited distribution. (Róche wines, in fact, are sold exclusively through the tasting room.) Situated atop a gently sloping knoll, the ranch-style winery and surrounding 2,200 acres of vineyards and estate are owned by Genevieve and Joe Róche, who originally bought the property with no intention of starting a winery. But in the early 1980s, a colleague suggested that they experiment with a few vines of chardonnay—and the results were so impressive that they decided to go into business making estate-grown chardonnay, pinot noir, and syrah.

The Roches produce only about 10,000 cases per year, some of which are bought before the wine even hits the bottle. Tastings are complimentary for nonreserve wines, and prices range from \$10 for a Tamarix pinot noir blanc to \$36 for the unfiltered Estate reserve pinot noir. Picnic tables overlooking the valley and San Pablo Bay are available, though you'd probably prefer lunching at neighboring Viansa Winery and Italian Marketplace (see below).

28700 Arnold Dr. (Hwy. 121), Sonoma. R 800/825-9475 or 707/935-7115. www. rochewinery.com. Daily 10am–6pm (5pm in winter). No tours available.

Viansa Winery and Italian Marketplace & Finds This sprawling Tuscan-style villa perches atop a knoll overlooking the entire lower Sonoma Valley. Viansa is the brainchild of Sam and Vicki Sebastiani, who left the family dynasty to create their own temple to

food and wine. (*Viansa* is a contraction of "Vicki and Sam.") While Sam, a third-generation winemaker, runs the winery, Vicki manages the marketplace, a large room crammed with a cornucopia of high-quality preserves, mustards, olive oils, pastas, salads, breads, desserts, Italian tableware, cookbooks, and wine-related gifts.

The winery, which sells its varietals exclusively at the winery and through their extensive mail-order business called the Tuscan Club, has established a favorable reputation for its Italian varietals such as muscat canelli, sangiovese, and nebbiolo. Five-dollar tastings are poured at the east end of the marketplace, and the self-guided tour includes a trip through the underground barrel-aging cellar adorned with colorful hand-painted murals. Free guided tours are held daily at 11am and 2pm.

Viansa is also one of the few wineries in Sonoma Valley that sells deli items—the focaccia sandwiches are delicious. You can dine alfresco while you admire the bucolic wetlands view.

25200 Arnold Dr. (Hwy. 121), Sonoma. © 800/995-4740 or 707/935-4700. www. viansa.com. Daily 10am–5pm. No appointment needed for the self-guided tour.

Gloria Ferrer Champagne Caves (Finds) When you have had it up to here with chardonnays and pinots, it's time to pay a visit to Gloria Ferrer, the grande dame of the Wine Country's sparklingwine producers. Who's Gloria? She's the wife of José Ferrer, whose family has made sparkling wine for 5 centuries. The family business, Freixenet, is the largest producer of sparkling wine in the world; Cordon Negro is its most popular brand. That equals big bucks, and certainly a good chunk went into building this palatial estate. Glimmering like Oz high atop a gently sloping hill, it overlooks the verdant Carneros District. On a sunny day, enjoying a glass of dry brut while soaking in the magnificent views is a must.

If you're unfamiliar with the term *méthode champenoise*, be sure to take the free 30-minute tour of the fermenting tanks, bottling line, and caves brimming with racks of yeast-laden bottles. Afterward, retire to the elegant tasting room for a flute of brut or cuvée (\$4–\$7 a glass, \$18 and up per bottle), find an empty chair on the veranda, and say, "Ahhh. *This* is the life." There are picnic tables, but it's usually too windy for comfort, and you must buy a bottle of sparkling wine to secure a table.

23555 Carneros Hwy. (Hwy. 121), Sonoma. **(?) 707/996-7256.** www.gloriaferrer. com. Daily 10:30am–5:15pm. Tours daily; call for schedule (call **(?)** 707/933-1917 after 9:30am the day you plan to visit for an updated tour schedule for that day).

Schug Carneros Estate Winery A native of Germany's Rhine River valley, Walter Schug (pronounced *shewg*) comes from a long line of pinot noir vintners. After graduating from the prestigious German wine institute of Geisenheim in 1959, he came to California and worked as winemaker for Joseph Phelps, where he established his reputation as one of California's top cabernet sauvignon and Riesling producers. In 1980, he launched his own label from a vineyard he tended at Phelps, and he left soon afterward to build Schug Carneros Estate Winery. Since then, Schug's wines have achieved world-class status, and an astounding amount of his wine is sent overseas.

The winery is situated on top of a rise overlooking the surrounding Carneros District, a prime region for cool-climate grapes such as chardonnay and pinot noir (Schug's predominant wines). Its post-and-beam architecture reflects the Schug family's German heritage; the tasting room, however, is quite ordinary and small, designed more for practicality than pomp and circumstance (a radical contrast to neighboring Viansa and Gloria Ferrer). Typical of Sonoma wineries, there's no tasting fee for new releases (reserve tasting \$5), and bottle prices are all quite reasonable, ranging from \$15 for a Sonoma Valley sauvignon blanc to \$50 for a Heritage reserve cabernet. The winery has new picnic facilities, but picnicking can be breezy when the winds upwell from the neighboring dairy farm. More fun: pétanque courts, Carneros views, and cave tours by appointment.

602 Bonneau Rd. (west of Hwy. 121), Sonoma. © 800/966-9365 or 707/939-9363. www.schugwinery.com. Daily 10am–5pm. Tours by appointment only.

SONOMA

Gundlach Bundschu Winery (F) If it looks like the people working here are actually enjoying themselves, that's because they are. Gundlach Bundschu (pronounced *gun*-lock *bun*-shoe) is the quintessential Sonoma winery—nonchalant in appearance but obsessed with wine: The GB clan are a nefarious lot, infamous for wild stunts such as holding up Napa's Wine Train on horseback and—egad!—serving Sonoma wines to their captives; the small tasting room looks not unlike a bomb shelter, the Talking Heads is their version of Muzak, and the "art" consists of a dozen witty black-and-white posters promoting GB wines.

This is the oldest continually family-owned and -operated winery in California, going into its sixth generation since Jacob Gundlach harvested his first crop in 1858. Drop in to sample chardonnay, pinot noir, merlot, cabernet, and more. Prices for the 15 distinct

wines range from a very reasonable \$14 per bottle for the Polar Bearitage (ha, ha) white table wine to \$65 for the Vintage reserve cabernet sauvignon, though most prices are in the mid-teens. Tastings are \$5 and tours, which include a trip into the 430-foot cave, are held regularly on weekends and by appointment on weekdays.

Gundlach Bundschu has the best picnic grounds in the valley, though you have to walk to the top of Towles' Hill to earn the sensational view. They also have great activities (Midsummer Mozart Festival, film fests), so call or check the website if you want to join the fun.

2000 Denmark St. (off Eighth St. E.), Sonoma. © 707/938-5277. www.gunbun. com. Daily 11am–4:30pm. Tours last 10–20 min. and are offered Sat–Sun; by appointment on weekdays.

Sebastiani Vineyards & Winery The name Sebastiani is practically synonymous with Sonoma. What started in 1904, when Samuele Sebastiani began producing his first wines, has in three generations grown into a small empire. After a few years of seismic retrofitting, a facelift, and a temporary tasting room, the original 1904 winery is now open to the public, with more extensive educational tours, an 80-foot **S**-shaped tasting bar, and lots of shopping opportunities in the gift shop. In the tasting room's mini-museum area you can see the winery's original crusher and press, as well as the world's largest collection of oak-barrel carvings, crafted by local artist Earle Brown. You can sample an extensive selection of wines for \$8. Bottle prices are reasonable, ranging from \$15 to \$75. A picnic area adjoins the cellars, but a far more scenic spot is across the parking lot, in Sebastiani's Cherryblock Vineyards.

389 Fourth St. E., Sonoma. © 800/888-5532 or 707/938-5532. www.sebastiani. com. Daily 10am–5pm. Call for tour schedules; no reservations necessary.

Buena Vista Winery Count Agoston Haraszthy, the Hungarian émigré who is universally regarded as the father of California's wine industry, founded this historic winery in 1857. A close friend of General Vallejo, Haraszthy returned from Europe in 1861 with 100,000 of the finest vine cuttings, which he made available to all growers. Although Buena Vista's winemaking now takes place at an ultramodern facility in the Carneros District, the winery maintains a tasting room inside the restored 1857 Press House. The beautiful stone-crafted room brims with wines, wine-related gifts, and accessories, as well as a small art gallery along the inner balcony.

Tastings are \$5 (plus glass) and \$10 for older reserve wines. You can take the self-guided tour any time during operating hours; the

Heritage Tour, offered daily by appointment at 11am and 2pm, costs \$15 and includes a vertical tasting and a tour emphasizing the winery's history, viticulture, and oenology. After tasting, grab your favorite bottle, a selection of cheeses, salami, bread (fresh on weekends, crackers during the week), and pâté (all available in the tasting room), and plant yourself at one of the many picnic tables in the lush, verdant setting.

18000 Old Winery Rd. (off E. Napa St., slightly northeast of downtown), Sonoma. © 800/926-1266 or 707/938-1266. www.buenavistawinery.com. Daily 10am—5pm. No appointment needed for the self-guided tour; Heritage Tour \$15 by appointment only.

Ravenswood Winery Compared to old heavies such as Sebastiani and Buena Vista, Ravenswood is a relative newcomer to the Sonoma wine scene. It has quickly established itself as the sine qua non of zinfandel, the versatile grape that's quickly gaining ground on the rapacious cabernet sauvignon. In fact, Ravenswood is the first winery in the United States to focus primarily on zins, which make up about three-quarters of its 700,000-case production; it also produces merlot, cabernet sauvignon, and a small amount of chardonnay.

The winery is smartly designed—recessed into the hillside to protect its treasures from the simmering summers. Tours follow the winemaking process from grape to glass and include a visit to the aromatic oak-barrel aging rooms. A gourmet Barbecue Overlooking the Vineyards runs from 11am to 2:30pm on weekends from Memorial Day through September; call for details and reservations. You're welcome to bring your own picnic basket to any of the tables. Tastings are \$5, which is refundable with purchase.

18701 Gehricke Rd. (off Lovall Valley Rd.), Sonoma. © 800/NO-WIMPY or 707/938-1960. www.ravenswood-wine.com. Daily 10am–5pm. Tours, by reservation only, at 10:30am.

