

SPEAKEASY

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FIVE REASONS TO LOVE NAPA AND SONOMA

Is there a more perfect place on earth than the California wine country of Napa and Sonoma?

I know that's an overstatement, so let me append a few qualifiers. Clearly, the region has become a little too popular for its own good – at least judging from all the clueless tourists and the nonsense they engender (can you say “limo winery tours”?). It's also facing worthy competition from the south (the “Sideways” wine country of Santa Barbara) and north (Oregon and Washington).

But no matter: Napa and Sonoma are where California's wine-making tradition began well more than a century ago and where it came of age (think the 1976 “Judgment of Paris” when wines from the region triumphed over wines from France). And today, it's where it continues to flourish.

I spent a glorious two days in Napa and Sonoma last week, reminding myself of what it means to be in a place where there's not only a premium placed on good wine (and good food), but where there's also something of a spirit of innovation. Indeed, for a region that's so historic (at least in American terms), there's a great deal of focus on the new. Sometimes, the goofy, tourist-y new, but the new nonetheless.

With that in mind, I humbly submit my five reasons for loving Napa and Sonoma, circa 2012.

1. It's about individuality: What is about this verdant patch of land and the crazily ambitious (or ambitiously crazy) titans and entrepreneurs it attracts? Napa and Sonoma are places where rich people run wild with dreams and ideas of all sorts – some related to wine, some related to the good life and some a little of both. I'm thinking in particular of Francis Ford Coppola, the filmmaker-turned-winemaker who's fashioned his eponymous winery into something of a palazzo straight out of “The Godfather”: You can come here to taste the wines – Coppola produces decent ones at all price levels – but you can also come to soak in the heated pool (you can rent cabanas by the day), play a game of bocce and enjoy a perfectly crisp pizza. The whole place is about Coppola's vision of a kind of a country-estate with an Italian accent (he calls it a “wine wonderland”). I was set to snicker at this oddball – and, yes, very tourist-y – enterprise, until I experienced it first-hand. Now I'm ready to sign up for a seasonal pool pass. (By the way, if you do visit, check out the small Coppola museum, replete with Don Corleone's desk from “The Godfather.”)

2. It's about education: You can't go to a Napa and Sonoma winery without learning something. The staff at the wineries talk the language of the vine – sugar levels, experimental blends, you name it – in a way you don't find in other “wine country” regions throughout the United States. But the best of them take it to a whole other level. A case in point: the Benziger Family Winery, where they espouse a biodynamic approach to winemaking – organic gardening taken to glorious extremes so that the land is maintained in its most natural state. After two hours of touring the grounds, I still found myself going back to an exhibit to learn a few more details about the proper use of manure.

3. It's about the perfect marriage between wine and something else: Note, I didn't say wine and fine dining. That's because most Napa and Sonoma wineries are limited in what they can serve – local laws are designed to promote wine in its own right as an agricultural product, not as a complement to a fancy meal. (The few wineries with restaurants have been grandfathered in before the enactment of such restrictions.) But wineries still feel the need to expand upon the wine-tasting experience – and they've come up with some incredibly novel concepts. At Mumm Napa, wine goes hand-in-hand with a mini museum devoted to photography, with rotating exhibits plus a first-rate collection of seminal works by Ansel Adams. At Cliff Lede, fine art is wine's soulmate – the winery has a number of notable pieces (a Jim Dine sculpture sits front and center) and a small gallery. And at Ehlers Estate, it's about wine and chocolate – not a whole meal with a chocolate coda (again, local laws don't allow that), but a few artisan truffles, made by an acclaimed local chocolatier using such eclectic flavorings as fennel and cumin; the pairing brings out all the hidden flavors of the winery's impressive offerings.

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4. It's about Gott's: As in Gott's Roadside, the roadside eatery with a gourmet flair. Sure, Napa has more famous dining destinations – this is where Thomas Keller's French Laundry, often cited as the country's greatest restaurant, is located. But to me, Gott's, which now has a second Napa location (in the Oxbow Public Market), speaks to the Napa/Sonoma ideal: good food, often made with locally sourced ingredients, served in an unpretentious matter. To those on the East Coast, it might seem like a California version of Shake Shack, a burger joint full of flavor and class. But Gott's menu goes even a little deeper – on my latest visit, I enjoyed a bowl of the excellent and hearty chili and a plate of zesty, Hawaiian-inspired ahi poke tacos. And last I checked, Shake Shack doesn't have as big a list of California wines.

5. Oh, yes, it's also about the wine: It's easy to paint Napa/Sonoma wines with a broad, New World brush – those overly oak-y Chardonnays, those obnoxiously big Cabernets. But I found ones with a lot more intellectual heft on this visit – tasty and intriguing all at once. (And keep in mind, much of what you see at Napa/Sonoma wineries are winery-only releases, which is partly why the region must be experienced up close). A couple of favorites: the Ehlers Estate Cabernet Franc – elegant in its medium-bodied structure and deftly delicious in a subtly herbaceous way; and the “Asatsuyu” Sauvignon Blanc from Kenzo Estate – the name translates as “morning dew” from the Japanese (and this is very much a Japanese-influenced winery) and it somehow fits this moderately crisp, gentle wonder of a white wine. Of course, in two days, I could taste only so many wines. I guess a repeat visit is in order...

Side dish: Naturally, another part of what makes Napa/Sonoma so special is its proximity to one of the foodie capitals of the world – namely, San Fran. My Bay Area find on this trip? Nduja, an unusual salame from Bocalone, a specialist in all things Italian and sausage (they have a shop at the Ferry Building). It's a spicy, soft salame – basically, spreadable like a pate – a fascinating style I've never seen before (it's native to Calabria). Bocalone (company motto: “Tasty salted pig parts”) believes it's one of just a handful of salami makers in this country to produce it. You won't find it in many gourmet shops nationwide, but fortunately Bocalone sells it online.