

Wine tasting notes in California - updated January, 2015

I've underlined and bolded the "critical few" for each region.

Southern California:

Santa Barbara is 2 hours north of LA. Santa Barbara wine country starts 30 minutes north of Santa Barbara and ends in the Santa Maria valley 30 minutes farther north.

First day going south to north. Right in Santa Barbara itself - downtown, the Santa Barbara winery has a great tasting room to get you started. The tasting fee is \$7 and that includes the glass to take home. From Santa Barbara, head north on i101 30 minutes to Buellton (close to Solvang - a Danish community) for three gems to the east, **Melville** (best Pinots), LaFond (a bit of everything) and **Alma Rosa** (a boutique Pinot & Chardonnay place).

For something a bit more exotic but in the atmosphere of an industrial park, head farther east 15 minutes to Lompoc and taste at Pali (boutique Pinots and Chardonnays), Palmina (Italian style wines) and **Brewer-Clifton** (old world French Burgundy style wines).

On the west side of i101 is a good and reasonably priced Marriott as well as a pretty good selection of restaurants (try A Ru Sushi for example in the shopping mall, the famous but somewhat overpriced Hitching Post from "Sideways" ~.5 miles toward Solvang or the Firestone Brewery just beyond the Marriott).

Back on i101 heading north again about 10 minutes, exit Zaca Station road and head northeast through Foxen Canyon. Firestone Winery is maybe worth a quick stop, then proceed north to **Zaca Mesa** (good syrahs), Fess Parker and a bit farther northeast to **Kenneth Volk** (a real gem - taste his Bien Nacido Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs).

On the second day, start just east of Buellton in Ballard at Blackjack Ranch. They taste about a dozen of their wines at a time there, most of which are very good. Heading north, back on i101 drive about 30 minutes to Santa Maria, which is at the top of Foxen Canyon road. Costa de Oro is right off the freeway and a good starting point. Cottonwood Canyon is a mile or so southeast. Ca' Del Grevino nearby in Old Town Orcutt is a good lunch spot that also has a (just okay) tasting room attached. Cambria and Tantara (call ahead 805.938.5051 for an appointment when you're close) are next. If you missed Kenneth Volk yesterday, you're close to it again here. If you've had enough, head back south.

Central California:

On the third day it's time for an adventure north to Paso Robles, which has far fewer people, less traffic on weekends and lower tasting fees. Paso Robles is 90 minutes north of Santa Barbara wine country just about halfway between LA and San Francisco, specializing in Rhone-style reds (Syrah, Grenache, Mourvedre) and whites (Viogniers). Exit i101 on 47 west and stop at **Lone Madrone, Dover Canyon** (a real gem for low cost, very good mid-week wines) and Windward (Pinot Noirs only). If you're hungry, head east to i101 and drive the short distance to downtown Paso Robles where the quaint town square offers lots of good restaurant choices (Artisan is the real restaurant gem here, while F. McLintocks Saloon is a decent sports bar). From downtown you've got a choice to make. Head east for Robert

Hall, EOS and Bianchi or head west again for **Tablas Creek** and Justin. West is the high brow wine trail and east is more pedestrian.

Northern California:

Napa is about 90 minutes north of San Francisco or west of Sacramento. Avoid Napa on weekends - it's very crowded and the traffic is awful. There's no end to great wineries and restaurants there, however the tasting fees are high. You can pace yourself and save money by splitting one tasting between two people. My favorite Napa places heading south to north are: **Paraduxx**, **Alpha Omega** (open until 6pm), Darioush, Stags Leap, lunch at the Rutherford Grill (an upscale diner) or take-away sandwiches from the Oakville General Store, then finish the day at Franciscan and Duckhorn. From there head west out of Napa to i101, which you can take south to Santa Rosa or Sonoma for the night. Santa Rosa's got a nice Marriott Courtyard near Railroad Square (lots of dining choices that are walking distance) or, if you'd like something a lot more romantic, try the Renaissance Lodge in Sonoma with dinner at The Girl & The Fig on the town square. Non-weekend nights should be available if you book ahead.

Next morning head north about 30 minutes on i101 to explore the Alexander / Sonoma / Russian River Valley wineries. All wineries have tasting fees along this trek, but most can be waved with bottle purchases. My favorite places starting up north in the Alexander Valley are: **Hanna** (lots of variety), Stryker Sonoma and Ridge. There are two cute little old general stores / restaurants in the area that I recommend for a quick lunch. Between Hanna and Stryker Sonoma is the Jimtown Cafe (old pickup truck out front). Closer to Ridge is the Dry Creek General Store. If the timing isn't right, get a couple of sandwiches to go and eat them at a picnic table at one of the wineries later on.

From Ridge, head south on i101 with a stop in Healdsburg at Seghesio (great Zins – especially their Rockpile Road), then continue south into the Russian River Valley on Westside Road to **Rochioli** (Pinot Noirs) and **Porter Creek**. If you're still in a "wine mood", head east a few miles to catch i101 south an exit or two and drive down the Sonoma highway through the Valley of the Moon to Arrowood. If you're staying in Sonoma, that will put you right back at your hotel. If you're staying in Santa Rosa, head back in that direction and stop by another hidden gem - Carol Shelton, located in an industrial park.

Haven't had enough? Next morning head north on i101 and east on 128 for a rare and wonderful wine experience that you can amaze your wine connoisseur friends with for years to come - the Anderson Valley. Fair warning though, it's at least a 90 minute drive from Santa Rosa, half of which is on a winding country road. Pinot Noirs are king in the Anderson Valley, although they do other varietals quite well. Start with Navarro for a beautiful spot with good "mid-week" wines (they open at 10am), then stop by **Toulouse** and if you're lucky, Vern, the owner and winemaker will make your tasting especially memorable. Then head south to grand **Goldeneye**. Finish with Breggo as you head back south. Last time I was in the Anderson Valley, only Goldeneye charged a tasting fee and the tasting they set up is well worth it.