GLEN ELLEN

B. R. Cohn Winery You may not have heard of Bruce Cohn, but you've certainly heard of the Doobie Brothers, the San Francisco band he managed to fame and fortune. He used part of his share of that fortune to purchase this wonderfully bucolic estate with its whitewashed farmhouse and groves of rare olive trees. Cohn, a native of Sonoma County, started making his own wine in 1984 and was an immediate success. The new tasting room, which opened in 2003, showcases framed gold and platinum albums and is home to the friendly and informative staff who pours \$5 tastings (applied

toward purchase) of cabernet, pinot noir, chardonnay, syrah (new as of 2003) and an occasional merlot. Bottle prices range from the mid-teens to \$100, and the winery often sells selections that aren't available elsewhere. Though best known for his cabernet sauvignon, it's a case of Cohn's reserve chardonnay you'll want to send back home, along with a bottle or two of his award-winning (and pricey) olive oil. There are a few picnic tables on the property, but it's not a bad idea to bring along a blanket and relax on the terraced hills of plush lawn overlooking the vineyards.

15000 Sonoma Hwy. (Hwy. 12, just north of Madrone Rd.), Glen Ellen. © 800/330-4064 or 707/938-4064. www.brcohn.com. Daily 10am–5pm. Tours by appointment.

Arrowood Vineyards & Winery Richard Arrowood had already established a reputation as a master winemaker at Chateau St. Jean when he and his wife, Alis Demers Arrowood, set out on their own in 1986. Even though the winery was purchased by Mondavi in 2000, Arrowood still embodies Richard's winemaking vision—especially since he's still making the juice. The picturesque winery stands on a gently rising hillside lined with perfectly manicured vineyards. Tastings take place in the Hospitality House, the newer of Arrowood's two stately gray-and-white buildings, which are fashioned after New England farmhouses, complete with wraparound porches. Richard's focus is on making world-class wine with minimal intervention, and his results are impressive: More than one of his current releases has been awarded over 90 points (out of 100) from Wine Spectator. Mind you, excellence doesn't come cheap. Prices start at \$29 for a chardonnay and quickly climb to \$85 for the reserve cabernet. Arrowood charges \$5 for tastings, and if you're curious about what near-perfection tastes like, it's well worth it. No picnic facilities are available.

14347 Sonoma Hwy. (Hwy. 12), Glen Ellen. \bigcirc **800/938-5170** or 707/935-2600. www.arrowoodvineyards.com. Daily 10am—4:30pm. Tours, by appointment only, are at 10:30am and 2:30pm daily.

Benziger Family Winery (Finds) When you visit here, you know you are indeed visiting a family winery. At any given time, three generations of Benzigers (pronounced *ben-zigger*) may be running around tending to chores, and they instantly make you feel as if you're part of the clan. The pastoral, user-friendly property features an exceptional self-guided tour ("The most comprehensive tour in the wine industry," according to *Wine Spectator*), gardens, a spacious tasting room staffed by amiable folks, and an art gallery.

The \$10 40-minute tram tour, held six to eight times daily and pulled by a beefy tractor through the vineyards, is both informative and fun and includes wine tasting. *Tip:* Tram tickets—a hot item in the summer—are available on a first-come, first-served basis, so either arrive early or stop by in the morning to pick up afternoon tickets.

Tastings start at \$5, and the winery offers several scenic picnic spots.

1883 London Ranch Rd. (off Arnold Dr., on the way to Jack London State Historic Park), Glen Ellen. © 800/989-8890 or 707/935-3000. www.benziger.com. Tasting room daily 10am–5pm. \$10 tram tours daily (weather permitting) includes tasting; call for times.

KENWOOD

Kunde Estate Winery Expect a friendly, unintimidating welcome at this scenic winery, run by four generations of the Kundes since 1904. One of the largest grape suppliers in the area, the Kunde family (pronounced *kun*-dee) has devoted 800 acres of its 2,000-acre ranch to growing ultrapremium-quality grapes, which it provides to many Sonoma and Napa wineries. This abundance allows the Kundes to make nothing but estate wines (wines made from grapes grown on the Kunde property, as opposed to also using grapes purchased from other growers).

The tasting room is located in a spiffy 17,000-square-foot wine-making facility, which features specialized crushing equipment that enables the winemaker to run whole clusters to the press—a real advantage in white-wine production. Tastings of four estate releases are \$5 (refunded with purchase) and reserve tastings will set you back \$10; bottle prices range from \$15 for a Magnolia Lane sauvignon blanc to \$50 for a Drummond Vineyards cabernet sauvignon; most labels sell in the high teens. The tasting room also has a gift shop and large windows overlooking the bottling room and tank room.

The tour of the property's extensive wine caves includes a history of the winery. Private tours are available by appointment, but most folks are happy to just stop by for some vino and to relax at one of the many picnic tables placed around the man-made pond. Animal lovers will appreciate Kunde's preservation efforts: The property has a duck estuary with more than 50 species (which can be seen by appointment only).

10155 Sonoma Hwy., Kenwood. © 707/833-5501. www.kunde.com. Tastings daily 10:30am—4:30pm. Cave tours Tues—Thurs 11am, Fri—Mon on the hour 11am—3pm.

Kenwood Vineyards Kenwood's history dates to 1906, when the Pagani brothers made their living selling wine straight from the barrel and into the jug. In 1970, the Lee family bought the property and dumped a ton of money into converting the aging winery into a modern, high-production facility (most of it cleverly concealed in the original barnlike buildings). Today the Korbell-Heck Estates conglomerate owns the winery with winemaker Michael Lee at the helm until his retirement at the end of 2003. Still, Kenwood keeps its solid reputation for consistent quality with each of its varietals: cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay, zinfandel, pinot noir, merlot, and most popular, sauvignon blanc—a crisp, light wine with hints of melon.

Although the winery looks rather modest in size, its output is staggering: Nearly 500,000 cases of ultra-premium wines fermented in steel tanks and French and American oak barrels. Popular with collectors is winemaker Michael Lee's Artist Series cabernet sauvignon, a limited production from the winery's best vineyards, featuring labels with original artwork by renowned artists. The tasting room, housed in one of the old barns, offers free tastings of most varieties and sells gift items. Private reserve tastings will set you back \$2 per taste or three tastes for \$5.

9592 Sonoma Hwy. (Hwy. 12), Kenwood. **② 707/833-5891.** www.kenwoodvineyards. com. Daily 10am–4:30pm.

Chateau St. Jean & Finds Chateau St. Jean is notable for its exceptionally beautiful buildings, expansive landscaped grounds, and gourmet market—like tasting room. Among California wineries, it's a pioneer in *vineyard designation*—the procedure of making wine from, and naming it for, a single vineyard. A private drive takes you to what was once a 250-acre country retreat built in 1920; a well-manicured lawn overlooking the meticulously maintained vineyards is now a picnic area, complete with a fountain and umbrella-shaded picnic tables. You can take a self-guided tour of the gardens or pay \$25 for a private tour of the winery, gardens, and history and vineyard-designated and reserve wine tasting.

Back in the huge tasting room—where there's also a gourmet deli and plenty of housewares for sale—you can sample five featured Chateau St. Jean wines, which range from chardonnay, pinot noir, cabernet sauvignon to fumé blanc, merlot, Johannisberg Riesling, and gewürztraminer. Tastings are \$5 per person. Reserve tastings, held in a more intimate old chateau, is \$10 and includes three wines.

8555 Sonoma Hwy. (Hwy. 12; at the foot of Sugarloaf Ridge, just north of Kenwood), Kenwood. © 800/543-7572 or 707/833-4134. www.chateaustjean.com. Tastings and tours daily 10am–5pm.

St. Francis Winery Although St. Francis Winery makes commendable chardonnay, zinfandel, and cabernet sauvignon, it is best known for its highly coveted merlot. Winemaker Tom Mackey, a former high-school English teacher from San Francisco, has been hailed as the Master of Merlot by *Wine Spectator*, for his uncanny ability to craft the finest merlot in California.

If you've visited this winery before but haven't been in a while, don't follow your memory to the front door. In 2001, St. Francis moved a little farther north, to new digs bordering on the Santa Rosa county line. The original property was planted in 1910 as part of a wedding gift to Alice Kunde (section of the local Kunde family) and christened St. Francis of Assisi in 1979, when Joe Martin and Lloyd Canton—two white-collar executives turned vintners—completed their long-awaited dream winery. Today the winery still owns the property, but there's a new history in development, with much larger facilities, including two tasting rooms and an upscale gift shop. Samples are \$5 for current releases, and \$20 for a reserve tasting and food pairing. Bottles go for \$13 to \$85. Now that St. Francis has special activities—holiday cooking demos—it's worth calling or checking the website for its calendar of events.

100 Pythian Rd. (Hwy. 12), Santa Rosa (at the Kenwood border). C 800/543-7713 or 707/833-4666. www.stfranciswine.com. Daily 10am–5pm.

Landmark Vineyards One of California's oldest exclusively chardonnay estates was first founded in 1972 in the Windsor area of northern Sonoma County. When new housing development started encroaching on the winery's territory, proprietor Damaris Deere W. Ethridge (great-great-granddaughter of John Deere, the tractor baron) moved her operation to northern Sonoma Valley in 1990. The winery, which produces about 27,000 cases annually, is housed in a modest, Mission-style building set on 11 acres of vineyards. The tasting room offers complimentary samples of five current releases and pours reserve tastings for \$10. (Note the wall-to-wall mural behind the tasting counter painted by noted Sonoma Co. artist Claudia Wagar.) Wine prices range from \$11 for Adobe Canyon chardonnay to \$45 for a reserve pinot noir.

The winery has a pond-side picnic area, as well as what is probably the only professional bocce court in the valley (yes, you can play, and yes, they provide instructions). Also available from Memorial

Day to Labor Day are free Belgian horse–drawn wagon tours through the vineyards, offered every Saturday from 11:30am to 3pm.

101 Adobe Canyon Rd. (just east of Hwy. 12), Kenwood. © 800/452-6365 or 707/833-1144. www.landmarkwine.com. Daily 10am–4:30pm. Tours available by appointment.

