



Winding Around Wine Country

Our national search for the best vineyards
in America decanted these top spots

BY JILL K. ROBINSON

GET A DEEP SENSE OF THE TERROIR



in a handful of United States wine regions with a number of road trips that goes beyond the city tasting room. It's only when you have your feet on the ground in the vineyard and breathe in the landscape where the grapes are grown can you experience the elements that come together in each glass of wine.

These select vineyards have significant differences in terrain, climate and culture—making for a vacation road trip to remember. Pack your bags and follow your palate to these rich wine destinations.



Santa Barbara County, California

Known to film buffs as the Sideways wine region, Santa Barbara County has more than 100 wineries across more than 21,000 acres. This is one of the coolest viticultural areas in California, due to the inland ebb and flow of fog and ocean breezes along the east-west transverse mountain range and valleys that open directly to the Pacific Ocean. There are six official

American Viticultural Areas (AVAs) here: Happy Canyon of Santa Barbara, Santa Maria Valley, Santa Ynez Valley, Ballard Canyon, Los Olivos District and Santa Rita Hills.

Santa Barbara County has a near-perfect place for a wide variety of wine grape varieties. Start at Beckmen Vineyards in the Santa Ynez Valley near Los Olivos, where the focus is on innovative and well-crafted Rhône varietal wines. Longoria Wines, with an explicit concentration on Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, has a tasting room in the heart of Lompoc. Finish up in downtown Santa Barbara where many of the area's best wineries have tasting rooms including Au Bon Climat, Margerum Wines, Santa Barbara Winery, Pali Wine Co., Riverbench Winery and Jaffurs Wine Cellars. For days when you want to leave the car behind, 805 Transportation has both limousine and wine country cab services to get you where you need to go.

Take a wine break at the Hitching Post II, famous for its Santa Maria-style barbecue (and as the hangout in *Sideways*) that dates

FROM TOP: Ehlers Estate in Napa Valley; rows of cabernet at Thomas Judy Beckman Estate Vineyard

back to 19th-century Spanish-style ranch cookouts featuring top-block sirloin and tri-tip barbecued over a native oak species that adds a smoky flavor. Stay at Alisal Guest Ranch & Resort in the new refurbished suites designed by Nathan Turner. Or embrace your inner cowboy at Fess Parker Wine Country Inn. The 19 spacious rooms and suites channel a Wild West vibe, courtesy of the famous actor's roles in Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone television shows. At the Bear and Star restaurant, refined ranch cuisine is paired with estate-grown Rhône varietals from the Fess Parker Winery.



Award-winning wines produced here include Merlot, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Zinfandel, Cabernet Franc and—of course—Cabernet Sauvignon, which makes up 40 percent of the total wine production in the valley.

With more than 400 wineries in Napa, the tasting options are as diverse as the grapes. If you're a morning person, the early bird gets the vino inside the 1886 stone barn winery at Ehlers Estate where the "Start Your Day" tasting of organically-farmed varietals begins at 9:30 a.m. (reservations required). Music lover? Reds and rock n' roll are the jam at Cliff Lede Vineyards where blocks of the vineyard are named after owner Cliff Lede's favorite songs and albums including "Dark Side of the Moon" and "My Generation." The "Backstage" tasting option features rotating exhibits from music artists and music memorabilia from Lede's personal collection.

Architecture buffs will appreciate the "Founders Experience" at Sullivan Rutherford Estate: sipping Bordeaux varietals in the vineyard home designed by celebrated architect John Marsh Davis, known for his Frank Lloyd Wright aesthetic. Cinema aficionados should head to Frank Family Vineyards where Marilyn Monroe sipped sparkling wine when she was in town. And keep an eye out for owner Rich Frank, the former president of Disney Studios and a Hollywood legend in his own right for his involvement in blockbusters including *Pretty Woman*. His Hollywood stories are best paired with a Napa Valley Chardonnay.

