

# The Best of the Wine Country

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**W**hether you're on a budget or blowing your annual bonus, there's no way around it: A Wine Country experience is the height of indulgence. All that's expected of you is to eat, drink, relax—and then do it all over again. The rest—wine tastings, spa treatments, hot-air balloon rides, canoe trips, horseback tours—is icing on an already decadently rich cake. In fact, you don't even have to like wine to love the Wine Country; anyone who enjoys lounging in a hammock on a warm summer's day will succumb to it. It's country life at its picture-perfect best, with verdant expanses of rolling hills patterned with grape-garnished trellises, hued with mustard and wildflowers, and peopled by farmers plowing the soil and vintners tending their vines.

Of course, there's a whole lot more: wineries both great and small producing some of the world's finest wines, nationally renowned chefs serving exceptional cuisine, luxury resorts, boutique shopping, and soothing mineral hot springs. Yes, the world may be falling apart elsewhere, but not here. This eternal Eden is where you go when you feel the need to be pampered, when it's time to whip out the charge card for that \$200 dinner or bottle of cabernet sauvignon and say, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

## 1 The Best Wineries

### IN NAPA VALLEY

- **Artesa** (Carneros): Sure, they've got a huge wine portfolio that includes a slew of tasty pinot noirs, but what makes Artesa one of my all-time favorite places to send visitors is the winery itself. Built into the Carneros hillside with stellar views of the San Pablo Bay and beyond, from the outside it seems like an underground fortress topped with super-cool fountains. From within it's an airy, modern space with plenty of elbow room. Plainly put, it's just too darned cool. See p. 52.
- **Clos Pegase** (Calistoga): Viewing the art at this temple to wine is as much the point as tasting the wines themselves. Renowned architect Michael Graves designed this incredible oasis, which

integrates an impressive modern art collection—including a sculpture garden—with a state-of-the-art winemaking facility that features 20,000 square feet of aging caves. See p. 71.

- **Domaine Chandon** (Yountville): Founded by Moët et Chandon, the valley's most renowned sparkling winery combines the grandeur of a world-class French champagne house with a hip, fresh, and extremely festive tasting experience. Strolling with a glass of bubbly in hand through this estate's beautifully manicured rose gardens—complete with pond and sculpture—is a quintessential Wine Country experience, while boogying the night away adds another dimension to this Napa stalwart. If you just can't bear to leave between the time the sun sets and the DJ begins, no worries. Just pull up a chair in their fancy French dining room or in the more casual salon or patio and relish the pastoral splendor. See p. 56.
- **The Hess Collection** (Napa): Half the fun is winding your way to this beautiful and secluded hillside winery, which is as much about contemporary art as it is about fermented grape juice. Spectacular gallery spaces show off their stunning collection and the gift shop is one of the most tasteful in the valley. It's a gorgeous place. See p. 54.
- **Joseph Phelps Vineyards** (St. Helena): Intimate, comprehensive tours and knockout tastings make this one of my favorite wineries to visit. An air of seriousness hangs heavier than harvest grapes when you first arrive, but the mood lightens as your knowledgeable guide explains the ins and outs of winemaking and you begin to taste five to six varietals. These range from sauvignon blanc to what's bound to be terrific cabernet. (*Wine Spectator* regularly awards Phelps's cabernets and blended reds with scores in the high 90s, and aficionados have been known to come close to brawling over bottles of the coveted Insignia cabernet.) Don't forget to reserve ahead; tours and tastings are by appointment only. See p. 67.
- **Quixote** (Napa): A tour of some of the most incredible and unusual architecture and rich, juicy petit syrah is free with the price of an intimate tasting at this exclusive winery that recently opened to the public. See p. 55.
- **Schramsberg** (Calistoga): Old hand-carved caves complete with cobwebs, echoes, and loads of ambience; a comprehensive walk through sparkling wine production; and a grand finale

tasting around a round table in a private room make this a great stop for those looking for a little entertainment with their education. See p. 72.

