

Q & A Planning a California Wine Tour

with Kim



Q: Where do I start?

Kim: Your best bet is to contact regional associations like the Sonoma County Grape Growers Association (www.sonomavalley.com) and the Napa Valley Vinters Association (www.napavintners.com) to get contact and tour schedule information. All wineries are going to be different. Some require reservations, and many will have a set tour schedule so you can plan your day. There is a great web site at <http://www.winecountry.com> that has searchable categories including wineries, dining, lodging, things to do, events and downloadable maps by region for Mendocino County, Monterey County, Napa Valley, Santa Barbara, Sonoma County and South Coast. If you want to focus mainly on Napa and Sonoma wineries, there is a really helpful map that shows where all the wineries are located and gives phone numbers, addresses and tour availability information to make your schedule and tour planning simple. The map also includes restaurant, entertainment and lodging ideas with phone numbers, a mileage chart and picnic spots. The map costs approximately \$3.00 (which includes shipping) and can be ordered from Graphic Concepts at (707) 545-5751.

Q: How far in advance should I begin planning?

Kim: Just to be safe, try to start gathering your information about 3-4 months before you want to go. You may decide you want to have one really nice dinner or stay in luxury accommodations one night, so you'll need some time to guarantee you can get reservations. Many upscale restaurants and hotels require reservations 2-3 months in advance.

Q: When is the best time to go to California wine country?

Kim: Late summer and fall are the busiest times of year in wine country. September and October can be extremely busy due to harvest. While harvest is an exciting time to tour wineries and the smell of crushing grapes is amazing, it can be very difficult to get reservations and to get around. If you do want to go for harvest, start planning now for next year. I'd say the most tourist-friendly time to go is from February-April when the vines are just beginning to bud out. You'll get more bang for your buck at this time of year as far as getting more personal attention from winery workers. It can get a little warm in the summer months, but there is really no bad time to tour and taste the wine country.

Q: Should I go to Napa or Sonoma? What are the differences?

Kim: Both. The main difference between Napa and Sonoma is that Sonoma is much more expansive and spread out than Napa, so if you don't know your way around, you better have a good map because it can get confusing. You'll enjoy both as they are home to many outstanding wineries and beautiful scenery.

Q: How do I pick which wineries to go to? Which wineries would you suggest?

Kim: It depends on your tastes. Pick the top five wineries you'd like to see, find out about wine tour schedules and availability and then find the wineries on a map to make sure the schedule is feasible. You can probably tour 2-3 wineries each day. My top five for Napa and Sonoma are:

NAPA

1. Robert Mondavi, Napa Valley (707) 226-1395, ext. 4312. Go to Mondavi first to get the educational foundation on how wine is made so you'll know when you tour other wineries.
2. Domaine Carneros, Napa Valley (707) 257-0101. Everyone should tour one sparkling wine facility just to see how different it is.
3. Clos Pegase, Napa Valley (707) 942-4981. Aside from making great wines, Clos Pegase houses one of the most amazing art collections open to the public.
4. Sterling, Napa Valley (707) 942-3344. The scenery at Sterling is breathtaking. The gondola ride to the top is a highlight for anyone touring the wine country.
5. Niebaum-Coppola, Napa Valley (707) 968-1177. The famous director's winery houses the Centennial Museum where visitors can see memorabilia from many of Francis Ford Coppola's films including Vito Corleone's desk and chair from "The Godfather," a Tucker car from the movie of the same name, props and costumes from "Bram Stoker's Dracula," Mr. Coppola's five Oscars as well as taste Niebaum-Coppola's excellent wines.



SONOMA

1. Rabbit Ridge, Sonoma County (707) 431-7128. See how even the smallest of wineries is able to produce large amounts of fantastic wines.
2. Clos du Bois, Sonoma County (707) 857-3100.
3. Chateau St. Jean, Sonoma County (707) 833-4134. A good place to see state-of-the-art wine technology, and the friendly staff is willing to pour the good stuff if you ask.
4. Kenwood, Sonoma County (707) 833-5891.
5. St. Francis, Sonoma County (707) 833-4666.




Q: What's the best way to get around?

Kim: If you're planning on doing some extensive tasting, you may want to look into renting a limo (Beau Limousine Tours, 800-792-5551). A 6-hour tour for four on Saturday runs about \$450, but plan for a weekday and you can get a 4-hour tour for \$200. Take the tour at your own pace by renting a car—all major rental companies have offices in wine country. If the weather is nice, you may want to rent bicycles (Get Away Bike Adventures and Tours 800-499-BIKE) or take the Napa Valley Wine Train for a 3-hour lunch or dinner ride (707-253-2111).


Q: Where are the best places to eat?


Kim: There are so many great restaurants in wine country that it's hard to narrow the field. But here are some of my favorites: In Napa, try The French Laundry (707-944-2380, expensive), Mustards Grill (707-944-2424, inexpensive) and the Greystone Restaurant at the Culinary Institute of America (707-967-1010, moderate) or in Sonoma, try The Grille at Sonoma Mission Inn and Spa (800 862-4945, moderate) or Bistro Ralph on the square in historic Sonoma.

Q: What can I do when I'm not touring wineries?

Kim: There are beautiful golf courses (like the Silverado Country Club and Resort in Napa, 707-257-0200) mud bath spas in Calistoga (Calistoga Oasis Spas, 800-404-4772) and if you're there in the summer, some wineries like Mondavi and Niebaum-Coppola have Summer Concert Series—check their web sites at www.robertmondavi.com and www.niebaum-coppola.com for event schedules. If you're feeling a bit more adventurous, enjoy camping along the Russian River or catch a glimpse of the beautiful landscape any time of year on a hot air balloon ride (Balloons Above the Valley 800-GO-HOT AIR). 



 Napa Valley

 Sonoma Valley