For A-list lodging, the five-room boutique hotel, Poetry Inn, is perched high above the valley with 360-degree views of wine country. Also A-list: Meadowood Inn. Rooms and suites are thoughtfully incorporated into the natural landscape of the 250-acre estate with outside-the-wine-box activities including croquet (you must wear all white), tennis and golf. Feel free to leave the car at the hotel: Napa has endless transportation options—from bikes to limos to trolleys and even a Wine Train—to help get you around town. — JF

Pro Tip

Tires sold in North America are required to have molded indicators, or "wear bars," to let drivers know when to replace them. Inspect tires for wear and damage before any road trip, and schedule an alignment check at least once a year to help reduce tread wear and get more miles per gallon.

Napa Valley, California



California State Route 29 winds through Napa Valley and leads to everything this northern slice of wine country is famous for: sprawling vineyards, luxury inns and boutique wineries. Known as one of the most premier wine regions in the world, Napa's elite reputation stems more from science than snobbery: The 30-mile stretch of wine country boasts a Mediterranean climate only seen in 2% of the world. For vintners, it's the perfect blend of unique geography, weather and some of the most diverse soil on the planet that allows more than 34 varieties of premium wine grapes to thrive here.

The Napa Valley itself is an American Viticultural Area (AVA) with 16 nested AVAs within the valley: Atlas Peak, Calistoga, Chiles Valley District, Coombsville, Diamond Mountain District, Howell Mountain, Los Carneros, Mt. Veeder, Oak Knoll District of Napa Valley, Oakville, Rutherford, St. Helena, Spring Mountain District, Stags Leap District, Yountville and Wild Horse Valley.

FROM TOP: Farmers harvesting at Hermann J. Wiemer in the Finger Lakes; glasses of red served fireside at the Allison Inn & Spa



Willamette Valley, Oregon

This wine region south of Portland is home to two-thirds of Oregon's wineries and vineyards, and is known as one of the premier Pinot Noir-producing areas in the world. The grape itself is extremely reflective of climactic and site differences, and demands a cool climate to thrive. The protection afforded by the Coast Range mountains to the west, Cascade Mountains to the east and lower hill chains to the extreme north makes the valley especially suitable for cool-climate grapes. Six official AVAs here include: Chehalem Mountains; Dundee Hills; Eola-Amity Hills; McMinnville; Ribbon Ridge; and Yamhill-Carlton.

While its Pinot Noir wines are the benchmark production at Elk Cove Vineyards in Gaston, it's also worth tasting their Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Riesling and Chardonnay wines. In Dundee, Nicholas-Jay is the result of a collaboration between a Burgundy luminary and a United States music executive, producing beautiful Pinot Noir wines. Lingua Franca in the Eola-Amity Hills is inspired by a desire for transparency in winemaking and purity in the vineyard, and featured Pinot Noir and Chardonnay.

And leave the driving to someone else because Pinot Car lets you plan your own itinerary, or you can lean on their expert suggestions.

Splurge at The Allison Inn & Spa, the Willamette Valley's premier destination resort, set on 35 hillside acres where its on-site restaurant showcases wine country cuisine and an impressive 500-label wine list. At Abbey Road Farm, you can stay in beautifully designed suites housed in converted grain silos with vineyard views and fuel up every morning with a gourmet breakfast before heading out for a day of wine tasting.



Finger Lakes/Upstate, New York

This wine region in upstate New York is often compared to the German wine regions along the Rhine River, mostly due to the laser-focus on aromatic whites like Riesling and Gewürztraminer. But like many wine regions, there's still much more to discover with its Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc and several French-American and native varieties. There's one major viticultural area here—Finger Lakes AVA—with two nested within, Cayuga Lake AVA and Seneca Lake.

More than 140 wineries are spread throughout this area, though the majority are clustered around Cayuga, Keuka and Seneca Lakes. At Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard, among the first to put the region on the map with its Rieslings, it's best to make a reservation to ensure you get a space in the intimate rustic barn. Wagner Vineyards has a variety of regional selections, from Chardonnay, Gewürztraminer and Pinot Noir to hybrid grapes like Cayuga and Delaware. And, of course, they have Riesling. Take a trip through a flight of wines across the Finger Lakes at Microclimate Wine Bar.