- **Shafer Vineyards** (Napa): If you want to taste some of the region's finest and most coveted wine and enjoy an extremely intimate, informative, and gracious introduction to the real-life workings of a winery and the people behind it, this is your best bet. An added perk is that the Stags Leap winery next door has just renovated its digs, and the tasting area, which hosts up to 10 people at a time, is breathtaking. See p. 56.
- **Swanson Vineyards & Winery** (Rutherford): No other winery offers such a luxurious, relaxed, and fun tasting as this sexy little reservations-only stop. Join the select few guests at a round table, taste delicious wines, and nibble on bonbons while you make new friends and learn about the famed Rutherford dust. Now that's living. See p. 64.

## IN SONOMA VALLEY

- **Benziger Family Winery** (Glen Ellen): As soon as you arrive here, you'll know you're at a family-run winery—in fact, you'll feel instantly like part of the Benziger clan. This low-volume, high-quality winery offers an exceptional self-guided tour, a 40-minute tram tour through its pastoral grounds, \$5 tastings, and many excellent, reasonably priced wines. See p. 127.
- **Gloria Ferrer Champagne Caves** (Carneros District): Gloria is the grande dame of Sonoma Valley's sparkling wine producers. On a sunny day, it's impossible not to enjoy sipping a glass of brut on the terrace of this palatial estate as you take in the magnificent views of the vineyards and valley below. If you're unfamiliar with the *méthode champenoise*, make time for the 30-minute tour, which takes you past the fermenting tanks and the bustling bottling line and into the dark caves brimming with rack after rack of fermenting wine. See p. 122.
- **Gundlach Bundschu Winery** (Sonoma): Gundlach Bundschu is the quintessential Sonoma winery: nonchalant about appearance, obsessed with wine. Oenophiles in the know covet GB's reds, particularly the zinfandels, which are remarkably inexpensive for such well-crafted wines. Tours include a trip into the 430-foot cave. GB also has the best picnic grounds in the valley. See p. 125.

## IN NORTHERN SONOMA

- **Bella Vineyards & Wine Caves** (Dry Creek Valley): Even if this boutique winery weren't producing exceptional zinfandels, it'd still be a top stop for me since the place is so enchanting. Even the drive (down a one-lane road to its end) is an adventure, but the real payoff is the *très chic* cave where tasting can be enjoyed at café tables under hip dangling lamps. It's relaxed glamour worth experiencing for yourself. See p. 168.
- **Ferrari-Carano Vineyards & Winery** (Healdsburg): With the most stunning landscaping in Northern Sonoma, this winery includes an Asian-inspired garden, a profusion of blooms (especially in spring), vast vineyard views, and sips of some pretty tasty wine. See p. 168.
- **Preston of Dry Creek** (Healdsburg): Absolutely charming is the best way to describe this family-owned winery. A must-stop on any Northern Sonoma itinerary, it's got everything you could wish for in a country winery: beautiful grounds with an abundance of flora (and picnic tables!), a friendly tasting room in a cheery Victorian farmhouse setting, a large selection of wines to sip and buy, estate-grown organic produce, homemade bread, and even a bocce ball court. See p. 171.

## 2 The Best Winery Tours for First-Timers

### IN NAPA VALLEY

- **Domaine Chandon** (Yountville): Not only are the grounds sublime, but the comprehensive tour walks you through the high-tech facilities and the entire bubbly-making process, from the history of the winery to the cellars, riddling room, and bottling line. Tours are free and reservations aren't necessary, but if you want to taste, it'll cost you \$15 for a tasting of various wines or between \$5.50 and \$16 for a full glass (sorry, no free sips). Come during high season, though, and you can supplement your bubbly with a few appetizers and kick back on the garden-front patio. See p. 56.
- **Robert Mondavi Winery** (Oakville): As one of the most prominent wineries in the valley, it's only appropriate that Robert Mondavi would offer a guided tour for every sort of wine taster. The basic 1-hour comprehensive production tour covers all aspects of the winemaking process and gives you a look at the destemmer-crusher, the tank room where fermentation is done, the bottling room, and the vineyard, all accompanied by

a top-notch narrative—the guides are great at making sure you know what you’re looking at. Make your reservations in advance, if possible; these tours are not offered daily and get booked up, especially in high season. See p. 58.

