

Passport to Wine Country: Napa Valley

Wine consumption is up in the United States from 2.73 gallons per resident in 2012 to 2.82 gallons per resident in 2013. And along with wine consumption, wine tourism is also booming.

Many wine consumers have turned to Wine-Themed destination travel over the last several years. According to The Wine Institute, a California based government relations association that represents wineries and wine-related businesses, 20.7 million tourists visited California wine regions in 2013, adding \$2.1 billion to the economy. Articles with titles such as "Ten Great Places to Hike, Bike and Sip in California Wine Country," and "Five Great California Wine Country Road Trips" are now commonplace in trade and consumer publications.

However, if you want to make the most of your wine-travel experience, there are a few things you need to know. With so many people visiting wineries and so many wineries to visit, it definitely pays to spend some time planning your trip before you go in order to avoid crowds and get a better-than-average reception during your visit.

Many wineries may charge a small fee for tasting a flight of their wines. Often, these fees are waived for groups that have appointments set up by wine shops or other wineries. If you don't have a friend in the business, consider hiring a company to set up your visits. I like to send friends to Cellar Pass (www.cellarpass.com), an online winery booking site that will create a custom tasting tour of California wineries, catering to the size and tastes of your group. I have also heard good things about Small Lots Tours (www.smalllotwintours.net) who specialize in family-run operations in Sonoma and Napa.

Regardless of where you go, here are a few useful do's and don'ts that will make your visit more enjoyable.

A Few Do's:

- Contact your local wine shop and ask them to arrange for a personal appointment for you and your group.
- Reconfirm all of your appointments - it goes a long way with the winery to demonstrate goodwill.
- Leave plenty of time between appointments so that you have time to spend at each winery without having to cut your visit short or rush off to the next one.
- Consider hiring a car or van service or ask someone in your group to be the designated driver. Even though you plan on tasting multiple wines at several wineries can add up to a DUI - and law enforcement in wine country are exceptionally well-trained to spot and detain inebriated drivers.

A Few Don'ts

- Don't show up late! Most wineries have a lot of things to do and people to see, particularly during harvest, so show up on time!
- Don't over-consume! Spit if you can, taste if it must, but remember to consume all alcohol products responsibly.
- Don't be a rude guest! Visiting a winery is like going to someone's home - and in some situations, you are going to someone's home! Be polite and buy wine if you like it.
- Don't show up unannounced unless the winery specifically lists hours during which they are open to the public.

As for my specific recommendations, here are a few of my favorite wineries to visit in Napa Valley:

Smaller wineries:

Neal Family Vineyards

716 Liparita Road
Angwin, CA 94508
707.965.2800
info@nealvineyards.com

Mark Neal has created the union of farming Napa's most prized appellations and using the fruit from those vineyards to produce Napa Valley and vineyard-designated wines. Many of the sites that were selected have been under vineyard management with Jack Neal and Son since 1968, with all grape sources for the Cabernet Sauvignon programs either owned or under vineyard management by Jack Neal & Son. Mark and winemaker Gove Celio direct the farming practices, having refined their techniques for many years. They share the common goal of producing superior grapes required to make quality wines, sustainably so that future generations may do the same. They have also taken a leading role in organic farming, certifying all Napa Valley wine program vineyards with the California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF). Wine tasting in their caves, drilled deep into the hillside, in an unforgettable experience. Reservations are required.

Bennett Lane Winery

3340 Highway 128
Calistoga, CA 94515
877-629-6272
info@bennettlane.com

Located at the North end of the Napa Valley, where the valley floor meets the edge of the Mayacamas Mountain and near the quaint town of Calistoga, owners Randy and Lisa Lynch have created a winery to make wine they like to drink as a complement to a meal and not the centerpiece itself. Ask to see their "petting vineyard" - a small vineyard that is set up to show visitors the different types of wine varietals and vines. Reservations are recommended.

Saddleback Cellars

7802 Money Road
Oakville, CA 94562
707-944-1305
barbara@saddlebackcellars.com

Known as "The King of Cabernet," legendary winemaker and owner, Nils Venge, is a hoot! He has been making stellar Cabernet Sauvignon since its establishment. Nils' philosophy on making wine is that they must reflect the best qualities of Napa Valley; sometimes a single vineyard, sometimes a single appellation, or a blend of appellations to make the best wine in a particular vintage. Despite his reputation as "The King," Nils is a down-to-earth, cheerful, full-of-life kind of guy whose wines not only reflect the character of their region, but also seem to reflect his personality - bold, yet approachable, friendly and fun yet with layers of complexities. While they are open to the public 10 am - 4 pm, I would recommend calling ahead for reservations.

Venge Vineyards

4708 Silverado Trail
Calistoga, CA 94515
707-942-9100

Nils' son, Kirk Venge, gravitated to winemaking at an early age. He proved to be as talented a winemaker as his father, making wines in his own style, with a vision to build his own legacy in the valley. In 2008, Kirk achieved his lifelong dream and acquired full ownership of Venge Vineyards from his family. Today, Kirk continues the Napa Valley heritage, focusing on select vineyard sites that produce fruit worthy of bearing the Venge family name. Not open to the public, so reservations are required.

Larger Wineries:

Chateau Montelena Winery and Estate

1429 Tubbs Lane
Calistoga, CA 94515
707-942-5105
reservations@montelena.com

Chateau Montelena is one of the most beautiful and storied wineries in Napa Valley. A visit to the grounds is worth the visit alone! In 1972, under the leadership of Jim Barrett, the vineyard was cleared and replanted, and the Chateau outfitted with modern winemaking equipment. He assembled a team to oversee the vineyard and winemaking, then grew and contracted for the highest-quality grapes in the Napa Valley. Decades later, this celebrated family-owned winery continues to thrive with Jim's son Bo Barrett at the helm. Be sure to watch the movie Bottle Shock before you go! Open daily to the public but reservations are required for the exclusive library wine tasting.

Joseph Phelps Winery

200 Taplin Road
St. Helena CA 94574
707-963-2745

Enamored with the beautiful Napa Valley and contemplating a career change, Joe Phelps bought the 600-acre Connolly cattle ranch in Spring Valley, and began planting vineyards and construction of a winery. The Joseph Phelps winery was completed in 1974 in time for harvest, crushing grapes for the first Insignia and the first Syrah bottlings. It put Joe Phelps and his Joseph Phelps Vineyards on the map of top Napa Valley wine producers. One of the best views of Napa Valley are from the porch of their tasting room makes this a wonderful place to pick up a bottle of wine from their tasting room and take time out of your day and relax. Open to the public daily. Reservations required for their private tasting room.