JUST UP FROM THE VALLEY

Matanzas Creek ← Finds It's not technically in Sonoma Valley, but if there's one winery that's worth a detour, it's Matanzas (pronounced mah-tan-zas) Creek. After a scenic 20-minute drive, you'll arrive at one of the prettiest wineries in California, blanketed by fields of lavender (usually in bloom near the end of June), and surrounded by rolling hills of well-tended vineyards.

The winery has a rather unorthodox history. In 1978, Sandra and Bill MacIver, neither of whom had any previous experience in winemaking or business, set out with one goal in mind: to create the finest wines in the country. Actually, they overshot the mark. With the release of their Journey 1990 chardonnay, they were hailed by wine critics as the proud parents of the finest chardonnay ever produced in the United States, comparable to the finest white wines in the world.

This state-of-the-art, environmentally conscious winery produces chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, and cabernet, all of which you can taste for \$5. Prices for current releases are, as you would imagine, at the higher end (\$20–\$95). Also available for purchase is culinary lavender from Matanzas Creek's own lavender field, the largest outside Provence. Purchase a full glass of wine and bring it outside to savor as you wander through these wonderfully aromatic gardens. Picnic tables hidden under groves of oak have pleasant views of the surrounding vineyards. On the return trip, be sure to take the Sonoma Mountain Road detour for a real backcountry experience.

6097 Bennett Valley Rd. (off Warm Springs Rd.), Santa Rosa. © 800/590-6464 or 707/528-6464. www.matanzascreek.com. Daily 10am—4:30pm. Tours daily, by appointment only, at 10:30am, and 3pm weekdays. From Hwy. 12 in Kenwood or Glen Ellen, take Warm Springs Rd. turnoff to Bennett Valley Rd.; the drive takes 15–20 min.

3 More to See & Do

If you tire of visiting Sonoma Valley wineries, you can explore the valley's numerous other sites and attractions. The majority of activities are centered around the town of Sonoma, which is small enough to explore on foot. (The picturesque town plaza is truly

worth checking out.) If the weather's warm, I strongly recommend a guided tour of Sonoma Valley via horseback or bicycle, two of the best things to do in the Wine Country (p. 145 and 129).

THE CARNEROS DISTRICT

BIPLANE RIDES For the adrenaline junkie in your group, **Vintage Aircraft Company** & will help you lose your lunch on one of its authentic 1940 Boeing-built Stearman biplanes. Rides range from the Scenic (a leisurely flight over Sonoma Valley) and Aerobatic (loops, rolls, and assorted maneuvers) to—drumroll, please—the Kamikaze, an intensely bowel-shaking aerobatic death wish that's (and I quote) "not for the faint of heart." For two people, prices range from \$190 for the Scenic to \$250 for the Kamikaze. Vintage Aircraft Company is at the Sonoma Valley Airport, 23982 Arnold Dr. (on Hwy. 121, across from Gloria Ferrer Champagne Caves), Sonoma Valley (© 707/938-2444; www.vintageaircraft.com). Call for reservations.

SONOMA

The best way to learn about the history of Sonoma is to follow the self-guided *Sonoma Walking Tour* map, provided by the Sonoma League for Historic Preservation. Tour highlights include General Vallejo's 1852 Victorian-style home; the Sonoma Barracks, erected in 1836 to house Mexican army troops; and the Blue Wing Inn, an 1840 hostelry built to accommodate travelers—including John Fremont, Kit Carson, and Ulysses S. Grant—and new settlers while they erected homes in Sonoma. You can purchase the map for \$2.75 at the **Sonoma Valley Visitors Bureau** (see "Visitor Information," earlier in this chapter) as well as at the Sonoma Barracks, which is next door to the Mission.

Also worth a look is the Mission San Francisco Solano de Sonoma, located on Sonoma Plaza, at the corner of 1st Street East and Spain Street (© 707/938-9560). Founded in 1823, this was the northernmost—and last—mission built in California. It also was the only mission established on the northern coast by the Mexican government, which wanted to protect its territory from expansionist Russian fur traders. It's now part of Sonoma State Historic Park. Admission is \$2 for adults, free for children 17 and under. It's open daily from 10am to 5pm except New Year's Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

It may not be all bells and whistles for adults, but add steam, and that's exactly what **Train Town** is for tots. In this 10-acre

Moments The Super Spa

The Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa, 18140 Sonoma Hwy. (1) 800/862-4945 or 707/938-9000; www.sonoma missioninn.com), has always been the most complete—and the most luxurious—spa in the whole Wine Country. With its recent \$20 million, 27,000-square-foot facility, this super spa is now one of the best in the country. The Spanish Mission-style retreat offers more than 50 spa treatments, ever-popular natural mineral baths, and virtually every facility and activity imaginable. You can pamper yourself silly: Soak in mineral baths, have a facial set to music, indulge in a grape-seed body wrap, relax with a massage, take a sauna or herbal steam, go for a dip in the pool—the list goes on and on (and, alas, so will the bill). You can also work off those wicked Wine Country meals with aerobics, weights, and cardio machines; get loose in a yoga class; or just lounge and lunch by the pool. There is a catch. If you're not staying at the hotel you'll have to pay a \$45 day-use fee plus extra for any spa treatment. (The \$45 fee is waived if you book two or more treatments.) Plus rates here are some of the most expensive in the valley; a 50minute massage will set you back \$119.

mini-amusement park the theme is locomotion—as in train rides around the wooded property, over bridges, and past doting parents. Other attractions include a petting zoo, ferris wheel, and carousel. Train Town is on Broadway, between MacArthur Street and Napa Road, Sonoma (© 707/938-3912). The train keeps a-rolling Friday through Sunday from 10am to 4:30pm October through May and daily 10am to 5pm June through September. Rates to ride the train are \$4 adults and \$3.50 children and seniors; each additional ride is \$1.25 to \$1.75 per person.

SHOPPING Most of Sonoma's shops, which offer everything from food and wine to clothing and books, are located around the plaza. **The Mercado**, a small shopping center at 452 1st St. E., houses several good stores that sell unusual wares. The **Arts Guild of Sonoma**, 140 E. Napa St. (© 707/996-3115), showcases the works of local artists in a wide variety of styles and media. It's open

Monday, Wednesday and Thursday from 10am to 5pm, Friday and Saturday from 10am to 9pm, and Sunday 10am to 6pm; admission is free.

My favorite stop along the plaza is **Wine Exchange** &, 452 1st St. E. (© 707/938-1794), which carries more than 700 domestic wines, books on wine, wine paraphernalia, olive oils, and a small selection of cigars. It's a great place to begin your wine experience: You can browse though the numerous racks of bottles and ask questions of the wine-savvy staff. Even the beer connoisseur who's feeling displaced in the Wine Country will be happy at Wine Exchange, where you can find more than 300 beers from around the world. There are \$1 wine and beer tastings daily at the small bar in back, which is occupied most evenings by a gaggle of friendly locals. Wine Exchange is open daily from 10am to 6pm. Shipping is available anywhere in the United States.

THE LOCAL FARMER'S MARKET Obsessed with farm-fresh produce, Sonomans host a year-round Sonoma Valley Farmer's Market every Friday morning from 9am to noon at Depot Park on 1st Street West (just north of E. Spain St.). Dozens of growers offer fresh fruits, vegetables, flowers, homemade jams, honey, barbecued turkey, baked goods, and handmade crafts from local artists. It's such a popular gathering place for locals and visitors alike that they added a Tuesday-night market from 5:30pm to dusk April through October. The Tuesday market is held at the plaza in front of City Hall. (There's also a Saturday morning market from 9am to noon on the corner of Oakmont Drive and White Oak in Santa Rosa, about 5 minutes north of Kenwood.)

GLEN ELLEN

Hikers, mountain bikers, horseback riders, and picnickers will enjoy a day spent at Jack London State Historic Park &, 2400 London Ranch Rd., off Arnold Drive (© 707/938-5216). On its 800 acres, which were once home to the renowned writer, you'll find 10 miles of trails, the remains of London's burned-down dream house (as well as some preserved structures), and plenty of ideal picnic spots. An on-site museum, called the House of Happy Walls, was built by Jack's wife to display a collection from the author's life. The park is open daily from 9:30am to 7pm in summer, from 9:30am to 5:30pm in winter; the museum is open daily from 10am to 5pm. Admission to the park is \$5 per car, \$4 per car for seniors 62 and over. Pick up the \$1 self-guided tour map on arrival to get acquainted with the

grounds. In summer, golf-cart rides also are offered from noon to 4pm on weekends for those who don't want to hoof it.

SHOPPING Gourmands might want to stop by The Olive Press, 14301 Arnold Dr., in Jack London Village (② 800/9-OLIVE-9 or 707/939-8900). With olive trees abounding in the area and the locals' penchant for gourmet foods, it's no surprise that fresh-pressed olive oil has become a lucrative business in this neck of the woods. Everyone from large commercial outfits to small-volume growers and hobbyists can pile their olives in the hopper and watch the state-of-the-art, Italian-made olive press in action, as it conveys the fruit up a belt, cleans it, and begins the pressing process. There's also a nifty gift shop, but don't expect a bargain here; even if you bring your own bottle, a gallon of oil can go for \$128. (You'd be surprised how many olives it takes to make a gallon.) The Press also carries numerous varieties of olive oils, cured olives, and olive-related foods, gifts, and books. Open daily from 10am to 5:30pm.

HORSEBACK RIDING Long before Sonoma Valley became part of the Wine Country, it was better known as cattle country and there's no better way to explore the land's old roots than with a guided horseback tour provided by the Triple Creek Horse Outfit (© 707/933-1600; www.triplecreekhorseoutfit.com), which will lead you on a leisurely stroll—with the occasional trot thrown in for thrills. April through October, when the beautiful Jack London State Historic Park is open, you can take a memorable ride through the park. The ride takes you past vineyards owned by London's descendants, across meadows blanketed with lupine, around a lake originally dammed by London, and up to enjoy Sonoma Mountain's panoramic views. Triple Creek also offers regular, sunset, and fullmoon rides at Sugarloaf Ridge at the northern end of Sonoma Valley; a route that also winds through deep, shady forests and up to ridge tops with spectacular 360-degree views. Two-hour rides are \$60, and it's \$40 for a 1-hour ride. Call for additional information and prices.