For a day off winery tours, visit the Corning Museum of Glass, home to the largest collection of glass in the world. You can merely look, or even step into the hot shop to make a creation of your own in a class. Make your home base at Belhurst Castle, a restored castle with two restaurants and a spa, or check in at Firelight Camps for some relaxed glamping in Ithaca. If you want a lift or a wine tour, check in with Main Street Drivers, so you don't need to do it all alone.



PHOTOS HERMANN J. WIEMER VINEYARD; BARBARA KRAFT

FROM TOP: A couple enjoying a glass on the patio at Abeja Winery; an aerial view of William Chris' new wine tasting facility in Hye, Texas



Columbia Valley, Washington

Stretching across the central and southern areas of Washington is the Columbia Valley Wine Region, the state's largest viticultural area that covers a full third of Washington's landmass. The cross-border AVA (which spills into Oregon) covers more than 11 million acres and contains 99 percent of wine grapes grown in Washington state. Cabernet Sauvignon is the most planted grape here, followed by merlot, Chardonnay, Riesling and Syrah. Nine smaller AVAs are nested within Columbia Valley: Ancient Lakes, Yakima Valley, Red Mountain, Walla Walla Valley, Horse Heaven Hills, Rattlesnake Hills, Lake Chelan, Snipes Mountain and Wahluke Slope.

Hit the road (actually, have someone drive you) to taste at Long Shadows in Walla Walla (look for the glassworks by sculptor Dale Chihuly). Also in Walla Walla, Abeja (Spanish for "bee") focuses on Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Chardonnay. Visits to this idyllic country farmhouse setting are by appointment, and you can also stay at the inn on the

estate, the Inn at Abeja, where you get priority for tasting appointments. Main Street Drivers is your best bet for a designated driver on a heavy tasting day.

Pick your own lavender at Blue Mountain Lavender Farm in early summer or visit Lewis and Clark State Park to get a great sense of the outdoors. Lay your head at The Marcus Whitman in Walla Walla, with elegant rooms and suites and five on-site tasting rooms hosted by boutique vintners, so you can still sample the region's wine when you take a break from the road. *RS*

Jill K. Robinson writes about adventure and travel for a variety of print and digital publications, including *Afar*, *National Geographic*, *Outside* and *Travel + Leisure*. Her wine adventures usually result in more than a few extra bottles.



Hill Country, Texas

Before you ask whether there's wine in Texas, the answer is yes. Believe it or not, there's wine in each of the 50 states. The sunny and dry climate of Texas is ideal for the varietals that flourish in the region, including Cabernet and Zinfandel, though many other varietals are planted throughout the Hill Country. The Texas Hill Country AVA is one of the largest AVAs in the geographic area, with more than nine million acres, even though that entire acreage isn't used in producing wine.

Drop in at William Chris Vineyards in Hye off Highway 290 for a true taste of Texas terroir. All wines are made from 100 percent Texas-grown grapes with an emphasis on red including Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and unique Lone Star blends including a Grenache-Syrah-Mourvedre with a touch of Tannat. At Kuhlman Cellars in Stonewall, the estate vineyard is planted to Mourvedre, Marsanne, Aglianico, Roussanne and Carignan. Enjoy a tasting on the breezy second-story covered tasting patio, where the world slows down and you can get an intimate sense of winemaking in Hill Country. The 290 Wine Shuttle is a great option when you don't want to drive on your own.

On a wine break, go see the nation's second-largest granite dome (next to Georgia's Stone Mountain): Enchanted Rock. Half-buried in the hills near Fredericksburg, the rock is best to visit at the end of the day, just before sunset. Stay at Tres Lunas, where you can get a poolside suite and truly see the wide-open skies of Texas, including what seems like a billion stars at night.

