

THE **TASTIEST** TRAVEL TRENDS, TOURS AND MORE!

Westworld

ALBERTA

The FOOD Issue

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food in Charleston



None for the Road: If you're wine-tasting, you shouldn't be driving. Pick a designated driver each day and reward that person with free dinner. If you're cycling from winery to winery, use the connoisseur-approved "swirl, sniff, sip, swish and spit" method of tasting (in other words, don't swallow the alcohol).

Sonoma by Bike

Pedal your way through wine country **by L.J. Williamson**

THE SONOMA VALLEY EMBODIES THE idealized image of California life: the people are mellow, the sun is shining and the wine is flowing. Unlike the caffeine-driven city life of San Francisco and Los Angeles, in wine country, they take it slow – which is why cycling is such a natural here. Plus, the region's wide variety of microclimates and soil types means that, unlike other wine regions that specialize in one or two varieties, almost any type of grape can be grown here with spectacular results. Cabernet Sauvignon thrives in the warmer inland areas, Pinot Noirs and Chardonnay on the cooler coast. Drive this route from town to town, parking your car and cycling in for a closer look – and taste.

LEG ONE: Oakland to Geyserville via Glen Ellen

Starting in Oakland affords a view of the dramatic difference between the urban Bay Area and the placid Sonoma Valley. Drive north on Hwy. 880 and Interstate 80, whisking past industrial landscapes, until the trafficky Interstate gives way to narrow, intimate Hwy. 37 and golden, spreading hillsides come into view.

It was this vista that led famously wanderlusting

JAUNT
Oakland to Santa Rosa, CA, and back.

DURATION
3 days

PRIME TIME
All year. Fall is the busy season.

Call of the Wild author Jack London to make Glen Ellen (pop. 784) his home in 1909. In the centre of town, make a stop at Jack London Village, a cluster of historic buildings that house gourmet shops and a host of lunch options. The town doesn't have its own bike rental shop, but nearby Sonoma's Good Time Touring (goodtimetouring.com; 888-525-0453)

offers free pickup and delivery of rental bikes. While you wait, dine or taste across the street at Eric Ross Winery (ericross.com; 707-939-8525), which is known for its kitschy decor and wines made from unusual Spanish varieties, such as Tempranillo and Albarino.

Once outfitted, hop on your bike and make the roughly three-kilometre ride up to Benziger Winery (benziger.com; 707-935-3000), a family operation that uses biodynamic growing methods to produce its Cabernet Sauvignons, Pinot Noirs, Sauvignon Blancs, Chardonnays, Merlots and Syrahs. The 93-point-rated Bordeaux blend, 2008 Tribute, is a don't-miss. Benziger also offers tractor-pulled tram tours of its vineyards and gardens.

Good Eats: The chef at Glen Ellen Star (glenellenstar.com; 707-343-1384) has a resumé that includes a stint at nearby three-Michelin-star



(this page, top to bottom) Life moves at a slow pace in Sonoma wine country – so cycling is the perfect mode of transport for touring; Sonoma Valley vineyards; (opposite) Glen Ellen Star chef Ari Weiswasser's wood-roasted asparagus and bread salad; L.J. Williamson in the vineyard behind Hope-Merrill House, Geyserville.

restaurant French Laundry. Menu standouts: the brick chicken, corn with queso fresco and Brussels sprouts with brown sugar-bacon marmalade.

Good Sleeps: After dinner, return your bike and have your designated driver head north for 64 km on Hwy. 101 to Hope-Merrill House (hope-inns.com; 800-825-4233) in Geyserville. Here, ornate wallpaper, floral prints and knick-knacks galore make for a “Grandma chic” decor. The breakfasts are stellar and there’s a small vineyard onsite.

LEG TWO: Healdsburg to Santa Rosa
Head south 13 km on Hwy. 101 to Healdsburg. For now, resist the urge to stroll through the main drag’s enticing restaurants, boutiques and tasting rooms. Instead, park the car behind Hotel Healdsburg and join a supported bike tour (getawayadventures.com; 800-499-BIKE) with a guide who will escort you through a leisurely (or strenuous – you pick) ride. On a supported tour, your only job is to pedal and enjoy, while your guide does the heavy lifting – of bikes, wine purchased en route, spare jackets and, best of all, a picnic lunch. Tired? Your guide will happily hoist your bike into his van and drive you back into town.

Tours leave from Healdsburg’s main plaza and run along Westside Road onto Dry Creek Road, meandering along back roads and gently rolling hills. Make as many or as few stops as you please – the guides are cheery and flexible. Popular wineries along the route include lushly landscaped Lambert Bridge (lambertbridge.com; 707-431-4760), where a fuzzy St. Bernard and yellow Labrador retriever laze in the tasting room; Dry Creek Vineyard (drycreekvineyard.com; 707-433-1000), whose 2009 Heritage Zinfandel was chosen as one of *Wine Spectator’s* “Best of the West”; and Quivira (quivirawine.com; 707-431-8333), where the offerings include a selection of less common reds, such as Grenache.

Good Eats: The wine list at local favourite Willi’s Wine Bar (starkrestaurants.com; 707-526-3096) includes an extensive list of Sonoma options, but also wines from



France, Australia and New Zealand. The menu is divided into “surf,” “turf,” and “earth” sections, along with an extensive selection of local and imported cheeses and charcuterie.

Good Sleeps: Head north-east up winding Mark West Springs Road into the African Savannah – or at least a remarkable imitation of it – for a night in one of Safari West’s luxurious tent cabins (safariwest.com; 707-566-3620), outfitted with linens, plush beds and bathrooms.

LEG THREE: Santa Rosa to Oakland

EMERGE from your cabin into the morning sunlight to see where all of those strange nighttime noises were coming from. The resort includes a 162-hectare Wildlife Preserve with immense enclosures where zebras, lemurs, giraffes, buffalo, ostriches, rhinos and wildebeests roam. It also offers, by reservation, a two-and-a-half-hour Winos and Rhinos tour, where guests sample wines from Alexander Valley’s Francis Ford Coppola Winery as they view the preserve.

Back on the road, head down Mark West Springs Road to Hwy. 101 and south to Santa Rosa’s Railroad Square Historic District, where Bike Partners (bikepartners.net; 85-LIVE-DREAM) will happily map out a route to nearby wineries. From the shop, take Prince Memorial Greenway, a protected bike path along oak-shaded Santa Rosa Creek through farmland to Olivet Road and the cluster of Russian River Valley appellation wineries, known for their sparkling wines, Pinot Noirs, Zinfandels and Chardonnays (olivetwineroad.com). Among them: Hook & Ladder, opened by a former San Francisco firefighter, and Harvest Moon, which offers the less common Gewürztraminer varietal.

Loop back on the greenway for the 11-km ride back to the Historic District. After a stroll through the shops and cafés, make the drive back to Oakland wiser in the ways of wine and always remembering the words of William Shakespeare: “Good company, good wine, good welcome can make good people.” ☒

AMA MEMBERS SAVE MORE

Before you go: Take a four-day cycling tour along Bodega Bay to the vineyards of Sonoma wine country. Includes deluxe accommodation, bicycles, meals, guides and a support vehicle. Land only from US\$2,295. 1-877-667-4777; AMATravel.ca

While you’re there: Save 10% on all food and non-alcoholic beverage purchases at La Vera Pizza in Santa Rosa and 20% on all food and non-alcoholic beverage purchases at Star Restaurant, also in Santa Rosa. AMARewards.ca/SearchforDiscounts