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Strategies for Seeing Napa & Sonoma



Napa and Sonoma will bombard you with much to see and do, and not enough time to do it—it's easy to get overwhelmed by all there is to experience, and difficult to decide which of the region's 350-plus wineries seem most worthy and how best to experience it to the fullest. My best advice is to have an itinerary and a sense of what kind of vacation you want before you arrive. Use this book to chart your course and choose the special-interest tours that appeal to you.

Once you know that, determine which parts of each valley seem to beckon most (perusing this book's "Charming Towns" chapter, p 71, will help). Know that Napa Valley dwarfs Sonoma Valley in population, number of wineries, and sheer traffic. It's the more commercial region, boasting big names (Mondavi, Beringer,

Krug), more spas, and a generally superior selection of restaurants and hotels. Sonoma, however, is catching up quickly, although many people prefer its brand of underdoggedness. It's lower key, less snobby, and more backcountry—kind of like a Napa for insiders. Small, family-owned wineries are its mainstay; tastings are less expensive (sometimes free), and winemakers themselves are often in the tasting

room pouring your flight. Choose Napa if you want an active touring schedule, and Sonoma for a restful, leisurely vacation.

Rule #2: Don't drink and drive—and don't speed, either.

Those tiny tastes add up. There are plenty of taxi and limo companies that will be more than happy to chauffeur you if you have too much to drink. Otherwise, designate a driver.

Rule #3: Visit wineries early in the day, if possible.

Most tasting rooms open around 10am and, even on the busiest weekends, remain empty in the morning, leaving staff free to discuss their product. If you come after noon, the tasting room may be packed (especially if it's high season), and many others will be waiting in line just to get a sample, much less the employees' prolonged attention.

Rule #4: To avoid the masses altogether, visit during off-season (Nov–May) or midweek.

The region's optimum time, "crush," the late-Aug–mid-Oct grape harvest, coincides with peak tourist season. If you can only get here on a high-season weekend, there are still ways to avoid the cattle drive: Opt for smaller, family-run wineries over the big boys. Even those along the Silverado Trail, which parallels Highway 29, receive significantly less traffic; locals use it as their main thoroughfare during high season. Another option is to stay in Sonoma. Though it, too, suffers from congestion, Sonoma gets less packed than Napa.

Note that most wineries are closed on major holidays, and many have restricted off-season hours, so call ahead if there's one you don't want to miss.

Rule #5: Be conscious of tasting fees.

Visitors didn't used to have to pay for sampling, but when Napa became a booming destination, wineries began collecting. To their credit, it wasn't so much to make a profit as to discourage visitors who, shall we say, preferred quantity over quality.

Nowadays, the Napa norm is to charge about \$2 to \$8 per flight (though it's much higher at certain places), which is often refundable toward a purchase and sometimes includes a souvenir glass. Sonoma's wineries are less likely to charge for tasting.

Rule #6: Just because you're buying wine at the winery doesn't mean you're saving money.

In fact, you'll probably end up spending more at a winery than you would at stores that buy cases in bulk. Exceptions to this strategy are wineries that offer big discounts on cases and those that only sell their wines in the tasting room (that is, they have no distribution). **Note:** If you're able to ship your wine directly from the winery, you'll avoid having to pay sales tax.

Rule #7: Don't let your wine cook in the back of your car, or you'll be unpleasantly surprised at its new flavor.

Buy a cheap Styrofoam cooler and a couple of ice packs, place them in

A field of mustard seeds in Napa Valley.





Remember: A visit to wine country means you can (and should) drink champagne before noon. This is wine country—kick back and relax.

your car's trunk, and *Voilà!*—you own a portable wine cellar.

Wine shipping is an alternative to lugging around all that *vino* you bought, but it can be quite confusing, since it's limited by regulations that vary by state. Complicating the matter, shipping rules also differ from winery to winery. It's a good idea to check the current legal situation as it pertains to your home state before buying. Ask wineries and, if necessary, independent shipping companies about their wine-transporting policies.

Rule #8: Keep a light attitude.

If you don't yet know everything about wine and it seems that everyone around you does (to an

almost silly degree), don't fall prey to the sometimes-snobby attitude of those who deem themselves worthier than thou simply because they're better versed in what's essentially only a beverage. Wine country is about relaxing, having fun, learning, and taking in the spectacular scenery—not feeling intimidated. If you encounter a superior attitude pouring your taste, move on.

Rule #9: Make time to veer away from the wineries to explore the region's natural splendor.

You can hike through a redwood tree forest, kayak the Russian River, stroll along the rocky Pacific coastline in Bodega Bay, and more. See “18 Favorite Moments” (p 1) and chapter 5, “The Great Outdoors,” for details.

Rule #10: Get to know the wine and the winery. Talk. Listen. Learn.

When at a winery, take the time to really get to know not only the wines but also the company's story: its history, its vineyards, and its colorful employees. Most staffers are quite willing to regale you with tales; if you want more, take a tour. You can drink California wine just about anywhere, but only by visiting a tasting room or touring a winery can you gain true appreciation for the painstaking and artistic processes that go into each bottle. ●

All roads lead to another fantastic winery.