- **St. Supéry Winery** (Rutherford): This straightforward winery is a great place for first-time tasters to learn more about oenology. The nifty self-guided tour comes complete with “SmellaVision,” an interactive display that teaches you how to identify different wine aromas and attributes; there’s also a demonstration vineyard that you can wander through to learn about growing techniques. See p. 63.
- **Frank Family Vineyards** (Calistoga): Although this isn’t a remotely comprehensive tour, it is the least intimidating. Staff members run one of the friendliest wineries in the valley, which includes taking the time to explain *anything* you want to know about wine. They also serve you all the bubbly you want and have a back room featuring still wines. See p. 72.
- **Schramsberg** (Calistoga): The label that U.S. presidents serve when toasting with dignitaries from around the globe also serves up the Wine Country’s best introduction to the *méthode champenoise* process of making sparkling wine. The excellent tour at Schramsberg is comprehensive and nonthreatening, and it’s an experience you won’t soon forget; the highlight is the visit to the 2½ miles of hand-carved champagne caves—you’ll feel like you’ve landed in the middle of a *Tom Sawyer* adventure. And the tasting room is positively gothic. Be sure to book a spot on a tour in advance, because tours fill up quickly. See p. 72.
- **Sterling Vineyards** (Calistoga): This dazzling-white, Mediterranean-style winery, perched high above the rest of the valley atop a rocky knoll (you’ll arrive via aerial tram), offers one of the most comprehensive self-guided tours in the entire Wine Country. It’s great for getting to know the winemaking process at your own pace. See p. 73.

## IN SONOMA VALLEY

- **Benziger Family Winery** (Glen Ellen): *Wine Spectator* magazine hailed this family-run winery as having “the most comprehensive tour in the wine industry.” The exceptional self-guided tour, which includes a \$10 40-minute tram ride through the estate vineyards, is both informative and fun. Tram tickets are a hot commodity, so be sure to plan ahead for this one. See p. 127.

### 3 The Best Experiences beyond the Wineries

- **Hot-Air Ballooning over Napa's Vineyards:** Admit it: Floating over lush green pastures in a hot-air balloon is something you've always dreamed of but never gotten around to actually doing. Here's your best chance: Napa Valley is the busiest hot-air balloon "flight corridor" in the *world*—and what more romantic place to sail up, up, and away? For recommendations on the best Napa hot-air balloon companies, see "More to See & Do," in chapter 4.
- **Spreading Out Your Picnic Blanket for a Gourmet Alfresco Feast:** You've been with the crowds all day—sitting with them in traffic and sipping elbow-to-elbow in the tasting rooms. If the thought of joining the masses for a meal after all that seems about as romantic and relaxing as a New York subway ride, cancel your restaurant reservations and pack a picnic instead. Both Napa and Sonoma have some of the most spectacular picnic spots on the planet, not to mention incredible artisan food products and excellent places to fill your basket. See "Where to Stock Up for a Picnic & Where to Enjoy It," in chapter 4 for details on picnicking in Napa. For details on picnicking in Sonoma, see "The Local Farmer's Market" and "Where to Stock Up for a Picnic & Where to Enjoy It," in chapter 5.
- **Pampering Yourself at a Spa:** The Wine Country is the perfect place to relax—so what better place to indulge in a tension-relieving massage, a purifying facial, or a rejuvenating body wrap? My favorite spas are St. Helena's **Health Spa Napa Valley** (☎ 707/967-8800), the **Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa** (☎ 800/257-7544), and **Hotel Healdsburg** (☎ 707/431-2800). See chapter 4 for details on Napa spas, chapter 5 for Sonoma, and chapter 6 for Hotel Healdsburg.
- **Horseback Riding through the Wine Country:** If you like horses, consider seeing the countryside from the saddle. **Triple Creek Horse Outfit** (☎ 707/933-1600) orchestrates rides in both Napa's Bothe-Napa Valley State Park and Sonoma's Jack London State Historical Park. The season runs from April through October. See "More to See & Do," in chapters 5 and 6.
- **Touring Sonoma's Wineries on Two Wheels:** With quiet, gently sloping country roads and lots of bucolic scenery, Sonoma is perfect for cycling. Local bike tours will rent you a bike, take you on one of their organized excursions to wineries, provide a gourmet lunch featuring local foodstuffs, and also