GOLF Thanks to the valley's mild climate, golf is a year-round pursuit. At the northern end of Sonoma Valley is the semiprivate Oakmont Golf Club, 7025 Oakmont Dr., off the Sonoma Highway, Santa Rosa (© 707/539-0415; www.oakmontgc.com), which has two 18-hole championship courses, both designed by Ted Robinson, as well as a driving range, clubhouse, and locker rooms. The par 63 East course is considered the most challenging, and the

par 72 West course is for higher-handicapped golfers. Greens fees are \$32 Monday through Thursday, \$37 Friday, and \$45 weekends and holidays; carts are \$26. Reservations are recommended at least a day in advance on weekdays, and at least a week in advance on weekends.

Originally designed by Sam Whiting in 1926, the Sonoma Golf Club, 17700 Arnold Dr., off Boyes Drive (pro shop © 707/996-0300), was completely remodeled in 1991 by Robert Muir Graves, is now owned by the Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn, and is only accessible if you're staying at the resort. Its par 72, 18-hole, 7,069-yard championship course has recently become private, which means you have to stay at the hotel to play. It's mostly flat, with several tight doglegs around an armada of redwoods and oaks. A driving range was added in the \$10-million renovation; a club-house and locker rooms are also provided. Greens fees (\$150 daily; packages available through the hotel) include a cart and use of the driving range. A strict dress code is enforced.

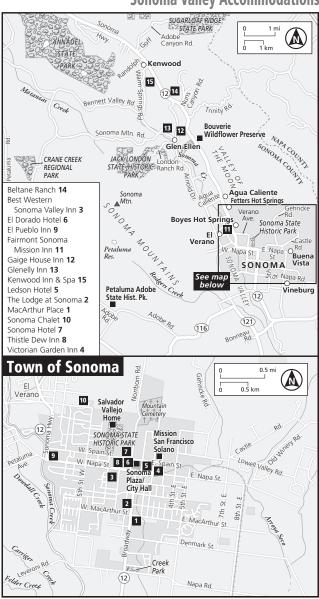
If you're a beginner or just want to bone up on your irons game, **Los Arroyos Golf Club**, 5000 Stage Gulch Rd. off Arnold Drive, a short drive from downtown Sonoma (pro shop © 707/938-8835), is for you. The small 9-hole course is fairly flat and inexpensive—\$12 on weekdays, \$14 on weekends. Pull carts are an extra \$2; practice greens and club rentals are also available. It's open on a first-come, first-play basis.

4 Where to Stay

When planning your trip, keep in mind that during the high season—between June and November—most hotels charge peak rates and sell out completely on weekends; many have a 2-night minimum. Always ask about discounts, particularly during midweek, when most hotels and B&Bs drop their rates by as much as 30%. During the off-season, you will have far better bargaining power and may be able to get a room at almost half the summer rate.

The accommodations listed below are arranged first by area and then by price, using the following categories: **Very Expensive**, more than \$250 per night; **Expensive**, \$200 to \$250 per night; **Moderate**, \$150 to \$200 per night; and **Inexpensive**, less than \$150 per night. (Sorry, the reality is that anything less than \$150 a night qualifies as inexpensive 'round these parts.)

11:32 PM



HELP WITH RESERVATIONS If you are having trouble finding a room, try calling the Sonoma Valley Visitors Bureau (© 707/996-1090), which can refer you to a lodging that has a room to spare (but won't make reservations for you). The Bed and Breakfast Association of Sonoma Valley (© 800/969-4667 or www.sonoma bb.com) can refer you to one of its member B&Bs and can make reservations for you as well.

SONOMA VERY EXPENSIVE

Ledson Hotel Sonoma's Square's hot new addition may look like a historic landmark, but this two-story six-room luxury inn is brand-spanking new. The regal brick hotel with ornate railings and an antiquated aura is the realized dream of vintner Steve Ledson who wanted to create the ultimate luxury hotel that gave a nod to the past through decor and a wink at the future with amenities. The result is six ultra-opulent rooms adorned with period furnishings, lots of rich fabrics, hardwood floors, Italian marble, fresh flowers, king-sized beds, whirlpool tubs, fireplaces, balconies, surroundsound television and digital music, and high-speed Internet access, and a welcoming of in-room wine and cheese. Alas, there are no public areas to speak of; you actually enter through a side door or its Harmony Club restaurant, which takes up the entire first floor, opens onto the plaza, and is a great wine bar and restaurant serving up small plates, Sonoma wines, and live jazz.

480 First St. E. (at the plaza), Sonoma CA 95476. © 707/996-9779. Fax 707/996-9776. www.ledsonhotel.com. 6 units. \$350—\$395. Rates include full breakfast served in the Harmony Club. AE, DISC, MC, V. Amenities: Restaurant and wine bar. *In room:* A/C, TV, dataport, whirlpool tub, digital music with surround sound, hair dryer, iron.

MacArthur Place A highly recommended alternative to the Sonoma Mission Inn is this much smaller and more intimate luxury property and spa located 4 blocks south of Sonoma's plaza. Once a 300-acre vineyard and ranch, MacArthur Place has since been whittled down to an 8-acre "Country Estate" replete with landscaped gardens and tree-lined pathways, various freestanding accommodations, and a spa and heated swimming pool and whirlpool. Most of the individually decorated guest rooms are housed within Victorian-modern cottages scattered throughout the resort; all are exceedingly well stocked with custom linens, oversized comforters, and original artwork. The newer suites come with fireplaces, porches, wet bars, six-speaker surround sound, and whirlpool tubs that often have

shutters opening to the bedroom. Everyone has access to complimentary wine and cheese in the evening and the DVD library anytime. The full-service spa offers a wide array of services: fitness programs, body treatments, Indian rejuvenation treatments, skin care, astrology services, and massages. Within the resort's restored century-old barn is Saddles, Sonoma's only steakhouse specializing in mesquite-grilled prime beef and whimsically classy-western decor. There are also an array of other excellent restaurants a short walk away—as well as shops, wineries, and bars. In fact, that's where MacArthur Place has Sonoma Mission Inn beat: Once you park your car here you can *leave* it parked during a good part of your stay. 29 E. MacArthur St., Sonoma, CA 95476. © 800/722-1866 or 707/938-2929. www.macarthurplace.com. 64 units. Sun-Thurs \$169-\$425 double; Fri-Sat \$299-\$525 double. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DC, MC, V. Amenities: Restaurant and bar specializing in martinis; outdoor heated pool; exercise room; full-service spa; co-ed steam; outdoor Jacuzzi; rental bikes; concierge; limited room service; massage; laundry service; same-day dry cleaning. In room: A/C, TV/DVD, dataport, wet bar and coffeemaker in suites, hair dryer, iron.

Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa AAA As you drive through Boyes Hot Springs, you may wonder why someone decided to build a multimillion-dollar spa resort in this ordinary little town. There's no view to speak of, and it certainly isn't within walking distance of any wineries or fancy restaurants. So what's the deal? It's the naturally heated artesian mineral water, piped from directly underneath the spa into the temperature-controlled pools and whirlpools. Set on 12 meticulously groomed acres, the Sonoma Mission Inn consists of a massive three-story replica of a Spanish mission (well, aside from the pink paint job) built in 1927, an array of satellite wings housing numerous superluxury suites, and, of course, worldclass spa facilities. It's a popular retreat for the wealthy and well known, so don't be surprised if you see Barbra Streisand or Harrison Ford. Big changes have occurred since the resort changed ownership a few years ago. It gained 60 suites, a \$20 million spa facility (you won't even recognize the old one), and the Sonoma Golf Club.

The modern rooms have plantation-style shutters, ceiling fans, down comforters, and oversized bath towels. The Wine Country rooms feature king-size beds, desks, refrigerators, and huge limestone and marble bathrooms; some offer wood-burning fireplaces, and many have balconies. The older, slightly smaller Historic Inn rooms are sweetly appointed with homey furnishings; most have queen-size beds. For the ultimate in luxury, the opulently appointed (and brand-new) Mission Suites are the way to go.

Corner of Boyes Blvd and Calif. 12, P.O. Box 1447, Sonoma, CA 95476. © 800/441-1414 or 707/938-9000. Fax 707/938-4250. www.fairmont.com. 228 units. \$199—\$1000 double. AE, DC, MC, V. From central Sonoma, drive 3 miles north on Hwy. 12 and turn left on Boyes Blvd. Amenities: 2 restaurants; 2 large heated outdoor pools; golf course; health club and spa (see box, "The Super Spa," on p. 143 for the complete rundown); Jacuzzi; sauna; bike rental; concierge; business center; salon; room service (6am—11pm); babysitting; same-day laundry service and dry cleaning; valet parking. *In room:* A/C, TV, dataport, minibar, hair dryer, iron, safe, high speed Internet in most rooms, complimentary bottle of wine upon arrival.

EXPENSIVE

El Dorado Hotel & This 1843 Mission-revival building may look like a 19th-century Wild West relic from the outside, but inside it's all 20th-century deluxe. Each modern, handsomely appointed guest room—designed by the same folks who put together the ultra-exclusive Auberge du Soleil resort in Rutherford—has French windows and tiny terraces. Some offer lovely views of the plaza; others overlook the private courtyard and heated lap pool. All rooms (except those for guests with disabilities) are on the second floor, contain four-poster beds, plush towels, and hair dryers, and were upgraded in 2001. The two rooms on the ground floor are off the private courtyard, and each has a partially enclosed patio. The prices reflect its prime location on Sonoma Square, but this is one of the most charming options in its price range. Breakfast, served inside or out in the courtyard, includes coffee, fruits, and freshly baked breads and pastries.

405 First St. W., Sonoma, CA 95476. © 800/289-3031 or 707/996-3030. Fax 707/996-3148. www.hoteleldorado.com. 27 units. Summer \$170–\$190 double; winter \$135–\$155 double. Rates include continental breakfast and bottle of wine. AE, MC, V. Amenities: Restaurant; heated outdoor pool; access to nearby health club; bike rental; concierge; room service (11:30am–10pm); laundry service; dry cleaning. *In room:* A/C, TV/DVD, dataport, hair dryer, iron, fridge, CD player.

