



SONOMA *on my mind*

SONOMA *out-cools Napa.*
BY ROBERT HAYNES-PETERSON

Fifteen or 20 years ago, Northern California's Sonoma County was considered the laid-back, "lesser" cousin to Napa Valley's tourist-friendly melange of pricey cult wines and large producers. These days the tides have turned a bit: Napa continues to do its highbrow, high-volume thing to ever-increasing traffic snarls. Sonoma's evolution, meanwhile, has been toward the trendy, experimental and high-concept. In short, Sonoma has become Napa's cooler sibling.

To start with, naturally, there's the wine. Thanks to a wide variety of microclimates, less-expensive land than Napa, and generally cooler weather, the small town-focused county has found itself in the fortunate position of being able to explore grapes beyond cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay (both important to the region). Notable pinot noir, old-vine zinfandel and intriguing petit verdot all come out of the region. And there are expanding blocks of sangiovese, grenache, cabernet franc, petite sirah, pinot grigio, merlot and more.

There are about 450 wineries in Sonoma County. Some are small and idiosyncratic: DaVero is a funky biodynamic winery and working farm, specializing in unusual Italian varieties. Others are more ornate: Jordan Winery offers an open-air sunset dinner among its tour options. Located on the highest occupied point on the 1,200-acre estate, "the table is the only place in Sonoma where you can view three appellations from one spot," according to CEO John Jordan, son of the winery's founders. "During the Perseid meteor showers, we offer a four-course Starlight Dinner. It's incredible." And of course Francis Ford Coppola Winery will give you all the posh, Napa Valley-style character you might desire in its mansion/tasting room, on-site swimming pool for guests and elevated dining experiences.

Many of the county's winemakers have stepped up their

accommodations game in the past few years. The newly launched guest house at Rodney Strong Vineyards played host in its first year to nine destination weddings, and made Buzzfeed's list of Top 20 Wedding Locations. Only members of Jordan Winery's rewards program can score a stay at the castle-like chateau, with views of the winery's oak fermentation tanks from one bedroom's balcony. (It might be worth it to snatch up a few dozen cases just to score that privilege.) For an even more immersive experience, the recently updated and stylish guesthouses at the revitalized Stryker Sonoma Estate outside of Geyserville and St. Anne's Crossing in Kenwood each place you smack dab in the middle of acres and acres of vines. Each has multiple bedrooms, providing a home base for groups of friends or wedding parties. *VRBO.com* provides access to a number of otherwise unknown stylish stays throughout wine country. (Some 40% of new luxury homes in Sonoma County are available as vacation rentals.)

Wander into the villages and hamlets, and you'll find the culinary scene offers much more than grapes. Sonoma produces a wider variety than Napa of local meats, produce and finished products (jams, olive oils, etc.), available at area restaurants and markets. Some of these venues compete dish-for-dish with Napa's French Laundry or anything in Manhattan. Valette, located in Healdsburg, is only a year old, and already a contender for a Michelin star. Do not let yourself out of the meticulously crafted New American spot without trying the Day Boat Scallops en Croute, a rich, visually striking puff pastry housing said scallops in a Champagne and fennel sauce, and dolloped with caviar. Nearby, Chalkboard prepares well-made dishes and top-notch craft cocktails in a friendly, well-lit space. Shed, a trendy bi-level "farmers' market" featuring local produce, beers and wines will make sure you're all stocked up for your return to that charming winery guest house.



Osmosis Spa zen garden



Valette Sonoma



Valette dish



Sonoma Kenwood Inn



Sonoma Madrona Manor

If you'd rather retreat to more traditional surroundings, consider Madrona Manor, the former home of 19th-century banker/magnate John Alexander Paxton. The 18-room Victorian stunner features traditionally appointed spaces (including five suites), no TVs, eight acres of woodlands and gardens, and a heated swimming pool. The secluded, Mediterranean-style Kenwood Inn and Spa transports you to another world with modern, understated furnishings, a dining patio enveloped by trees, and every detail carefully attended.

Those who have had their fill of wine tastings can book an appointment at the unique Osmosis Spa in the tiny town of Occidental. A Japanese-style spa surrounded by zen gardens, it's an oasis away from absolutely everything. The unusual cedar bath (think mud bath, but with aromatic wood pulp) provides a specialized heat therapy and detoxifies the body. Adventure seekers ought to consider Sonoma Canopy Tours. Rope bridges and seven zip-lines take you on an eco-tour through California's majestic coastal redwood forest. Need more nature? Just off the coast you'll find whale, seal and shark watching opportunities from a 33-foot sailboat offered by Bodega Bay Sailing. Or stay on land and shoot a quick nine (or more) while taking in the oceanside views at The Links at Bodega Harbor, or wander among 150-foot tall redwoods at the unique, highly rated Northwood Golf Club.

When it's time for a drink, but wine isn't cutting it, Sonoma County is now home to several breweries and two new craft distilleries. Sonoma

County Distilling is producing irreverent, yet carefully made American whiskeys out of an industrial business complex in Roehner Park, using locally sourced ingredients. Spirit Works, meanwhile, is nestled in the trendy Sebastopol-based Barlow complex of restaurants, shops and artisanal producers. With a grain-to-glass philosophy, the husband-and-wife distilling team incorporates both the high-tech (rapid distillation techniques) and unusual (some barrels sport iPods and headphones, the

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whiskey "listening" to anything from classical music to Led Zeppelin as it ages). As of 2016, you can buy the spirits you taste at California distilleries, rather than later hunting down a liquor store.

Being such a forward-thinking region, alternative energy and sustainability are issues on the tip of everyone's tongues. The Links at Bodega Harbor received the "Green to a Tee" certification in 2010 indicating responsible, earth-friendly maintenance. Sonoma County Distillery's operations are 100% wind powered. And Jordan Winery generates around 75% of its power needs through on-estate solar panels. "The last couple of years we've been at around 90 to 95% solar because of the lack of rain," says tour guide Claire Smith. "We hope to produce less of our own energy next year," she jokes.