carry any wine you purchase and even help with shipping it home. See “More to See & Do,” in chapter 4 and “Touring Sonoma Valley by Bike,” in chapter 5.

- **Getting Your Thrills in the Skies:** If you're the thrill-seeking type, catch a panoramic ride in an authentic 1940 Boeing-built Stearman biplane with **Vintage Aircraft Company** (☎ 707/938-2444). Planes depart from the south end of Sonoma Valley. See “More to See & Do,” in chapter 5.

## 4 The Best Luxury Hotels & Inns

- **Auberge du Soleil** (Rutherford, Napa Valley; ☎ 800/348-5406): This spectacular Relais & Châteaux member is one of my absolute favorite luxury destinations on the planet (and yes, I've seen a lot of them). Quiet, indulgent, and luxuriously romantic rooms are large enough to get lost in—and you'll want to once you try out the fireplace, whirlpool tub, and private balcony overlooking the valley. Tack on an incredible spa with valley views from the hot tub and the restaurant's terrace, and it's pure heaven. If you've got the cash, this is the way to go, except, perhaps, if you can book a room at its newer sister property, **Calistoga Ranch** (Calistoga, Napa Valley; ☎ 707/254-2800). Park yourself on your private deck at one of their uberluxury cabins within a pristine canyon; exit only to treat yourself at the spectacular indoor-outdoor spa, delicious private restaurant overlooking Lake Lommel, or pool, and you'll be hard pressed to leave. See p. 90 and 94.
- **Meadowood Napa Valley** (St. Helena, Napa Valley; ☎ 800/458-8080): I love Meadowood, too, but it offers a more resort-like experience. Tucked away in its own private wooded valley, it's a favorite retreat for Hollywood celebs and corporate CEOs who can hide out in freestanding New England-style cottages; spend days hiking the private trails or playing golf, tennis, or croquet; and follow up with a trip to the health spa and whirlpool. For those who love full-service luxury with all the fixins, there's no better option. Indeed it's perfect anytime of year, but I find the most magical time to come is the holidays, when the resort is quieter and romantically lit with white Christmas lights. See p. 92.
- **Cottage Grove Inn** (Calistoga, Napa Valley; ☎ 800/799-2284): This romantic cluster of cottages is my top pick for doing the Calistoga spa scene in comfort and style. Each one-room

cottage is ultracompact, but it makes a lot out of a little and comes complete with a wood-burning fireplace, homey furnishings (perfect for curling up in front of the fire), cozy quilts, and an enormous bathroom with a skylight and a deep, two-person Jacuzzi tub. But if you want the perks that come with a hotel, go for one of the suites with the outdoor hot tubs at the nearby Mount View Hotel & Spa. See p. 95.