The Lodge at Sonoma Me Not surprisingly, a large-scale hotel finally made its way to downtown Sonoma. The good news is that this one, which is privately owned and operated by Marriott, takes into account its surroundings, offering some country charm in its 182 rooms. At the center of this resort is a U-shaped building with a classic big-hotel lobby, a Carneros restaurant with fine food and city-slick ambience, and a large courtyard swimming pool with plenty of lounge chairs. The very tasteful and spacious accommodations in the main building are decorated in various shades of earth tones and come complete with prints by local artists, artistic lighting fixtures, balconies or patios, and some fireplaces and tubs with shutters that open from the lovely bathroom to the bedroom. The

two-story cottages along the property are especially appealing because they're surrounded by trees, flowers, and shrubs and offer a sense of seclusion. All rooms have great robes and bath amenities. The full-service spa, where I've twice had one of the best massages of my life, makes excellent use of its outdoor public space, with a number of small pools surrounded by lush plants.

1325 Broadway, Sonoma, CA 95476. © 888/710-8008 or 707/935-6600. Fax 707/935-6829. www.thelodgeatsonoma.com. 182 units. \$159–\$349 double. AE, MC, V. Amenities: Restaurant; large heated outdoor pool; health club and spa; Jacuzzi; concierge; business center; limited room service; in-room massage. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, dataport, wet bar in suites, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron.

MODERATE

Best Western Sonoma Valley Inn @ds There are just two reasons to stay at the Sonoma Valley Inn: It's the only place left with a vacancy, or you're bringing the kids along. Otherwise, unless you don't mind staying in a rather drab room with thin walls and small bathrooms, you're probably going to be a little disappointed. Kids, on the other hand, will love the place: There's plenty of room to run around, plus a large heated outdoor pool, a gazebo-covered spa, and a sauna to play in. The rooms do have a lot of perks, however, such as continental breakfast delivered to your room each morning, a gift bottle of white table wine from Buena Vista Vineyards chilling in the fridge, and satellite TV with HBO. Most rooms have either a balcony or a deck overlooking the inner courtyard. It's also in a good location, just a block from Sonoma's plaza.

550 Second St. W. (1 block from the plaza), Sonoma, CA 95476. © 800/334-5784 or 707/938-9200. Fax 707/938-0935. www.sonomavalleyinn.com. 82 units. \$109—\$349 double. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DC, MC, V. Amenities: Heated outdoor pool; Jacuzzi; sauna; steam room; exercise room. *In room:* A/C, TV, dataport, fridge, coffeemaker, hair dryer, iron.

Thistle Dew Inn Innkeepers Larry and Norma Barnett will be the first to admit that they don't run the fanciest B&B in town, but they'll just as quickly tell you that you'd be hard-pressed to find a better deal in Sonoma. Six rooms—all with private baths, queen beds, and phones with voice mail—are split between two homes, one built in 1869 and the other 1910. Both are handsomely furnished with an impressive collection of original Arts and Crafts furniture. If you're looking to save a few bucks, opt for a room in the main house; otherwise, you'll want one of the four larger and quieter rooms in the rear house. Each of the rooms in the rear house has its own deck overlooking Larry's cactus garden and is furnished

with either a gas fireplace, a two-person whirlpool tub, or both. A second-floor two-room suite was added in 2000.

Luxury perks at Thistle Dew Inn include breakfast (most popular are the Dutch babies—German pancakes with ricotta cheese and jams), which can be delivered to your room for an additional fee; afternoon hors d'oeuvres; free use of bicycles and utensil-filled picnic baskets; passes to the nearby health club; and use of the garden hot tub. You're bound to like the location—just half a block from Sonoma's plaza—as well as your hosts Larry and Norma and their very low-key, help-yourself approach toward innkeeping.

171 W. Spain St., Sonoma, CA 95476. © 800/382-7895 or 707/938-2909. Fax 707/996-8413. www.thistledew.com. 6 units. \$140–\$275 double; ask about winter weekday specials. Rates include full breakfast and afternoon hors d'oeuvres. AE, DISC, MC, V. Amenities: Passes to nearby health club; free bikes; hot tub. *In room:* A/C, 1 room with TV.

INEXPENSIVE

El Pueblo Inn Located on Sonoma's main east-west street, 8 blocks from the center of town, this isn't Sonoma's fanciest hotel, but it did just undergo renovations, is well cared for, and offers some of the best-priced accommodations around. The rooms here are pleasant enough, with individual entrances, post-and-beam construction, exposed brick walls, light-wood furniture, and geometric prints. A new addition in 2002 resulted in 20 new larger rooms with high ceilings, DVDs, and fireplaces in some rooms. They also recently made each room open to a courtyard with a fountain. Their new reception area doubles as a breakfast room for their continental breakfast and leads to a small meeting room. Reservations should be made at least a month in advance for the spring and summer months.

896 W. Napa St., Sonoma, CA 95476. (© 800/900-8844 or 707/996-3651. Fax 707/935-5988. www.elpuebloinn.com. 53 units. May—Oct \$108—\$255 double; Nov—Apr \$90—\$195 double. AE, DISC, MC, V. Corporate, AAA, and senior discounts are available. Amenities: Heated outdoor pool; Jacuzzi; in-room massage. *In room:* A/C, TV, DVD (newer rooms only), dataport, fridge, coffeemaker and biscotti, hair dryer, iron.

Sonoma Chalet ← This is one of the few accommodations in Sonoma that's truly secluded; it's on the outskirts of town, in a peaceful country setting overlooking a 200-acre ranch. The accommodations, housed in a Swiss-style farmhouse and several cottages, have all been delightfully decorated by someone with an eye for color and a concern for comfort. You'll find claw-foot tubs, country quilts, Oriental carpets, comfortable furnishings, and private decks; some units have wood stoves or fireplaces. The two least expensive rooms share a bathroom, and the cottages offer the most privacy. A

breakfast of fruit, yogurt, pastries, and cereal is served either in the country kitchen or in your room. If you like country rustic, you'll like the Sonoma Chalet.

18935 5th St. W., Sonoma, CA 95476. © 800/938-3129 or 707/938-3129. www.sonomachalet.com. 7 units including 3 cottages. Apr–Oct \$110–\$225 double; Nov–Mar \$110–\$195 double. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, MC, V. Amenities: Hot tub. *In room:* A/C, coffeemaker in cottages, hair dryer, iron on request, no phone.

Sonoma Hotel **A* This cute little historic hotel on Sonoma's tree-lined town plaza emphasizes 19th-century elegance and comfort. Built in 1880 by German immigrant Henry Weyl, it has attractive guest rooms decorated in early California style, with French country furnishings, antique beds, and period decorations. In a bow to modern luxuries, recent additions include private bathrooms, cable TV, phones with dataports, and (and this is crucial) air-conditioning. Perks include fresh coffee and pastries in the morning and wine and cheese in the evening. The lovely restaurant The Girl & the Fig (see "Where to Dine," later in this chapter) is now located right next to the hotel.

110 W. Spain St., Sonoma, CA 95476. © 800/468-6016 or 707/996-2996. Fax 707/996-7014. www.sonomahotel.com. 16 units. Summer \$110–\$245 double. Winter Sun–Thurs \$95–\$170 double; Fri–Sat \$115–\$195 double. Rates include continental breakfast and evening wine. AE, DC, MC, V. *In room:* A/C, TV, dataport.

Victorian Garden Inn **Proprietor Donna Lewis runs what is easily the cutest B&B in Sonoma Valley. A small picket fence and a wall of trees enclose an adorable Victorian garden brimming with violets, roses, camellias, and peonies, all shaded under flowering fruit trees. It's truly a marvelous sight in the springtime. The guest rooms—three in the century-old water tower and one in the main building, an 1870s Greek revival farmhouse—continue the Victorian theme, with white wicker furniture, floral prints, padded armchairs, and claw-foot tubs. The most popular rooms are the Top o' the Tower and the Woodcutter's Cottage. Each has its own entrance and a garden view; the cottage boasts a sofa and armchairs set in front of the fireplace. After a hard day's wine tasting, spend the afternoon cooling off in the pool or on the shaded wraparound porch, enjoying a mellow merlot while soaking in the sweet garden smells. 316 E. Napa St., Sonoma, CA 95476. (?) 800/543-5339 or 707/996-5339. Fax 707/996-1689. www.victoriangardeninn.com. 4 units. \$125-\$240 double. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, DC, MC, V. Amenities: Outdoor pool; concierge; business center; room service (8am-5pm); laundry service; dry cleaning, hot tub. In room: A/C, fireplaces in some rooms.

GLEN ELLEN VERY EXPENSIVE

Gaige House Inn AAA Finds Owners Ken Burnet Jr. and Greg Nemrow have managed to turn what was already a fine B&B into the finest in the Wine Country. They've done it by offering a level of service, amenities, and decor normally associated with outrageously expensive resorts—but without the snobbery. Every nook and cranny of the 1890 Queen Anne-Italianate building and Garden Annex is swathed with fashionable articles found during the owners' world travels. Spacious rooms offer everything one could want—firm mattresses, wondrously silk-soft linens, and premium down comforters grace the beds, and even the furniture and artwork are the kind you'd like to take home with you. Breakfast is a momentous event, accented with herbs from the inn's garden and prepared by a chef who cooked at the James Beard House in 2001. Bathrooms are equally luxe, range in size, and are stocked with Aveda products. Attention to detail means you'll be treated to the best robe I've ever worn and evening appetizers at wine hour that might include freshly shucked oysters or a sautéed scallop served ready-to-slurp on a Chinese soupspoon.

But wait, it gets better. Behind the inn is a 1½-acre oasis with perfectly manicured lawns, a 40-foot-long pool, and an achingly inviting creek-side hammock shaded by a majestic Heritage oak. All 15 rooms, each artistically decorated in a plantation theme with Asian and Indonesian influences (trust me, they're beautiful), have kingor queen-size beds; four rooms have Jacuzzi tubs, one has a Japanese soaking tub, and several have fireplaces. For the ultimate retreat reserve one of the suites, which have patios overlooking a stream. On sunny days, breakfast is served at individual tables on the large terrace. Evenings are best spent in the reading parlor, sipping premium wines. Greg and Ken also manage four long-term rentals (private guesthouses on private estates) for those who want more privacy and fewer services.

13540 Arnold Dr., Glen Ellen, CA 95442. © 800/935-0237 or 707/935-0237. Fax 707/935-6411. www.gaige.com. 15 units. Summer \$250–\$375 double, \$375–\$525 suite; winter \$175–\$325 double, \$325–\$525 suite. Rates include full breakfast and evening wines. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Amenities: Large heated pool; in-room massage. *In room:* A/C, TV, fax, dataport, hair dryer, iron, safe.

INEXPENSIVE

Beltane Ranch & Finds The word "ranch" conjures up a big ol' two-story house in the middle of hundreds of rolling acres, the kind of place where you laze away the day in a hammock watching the

grass grow or pitching horseshoes in the garden. Well, friend, you can have all that and more at the Beltane Ranch, a century-old buttercup-yellow manor that's been everything from a bunkhouse to a brothel to a turkey farm. You simply can't help but feel your tensions ease away as you prop your feet up on the shady wraparound porch overlooking the vineyards, sipping a cool, fruity chardonnay while reading *Lonesome Dove* for the third time. Each room is uniquely decorated with American and European antiques; all have sitting areas and separate entrances. A big country breakfast is served in the garden or on the porch overlooking the vineyards. For exercise, you can play tennis on the private court or hike the trails meandering through the 1,600-acre estate. *Tip:* Request one of the upstairs rooms, which have the best views.

11775 Sonoma Hwy. (Hwy. 12), Glen Ellen, CA 95442. © 707/996-6501. www. beltaneranch.com. 5 units, 1 cottage. \$130–\$180 double; \$220 cottage. Rates include full breakfast. No credit cards; personal checks accepted. Amenities: Tennis court. *In room:* No phone.

Glenelly Inn & This former 1916 railroad inn is positively drenched in serenity. Located well off the main highway on an oak-studded hillside, the inn comes with everything you would expect from a country retreat: long verandas with comfy wicker chairs and views of the verdant Sonoma hillsides; a hearty country breakfast served beside a large cobblestone fireplace; and bright, immaculate rooms with private entrances, authentic antiques, old-fashioned claw-foot tubs, Scandinavian down comforters, firm mattresses, and ceiling fans. The simmering hot tub is ensconced within a grapevine- and rose-covered arbor. As this book goes to press, new garden cottages are slated to open.

5131 Warm Springs Rd. (off Arnold Dr.), Glen Ellen, CA 95442. © 707/996-6720. Fax 707/996-5227. www.glenelly.com. 10 units. \$150–\$250 double. Rates include full breakfast. AE, DISC, MC, V. Amenities: Hot tub, spa services, massage.

KENWOOD VERY EXPENSIVE

Kenwood Inn & Spa (A) (Finds Inspired by the villas of Tuscany, the Kenwood Inn's honey-colored Italian-style buildings, flower-filled flagstone courtyard, and pastoral views of vineyard-covered hills are enough to make any Northern Italian homesick. But the friendly staff and luxuriously restful surrounds made this California girl feel right at home. What's not to like about a spacious room lavishly and exquisitely decorated with imported tapestries, velvets, and antiques plus a fireplace, balcony (except on the ground floor),

feather bed, CD player, and down comforter? With no TV in the rooms, relaxation is inevitable—especially if you book treatments at the spa, which gets creative with its rejuvenating program. A minor caveat is road noise, which you're unlikely to hear from your room, but can be slightly audible over the tranquil pumped-in music around the courtyard and decent-size pool. Longtime guests will be surprised to find more bodies around the pool—18 new guestrooms on a neighboring property joined this slice of pastoral heaven in June 2003. But anyone with a hefty credit card limit can buy complete seclusion by renting the inn's new nearby two-bedroom house.

An impressive three-course gourmet breakfast is served poolside or in the Mediterranean-style dining room. Mine consisted of a poached egg accompanied by light, flavorful potatoes, red bell peppers, and other roasted vegetables, all artfully arranged, followed by a delicious homemade scone with fresh berries, and a small lemon tart.

10400 Sonoma Hwy., Kenwood, CA 95452. © 800/353-6966 or 707/833-1293. Fax 707/833-1247. www.kenwoodinn.com. 30 units. Apr–Oct \$400–\$725 double; Nov–Mar \$375–\$675 double. Rates include gourmet breakfast and bottle of wine. 2-night minimum on weekends. AE, MC, V. Amenities: Heated outdoor pool; full-service spa; concierge. *In room:* CD player, hair dryer, iron.

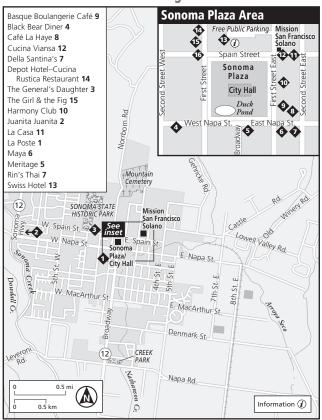
5 Where to Dine

In the past decade, Sonoma Valley has experienced a culinary revolution. In response to the saturation of restaurants in the Bay Area, both budding and renowned chefs and restaurateurs have pulled out their San Francisco stakes and resettled in Sonoma Valley to craft culinary art from the region's bounty of organic produce and meats. The result is something longtime locals never dared to dream of when it came to fine dining in Sonoma: a choice.

Granted, the restaurants in Sonoma Valley—both in quality and quantity—pales in comparison to those found in Napa Valley, but the overall dining experience is splendid regardless. Even the big players are forced to concede to Sonoma's small-town code by keeping their restaurants simple and unpretentious, hence the absence of ostentatious eateries such as Napa's Tra Vigne and Pinot Blanc.

As you travel through the valley, you'll find a few dozen modestly sized and privately owned cafes, often run by husband-and-wife teams who pour their hearts and bank accounts into keeping their businesses thriving during the off-season. In fact, don't be surprised if the person waiting your table is also the owner, chef, host,

11:32 PM



sommelier, and retired professor from Yale. It's this sort of combination that often makes dining in Sonoma a very personable experience and one that you'll relish long after you leave the Wine Country.

The restaurants listed below are classified first by town, then by price, using the following categories: **Expensive**, dinner from \$50 per person; **Moderate**, dinner from \$35 to \$50 per person; and **Inexpensive**, dinner less than \$35 per person. These categories reflect prices for an appetizer, a main course, and a dessert.

Note: Though Sonoma Valley has far fewer visitors than Napa Valley, its restaurants are often equally crowded, so be sure to make

reservations as far in advance as possible. Also bear in mind that the food in the Wine Country is usually served in large portions and washed down with copious amounts of wine—enough so that I make a point of eating at only one restaurant a day, lest I explode.

SONOMA EXPENSIVE

Santé Restaurant ← CALIFORNIA/SPA One of the fanciest restaurants in the Wine Country, Santé Restaurant has long suffered from a solid reputation for serving high-caliber spa cuisine. But in 2003 they moved away from "spa" and their old chef and into the luxury food realm with chef Rod Williams at the helm. Selections from the seasonally changing menu might include clay oven specials (think herb-infused prawns with papaya and jicama salad with cilantro crème frâiche); seared Thai snapper on arugula with citrus habanero chile vinaigrette; butternut and acorn squash ravioli with sautéed arugula, anjou pear emulsion, and candied pecans; and grilled Niman Ranch pork chop with caramelized onion mashed potatoes, and apple-balsamic glaze. Service is professional yet friendly, and the wine list is extensive and expensive.

At Sonoma Mission Inn, 18140 Sonoma Hwy., Sonoma. © 707/938-9000. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$23–\$29, fixed-price menu \$55. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 6–9:30pm.

MODERATE

Café La Haye * Value ECLECTIC Well-prepared, wholesome food, an experienced waitstaff, friendly owners, a soothing atmosphere, and reasonable prices—including a modestly priced wine list—make La Haye a favorite. In truth, everything about this place is charming. The small split-level dining room is smart, intimate and pleasantly decorated with hardwood floors, an exposed-beam ceiling, and revolving contemporary artwork. The vibe is smallbusiness—a welcome departure from Napa Valley's big-business restaurants. The straightforward seasonally inspired cuisine, which chefs bring forth from the tiny open kitchen, is delicious and wonderfully well priced. Although the menu is concise, it offers just enough options. Expect a risotto special, pasta such as fresh tagliarini with butternut squash, prosciutto, sage, and garlic cream and pan-roasted chicken breast, perhaps with goat cheese-herb stuffing, caramelized shallot jus, and fennel mashed potatoes. Meateaters are sure to be pleased with filet of beef seared with black pepper-lavender sauce and served with gorgonzola-potato gratin, and no one can resist the beautiful salads. Sunday brunch includes a

handful of creative breakfast dishes, such as white cheddar grits with grilled ham, poached egg, and cracked pepper hollandaise, as well as salads and sandwiches.

140 E. Napa St., Sonoma. © 707/935-5994. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$14–\$24. MC, V. Tues–Sat 5:30–9pm; Sun brunch 9:30am–2pm.

Depot Hotel—Cucina Rustica Restaurant NORTHERN ITALIAN Michael Ghilarducci has been the chef and owner here for nearly 2 decades, which means he's either independently wealthy or a darned good cook. Fortunately, it's the latter. A block north of the plaza in a handsome 1870 stone building, the Depot Hotel offers pleasant outdoor dining in an Italian garden, complete with a reflecting pool and cascading Roman fountain. The menu is unwaveringly Italian, featuring classic dishes such as spaghetti bolognese and veal alla parmigiana. Start with the bounteous antipasto misto, and end the feast with a dish of Michael's handmade Italian ice cream and fresh-fruit sorbets.

241 1st St. W. (off Spain St.), Sonoma. © 707/938-2980. www.depothotel.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses lunch \$10–\$16; dinner \$14–\$22. AE, DISC, MC, V. Wed–Fri 11:30am–5pm; Wed–Sun 5–9pm.

The Girl & the Fig & COUNTRY FRENCH Already well established in its downtown Sonoma digs (it used to be in Glen Ellen), this modern, attractive, and cozy eatery, with lovely patio seating, is home to Sondra Bernstein's (The Girl) beloved restaurant. Here the cuisine, orchestrated by executive chef John Toulze, is nouveau country with French nuances, and yes, figs are sure to be on the menu in one form or another. The wonderful winter fig salad contains arugula, pecans, dried figs, Laura Chenel goat cheese, and figand-port vinaigrette. Toulze uses garden-fresh produce and local meats, poultry, and fish whenever possible, in dishes such as pork tenderloin with a potato-leek pancake and roasted beets, and sea scallops with lobster-scented risotto. For dessert, try the warm pear galette topped with gingered crème fraîche, a glass of Quady Essensia Orange Muscat, and a sliver of raclette from the cheese cart. Sondra knows her wines and will be happy to choose the best accompaniment to your meal.