- **Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa** (Sonoma, Sonoma Valley; ☎ 800/257-7544): A popular retreat for the wealthy and the well known, this multimillion-dollar resort is Sonoma Valley's most luxurious (and big-business) resort. A gargantuan spa and workout area and its naturally heated artesian springs are the place's coups de grâce. Sauna, steam room, whirlpool, outdoor exercise pool, weight room, a whole menu of spa treatments—you can pamper yourself in myriad ways, and retire to your superluxe suite when the day is done. Alas, the rooms are extremely expensive, but, hey, this is Wine Country. Get used to it. See p. 138.
- **Gaige House Inn** (Glen Ellen, Sonoma Valley; ☎ 800/935-0237): Truth be told, I've never stayed in a better B&B—ever, anywhere, period. Here's what you have to look forward to: plantation-inspired decor with tasteful worldly accents, the best robes ever designed, late-night cookie-plate raids, and professionalism associated with fine hotels. In a nutshell, it's good service, an abundance of amenities, luxurious rooms outfitted with top-quality goods. See p. 144.
- **Kenwood Inn & Spa** (Kenwood, Sonoma Valley; ☎ 800/353-6966): Romantics, look no further. Here, the honey-colored, Tuscan-style buildings, flower-filled flagstone courtyard, and pastoral views of vineyard-covered hills are enough to make any northern Italian homesick. The lavishly done rooms come with just about every extra you could want (except TV, which would interfere with the tranquil ambience). The full-service spa is small but to die for, and the staff is friendly and helpful. See p. 146.

## 5 The Best Moderately Priced Accommodations

- **Wine Country Inn** (St. Helena, Napa Valley; ☎ 888/465-4608): This attractive wood-and-stone hideaway, complete with a French-style mansard roof and turret, offers lovingly and individually decorated rooms and copious amounts of hospitality. It's also very well priced, considering the outrageous rates



usually charged in St. Helena. One of the inn's best features is its attractively landscaped outdoor pool (heated year-round); in fact, the whole charming place overlooks a pastoral landscape of Napa Valley vineyards. See p. 93.

- **El Dorado Hotel** (Sonoma, Sonoma Valley; ☎ 800/289-3031): Designed by the same folks who put together Napa's exclusive Auberge du Soleil, this place on Sonoma's historic square may look like a 19th-century Wild West relic from the outside, but inside, it's midrange 20th-century deluxe. French windows afford lovely views of the courtyard, which features a heated lap pool. The ground floor houses one of the area's best restaurants. See p. 140.
- **Glenelly Inn and Cottages** (Glen Ellen, Sonoma Valley; ☎ 707/996-6720): With verdant views of Sonoma's oak-studded hillsides, this former 1916 railroad inn is drenched in serenity, and it has everything you'd expect from a Wine Country retreat. Bright, immaculate rooms have old-fashioned claw-foot tubs and Scandinavian down comforters; a hearty country breakfast is served beside the large cobblestone fireplace, and there's a long veranda where you can curl up in a comfy wicker chair to admire the idyllically bucolic view. See p. 145.

## 6 The Best Restaurants

- **Bistro Don Giovanni** (Napa, Napa Valley; ☎ 707/224-3300): My favorite casual restaurant in the valley, this has a consistent combination of perfect thin-crust pizzas (margarita and the seasonal fig, prosciutto, and balsamic are spectacular), soul-satisfying pastas (anything with duck ragout!), wood-oven specialties, friendly service, and an excellent bar dining and drinking scene. Perch yourself at the bar, order a glass of wine or a cocktail from fabulous bartenders Aaron or Ben, and you're likely to strike up a jolly conversation with a local—perhaps even me! See p. 100.
- **Bouchon** (Yountville, Napa Valley; ☎ 707/944-8037): This locals' favorite tops even my charts—after Bistro Don Giovanni, that is. This sleek and festive French bistro serves outstanding classics such as steak frites, a towering bibb lettuce salad, and steamed mussels in white wine broth. Beyond lunch and dinner, it's an excellent late-night stop, when they serve a limited menu and attract restaurant staff at the bar. See p. 106.
- **The French Laundry** (Yountville, Napa Valley; ☎ 707/944-2380): If you've got the cash, are a serious food lover, and can

get a reservation, you have no choice but to dine here and find out for yourself why chef/owner Thomas Keller's restaurant continues to be hailed as the best restaurant in the world. Dinner at this intimate restaurant is an all-night affair complete with truffle shavings, dramatic presentations, and swirling and sniffing. When it's finally over, you won't believe how many different delicacies found their way out of the kitchen and into your heart. See p. 104.