110 W. Spain St., Sonoma. © 707/938-3634. www.thegirlandthefig.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$18–\$21. AE, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–11pm.

La Poste & FRENCH BISTRO It's a gastronome's game of sardines at shoebox-size French bistro. The original Williams-Sonoma storefront is now downtown Sonoma's tiniest dining room with 26 chairs and maple banquettes strategically squeezed amidst brass

sconces, mahogany wainscoting, a whitewashed press tin ceiling, and just enough space on the French concrete-tiled floor for staff to refill wine glasses. The ever-changing chalkboard menu announces chef Rob Larman's complete U-turn from the more casual fare he served at his recently closed restaurant Rob's Rib Shack. The menu changes faster than you can say "Pass the profiteroles," but recent winners included seared scallops seasoned with tomato-herb vinaigrette over truffled mashed potatoes; braised veal cheeks with cream, Calvados, English peas, and chanterelles; and quail stuffed with foie gras and sweetbreads on a warm salad of fingerling potatoes. Finish the eve with chocolate mousse and take a stroll around the plaza. Oh, and when weather permits you'll find 14 more seats on the sidewalk.

599 Broadway (just south of the plaza), Sonoma. © 707/939-3663. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$16—\$25. AE, MC, V. Sun and Wed—Thurs 5:30—9pm, Fri—Sat 5:30—10pm.

Harmony Club * Finds CONTINENTAL The most welcome addition in 2003, The Harmony Club is not only a looker with its elegant Italianate dining room with dark woods, high ceilings, marble flooring, a wall of giant doors opening to sidewalk seating and Sonoma's plaza. It also delivers in great food and live entertainment. Drop in anytime after their gourmet breakfast for fantastic "small plates" such as tender Moroccan spiced lamb loin with saffron couscous, grapes, and mint; french fries with tarragon aioli; seared scallops with vegetable ragout and truffle beurre blanc; and Scharffen Berger chocolate and orange Muscat tort. Go for sidewalk seating during warmer weather (they also have heat lamps), sit inside, or hang at the carved wood bar. Either way you'll want to face the piano when the nightly performer is tinkling the keys and singing jazz standards. Alas, the only bummer is the wine list, which leaves little in the way of options since this spot, owned by Steve Ledson of Ledson Winery, naturally features only Ledson wines.

480 First St. E. (at the plaza), Sonoma. **© 707/996-9779.** No reservations. Small plates \$6–\$14. AE, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 11:30am–10pm, Fri–Sat 11:30am–11:30pm.

Maya MEXICAN Gourmet Mexican might be the best way to describe the food at this lively grill-and-rotisserie restaurant on the southeast corner of Sonoma's plaza. I'm not talking top-shelf enchiladas here—rather, it's a winning combination of traditional Yucatán dishes prepared with ultrafresh ingredients. Take salmon for instance: a thick cut of fresh fish, perfectly cooked with pasilla pesto, chervil and tarragon risotto, and a medley of root vegetables. The commendable Maya pollo rostizado—a spit-roasted half chicken

with a Yucatán spice rub—could easily feed two. Other menu items I considered seriously included smoked duck salad with goat cheese, seasoned walnuts, and blood orange vinaigrette and grilled pork loin with apple chutney, chive potato cake, and Swiss chard. Yes, you're probably going to pay a bit more than you planned to pay for Mexican food, but it's worth the extra few dollars. You are likely to enjoy the faux Mayan village ambience as well: desert earth tones with bright splashes of colorful art and thick, hand-carved wood furnishings. The only caveat is the *muy fuerte* noise level, but a couple of fantastic margaritas on the rocks, and you'll soon be in fiesta mode yourself.

101 E. Napa St., Sonoma. **(? 707/935-3500**. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$9–\$20. MC, V. Tues–Sun 11:45am–9:30pm; Mon 4–9:30pm. Jan–Apr closed Mon.

Learning from the previous occupants' mistakes—that Sonoma ain't New York City and shouldn't treat its customers that way chef/owner Carlo Cavallo eliminated the big-city attitude and prices at his new restaurant, without diminishing style, service, and quality. The former executive chef for Giorgio Armani, Cavallo combines the best of southern French and northern Italian cuisines (hence "Meritage," after a blend made with traditional Bordeaux varieties), giving Sonomans yet another reason to eat out. The menu, which changes twice daily, is a good read: handmade roasted pumpkin tortellini in Parmesan cheese sauce; napoleon of escargot in champagne-and-wild thyme sauce; organic greens, strawberries, corn, and French feta salad; wild boar chops in white truffle sauce with mashed potatoes. Shellfish fans can't help but love the oyster raw bar and options of live crab and lobster. A lovely garden patio is prime positioning for sunny breakfasts and lunches and summer dinners. Such edible enticement—combined with reasonable prices, excellent service, a stellar wine list, cozy booth seating, a handsome dining room, and Carlo's practiced charm—make Meritage a trustworthy option.

522 Broadway, Sonoma. **© 707/938-9430.** www.sonomameritage.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$13–\$30. AE, MC, V. Wed–Sun 8am–9pm. Mon 11:30am–9pm.

Swiss Hotel & CONTINENTAL/NORTHERN ITALIAN With its slanting floors and beamed ceilings, the historic Swiss Hotel, located right in the town center, is a Sonoma landmark and very much the local favorite for fine food served at reasonable prices.

The oak bar at the left of the entrance is adorned with black-and-white photos of pioneering Sonomans. The bright white dining room and rear dining patio are pleasant spots to enjoy lunch specials such as penne with chicken, mushrooms, and tomato cream; hot sandwiches; and California-style pizzas fired in a wood-burning oven. But the secret spot is the back garden patio, a secluded oasis shaded by a wisteria-covered trellis and adorned with plants, a fountain, gingham tablecloths, and a fireplace. Dinner might start with a warm winter salad of radicchio and frisée with pears, walnuts, and bleu cheese. Main courses run the gamut; I like the linguine and prawns with garlic, hot pepper, and tomatoes; the filet mignon wrapped in bleu cheese crust; and roasted rosemary chicken. It's all very traditional and satisfying, a style of cuisine that's becoming increasingly rare in Sonoma Valley.

18 W. Spain St., Sonoma. **(?) 707/938-2884**. Reservations recommended. Main courses lunch \$8.50–\$16, dinner \$10–\$24. AE, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–2:30pm and 5–9:30pm. (Bar, daily 11:30am–2am.)

INEXPENSIVE

Basque Boulangerie Café BAKERY/DELI If you prefer a lighter morning meal and strong coffee, stand in line with the locals at the Basque Boulangerie Café, the most popular gathering spot in Sonoma Valley. Most everything—sourdough Basque breads, pastries, quiche, soups, salads, desserts, sandwiches, cookies—is made in-house and made well. Daily lunch specials, such as a grilled-veggie sandwich with smoked mozzarella cheese (\$4.95), are listed on the chalkboard out front. Seating is scarce, and if you can score a sidewalk table on a sunny day, consider yourself one lucky person. A popular option is ordering to go and eating in the shady plaza across the street. The cafe also sells wine by the glass, as well as a wonderful cinnamon bread by the loaf that's ideal for making French toast.

Black Bear Diner DINER When you're craving a classic Americana breakfast, lunch, or dinner with all the cholesterol and the fixin's, bee-line to this old-fashioned diner. First, it's fun with its over-the-top bear paraphernalia, gazette-style menu listing local news from 1961 and every possible diner favorite, and absurdly friendly wait staff. Second, it's darned cheap. Third, helpings are huge. What more could you want? Kids get a kick out of coloring

books, old-timers reminisce over Sinatra playing on the jukebox, and everyone leaves stuffed on omelets, scrambles, pancakes, steak sandwiches and other classics, salads, and comfort food faves like barbecued pork ribs, roast beef, fish and chips, and spaghetti and meat sauce. Whatever you want, it's almost guaranteed to part of Black Bear's extensive selection. Dinners come with salad or soup, bread, and two sides and seniors are buffed out with a special-priced menu. 201 W. Napa St. (at Second St.), Sonoma. © 707/935-6800. Main courses breakfast \$5–\$8.50, lunch and dinner \$5.50–\$17. AE, DISC, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 6am–10pm, Fri–Sat 6am–midnight.

Cucina Viansa & ITALIAN DELI When it comes to straightforward fresh, contemporary Italian fare, Cucina Viansa is the sexiest thing going in Sonoma. Lines out the door inspired Sam and Vicki Sebastiani, who also run Viansa Winery and own the suave restaurant and wine bar, to make the place double as a full-service restaurant as well as a mecca for to-go items and gourmet condiments. A visual masterpiece with shiny black-and-white-checked flooring, long counters of Italian marble, tables 'round back, and track lighting, it's a very casual place to drop in for cured meats, cheese, fruit, pastas, salads, breads, focaccia sandwiches, and specialties from the centerpiece wood-burning oven at the deli. Or park yourself at one of the window-front tables or tall cocktail tables in the back and enjoy rigatoni Bolognese with artichokes; roasted chicken with thyme, orange, garlic mashed potatoes, sugar snap peas and sherry sauce; and roasted fennel-spiced pork with mashed potatoes and fava bean sauce. Opposite the deli is the wine bar, featuring all of Viansa's current releases for both tasting and purchase, as well as a small selection of microbrewed beers on tap. On your way out, stop at the gelateria and treat yourself to some intense Italian ice cream.

400 First St. E., Sonoma. **707/935-5656.** Deli items \$5–\$9. AE, DISC, MC, V. Daily 11am–9pm; Fri–Sat until 10pm.

Della Santina's € ITALIAN Those of you who just can't swallow another expensive, chi-chi, California meal should follow the locals to this friendly, traditional Italian restaurant. How traditional? Just ask father-and-son team Dan and Robert who preside over Signora Santina's Tuscan recipes. (Heck, even the dining room looks like an old-fashioned, elegant Italian living room—and their patio is great!) Dishes tend to be pure and well flavored, without overbearing sauces or one *hint* of California pretentiousness. Be sure to

start with traditional antipasti, especially sliced mozzarella and tomatoes, or delicious white beans. The pasta dishes are wonderfully authentic (gnocchi lovers, rejoice!). The spit-roasted meat dishes are a local favorite (although I found them a bit overcooked); for those who can't choose between chicken, pork, turkey, rabbit, or duck, there's a selection that offers a choice of three. Don't worry about breaking your bank on a bottle of wine, because most of the choices go for under \$40. Portions are huge, but save room for a wonderful dessert.

133 E. Napa St. (just east of the square), Sonoma. © 707/935-0576. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$9–\$15. AE, DISC, MC, V. Daily 11:30am–3pm and 5–9:30pm.

Juanita Juanita MEXICAN Everyone loves this roadside shack hawking fresh Mexican specialties and hearty sides of who-gives-a-heck attitude. Lines out the door during weekends prove the point. But if you've gotta have a killer quesadilla, nachos, enchiladas, tacos, and their very fabulous "plate" specials (think grilled chicken with chipotle cream sauce on a bed of spinach and avocado with rice, beans, and tortillas) it's worth the wait. Besides, the place is fun. Here the decor and vibe is about as casual as you can get. Plop down at the counter or pull up a chair at one of the mix-and-match tables, kick up your heels, dig into the plastic bucket of tortilla chips and side o' salsa, sip on an ice cold beer, and revel in the oh-so-Sonoma-casual vibe as you fill up on the huge portions. Kids dig the place, too, and have their own specialties offered at pint-sized prices of \$3.75.

19114 Arnold Dr. (just north of W. Napa St.), Sonoma. **(?)** 707/935-3981. www.juanitajuanita.com. No reservations. Main courses \$5.95–\$12. No credit cards. Daily 11am–8pm.

Rin's Thai & THAI When valley residents or visitors get a hankering for Pad Thai, curry chicken, or *tom yam* (classic spicy soup) they head to this adorable little restaurant just off Sonoma Plaza. The atmosphere itself—contemporary, sparse, yet warm environs within an old house—is tasty and the staff is extremely accommodating. After you settle into one of the well-spaced tables within or on the outside patio (weather permitting), go for your favorites—from satay with peanut sauce and cucumber salad or salmon with grilled veggies to yummy *gai kraprao* (minced chicken, chiles, basil, and garlic sauce) or char-broiled ribs with chile-garlic dipping sauce they've got it covered, including that oh-so-sweet Thai iced tea, fried bananas with coconut ice cream, and fresh mango with sticky rice (seasonal).

139 E. Napa St. (just east of the plaza), Sonoma. © 707/938-1462. Reservations recommended. Main courses lunch \$7.50–\$9.25; dinner \$8.25–\$11. MC, V. Daily 11:30am–9:30pm.

GLEN ELLEN MODERATE

Wolf House € ECLECTIC The most polished-looking dining room in Glen Ellen is elegant yet relaxed, and under its new name and ownership as of 2003 it's also a trustworthy place to eat. Whether you're seated in the handsome dining room—smartly adorned with maple floors, gold walls, dark-wood wainscoting, and a corner fireplace—or outside on the multilevel terrace under the canopy of trees with serene views of the adjacent Sonoma Creek, you can lunch on standards like an excellent chicken Caesar salad, grilled ahi tuna nicoise sandwich, or a juicy half-pound burger with Point Reyes Original Blue cheese. During dinner the kitchen antes up with sparkling-wine battered prawns with upland cress salad; seared Sonoma lamb sirloin with roasted eggplant, chickpea ragout, and tomato confit; and pan-seared day boat scallops with heirloom tomatoes and avocado-cucumber emulsion. The reasonably priced wine list offers many by-the-glass options as well as a fine selection of Sonoma wines. Oh! And locals love the brunch complete with huevos rancheros, steak and eggs, omelets, and brioche French toast. During my visit service was rather languid, but well meaning.

13740 Arnold Dr., Glen Ellen. **© 707/996-4401**. Reservations recommended. Main courses brunch and lunch \$8–\$12, dinner \$18–\$20. AE, DISC, MC, V. Brunch Sat–Sun 10:30am–3pm; lunch Mon–Fri 11am–3pm; dinner nightly 5:30–9:30pm.

Glen Ellen Inn Restaurant & CALIFORNIA Christian and Karen Bertrand have made this restaurant so quaint and cozy that you feel as if you're dining in their home, and that's exactly the place's charm. Garden seating is the favored choice on sunny days, but the covered, heated patio is always welcoming. First courses from Christian's open kitchen might include a poached pear, spinach, and arugula salad with blue cheese, pecans, and blackberry honey-mustard vinaigrette or Dungeness crab pot stickers with leek cream sauce. Main courses, which change with the seasons, range from sesame-seared ahi tuna on a creamy potato cake with pickled ginger, wasabi, and port reduction to grilled pork tenderloin with pineapple-mango chutney and smoked Sonoma jack cheese polenta. The 350-selection wine list offers numerous bottles from Sonoma, as well as more than a dozen wines by the glass. *Tip:* There's a small parking lot behind the restaurant.

13670 Arnold Dr., Glen Ellen. © 707/996-6409. www.glenelleninn.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$18–\$25. AE, MC, V. Fri–Tues 11:30am–2:30pm and 5:30–9:30pm; Wed–Thurs 5:30–9:30pm. Closed Mon–Thurs last week in Jan.

KENWOOD MODERATE

Kenwood Restaurant & Bar ← CALIFORNIA/CONTINENTAL From the terrace of the Kenwood Restaurant, diners enjoy a view of the vineyards set against Sugarloaf Ridge as they imbibe Sonoma's finest at umbrella-covered tables. On nippy days, you can retreat inside to the Sonoma-style roadhouse, with shiny wood floors, pine ceiling, vibrant artwork, and cushioned rattan chairs at white-cloth-covered tables. Regardless of where you pull up a chair, expect first-rate cuisine, perfectly balanced between tradition and innovation, and complemented by a reasonably priced wine list. Great starters are Dungeness crab cake with herb mayonnaise; superfresh sashimi with ginger, soy, and wasabi; and a solid Caesar salad. Main-dish choices might include poached salmon in creamy caper sauce, prawns with saffron Pernod sauce, or braised Sonoma rabbit with grilled polenta. But the Kenwood doesn't take itself too seriously: Great sandwiches and burgers are available.

9900 Sonoma Hwy,, Kenwood. © 707/833-6326. Reservations recommended. Main courses lunch and dinner \$11–\$27. MC, V. Tues–Sun 11:30am–9pm.

INEXPENSIVE

Café Citti NORTHERN ITALIAN If you're this far north into the Wine Country, then you're probably doing some serious wine tasting. If that's the case, then you don't want to spend half the day at a fancy, high-priced restaurant. What you need is Café Citti (pronounced cheat-ee), a roadside do-it-yourself Italian trattoria that is both good and cheap. You order from the huge menu board displayed above the open kitchen. Afterward, you grab a table (the ones on the patio, shaded by umbrellas, are the best on warm afternoons), and a server will bring your meal. It's all hearty, homecooked Italian. Standout dishes are the green-bean salad, tangy Caesar salad, focaccia sandwiches, and roasted rotisserie chicken stuffed with rosemary and garlic. The freshly made pastas come with a variety of sauces; try the zesty marinara. Wine is available by the bottle, and the espresso is plenty strong. Everything on the menu board is available to go, which makes Café Citti an excellent resource for picnic supplies.

9900 Sonoma Hwy., Kenwood. © 707/833-6326. Reservations recommended. Main courses \$13–\$26. MC, V. Wed–Sun 11:30am–9pm.

11:32 PM



6 Where to Stock Up for a Picnic & Where to Enjoy It

Sure, Sonoma has plenty of restaurants, but when the weather's warm there's no better way to have lunch in the Wine Country than by toting a picnic basket to your favorite winery and basking in the sweet Sonoma sunshine. Even Sonoma's central plaza, with its many picnic tables, is a good spot to set up a gourmet picnic. But first you need grub, so for your picnicking pleasure, check out Sonoma's top spots for stocking up for an alfresco fete.

If you want to pick up some specialty fare on your way into town, stop at **Angelo's Wine Country Deli,** 23400 Arnold Dr. (② 707/938-3688), where you'll find all types of smoked meats, special salsas, and homemade mustards. The deli is known for its half-dozen types of homemade beef jerky. It's open in summer daily from 9am to 6pm; off-season, daily from 9am to 5pm.

The venerable **Sonoma Cheese Factory** \mathcal{F} , on the plaza at 2 Spain St. (© 707/996-1931), offers award-winning house-made

cheeses and an extraordinary variety of imported meats and cheeses; a few are set out for tasting every day. The factory also sells caviar, gourmet salads, pâté, and homemade Sonoma Jack cheese. Good, inexpensive sandwiches are also available, such as fire-roasted pork loin or New York steak. While you're there, you can watch a narrated slide show about cheese making. The factory is open Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 6pm and Saturday and Sunday 8:30am to 6:30pm.

At 315 2nd St. E., a block north of East Spain Street, is the **Vella Cheese Company** & (© 800/848-0505 or 707/938-3232), established in 1931. The folks at Vella pride themselves on making cheese into an award-winning science, and their best-known beauty, the Monterey Dry Jack, continues to garner blue ribbons. Other cheeses range from flavorful High Moisture Jack to a razor-sharp Raw Milk Cheddar. Vella has also become famous for its Oregon Blue, made at its southern Oregon factory—it's rich, buttery, and even spreadable, one of the few premier bleues produced in this country. Any of these fine handmade, all-natural cheeses can be shipped directly from the store. Hours are Monday through Saturday from 9am to 6pm.

Other highly recommended picnic outfitters include Cucina Viansa and Basque Boulangerie Cafe in Sonoma; Café Citti in Kenwood (see "Where to Dine," above); and Viansa Winery & Italian Marketplace, which makes fabulous focaccia sandwiches—and has a lovely picnic area for noshing on them, too (p. 132).

Gundlach Bundschu (p. 134), located on the outskirts of Sonoma, also has a wonderful picnic area perched on the side of a small hill overlooking the Sonoma countryside (though you'll have to earn the sensational view by making the trek to the top). On the opposite side of the valley, my favorite picnic picks are Chateau St. Jean's (p. 139) big, beautiful lawn overlooking the vineyards (bring a blanket) and the blissfully quiet pond-side picnic area at Landmark Vineyards (p. 140), which also sports a bocce court.

If you'd rather have someone else provide the picnic grub for you, check out **Ravenswood Winery** (p. 136), which offers the gourmet Barbecue Overlooking the Vineyards, held each weekend from 11am to 4:40pm, Memorial Day through the end of September. It's a great time for not much money; items range from \$7 to \$10, and sides cost a few bucks.