- **Terra** (St. Helena, Napa Valley; ☎ 707/963-8931): As far as formal, intimate fine dining goes, Terra is my number-one choice. Within a historic fieldstone restaurant, James Beard Award-winning chef Hiro Sone creates incredibly sophisticated, vibrant, and refined cuisine that deftly shows his French, Italian, and Japanese culinary training as well as his appreciation for the best of local seasonal ingredients. Sone's wife—pastry chef and front-of-the-house gal Lissa Doumani—ensures each eve is delicious, from the polished service to the to-die-for desserts. See p. 109.
- **ZuZu** (Napa, Napa Valley; ☎ 707/224-8555): If you've had it with French and Italian fare and Wine Country-themed dining rooms, race directly to this neighborhood haunt. Shockingly affordable and serving a worldly array of Mediterranean-inspired "small plates," it's a snack-lover's nirvana. I'm addicted to the single-serving paella, yummy and intriguing by-the-glass wines, and friendly attitude here. See p. 104.
- **Cafe La Haye** (Sonoma, Sonoma Valley; ☎ 707/935-5994): This small, sophisticated Sonoma cafe is a must-stop on your Wine Country dining binge. You'll enjoy the simple yet savory dishes emanating from the tiny open kitchen as well as a friendly waitstaff, attractive art, and absurdly reasonable prices. See p. 148.
- **El Dorado Kitchen** (Sonoma, Sonoma Valley; ☎ 707/996-3030): This much welcome addition to downtown Sonoma ups the area's posh factor with a swanky modern dining room, white-umbrella-strewn patio, and Mediterranean-inspired cuisine by chef Ryan Fancher, who delivers some tricks he learned while cooking at The French Laundry. See p. 149.
- **The Girl & the Fig** (Sonoma, Sonoma Valley; ☎ 707/938-3634): The cuisine at this modern, attractive cafe is nouveau-country with French nuances—and, yes, usually figs: They appear in creations such as the winter fig salad made with

arugula, pecans, and dried figs; as well as in the Laura Chenel goat cheese with a fig-and-port vinaigrette; and in the hearty pork chop with fig compote, roasted fennel, mashed potatoes, and pork jus. Of course there are lots of options minus the figs, too. Tourists and locals pack the place (and its lovely back patio) nightly, so reserve ahead. See p. 149.

- **Harvest Moon** (Sonoma, Sonoma Valley; ☎ 707/933-8160): My personal favorite for food downtown, this restaurant with a quirky layout, tiny kitchen, and lovely backyard dining area is a must-try for food lovers, thanks to the efforts of chef/owner Nick Demarest and his wife Jen. See p. 150.
- **Cyrus** (Healdsburg, Northern Sonoma; ☎ 707/433-3311): One of Northern California's most elegant and opulent dining experiences can be yours with a reservation at this restaurant designed to remind you of the small fine-dining establishments of Bordeaux, France. Blow the budget and start by ordering from the caviar cart and the champagne cart, and then let genius chef Doug Keane work his culinary magic. Definitely save room for dessert. Those offered here achieve real star status. See p. 187.
- **Jimtown Store** (Alexander Valley, Northern Sonoma; ☎ 707/433-1212) Part general store, part gastronome's dream deli and cafe, this roadside attraction is downright adorable, from its old-school looks and toy and candy collections to its exceptional edibles, from sandwiches to housemade spreads (definitely get the fig and olive tapenade) to pastas and cookies. See p. 191.