

SONOMA'S HEARTLAND

Top places to eat, drink and stay in Sonoma Valley

By Aaron Romano and Augustus Weed



PHOTOGRAPHS BY NAT & CODY

The mountaintop wine tasting at Kunde Family overlooks 700 acres of estate vineyards.



STEEPED IN HISTORY, SONOMA VALLEY

is an intimate wine country destination, less developed than Napa Valley, its neighbor to the east, but appealing to many for that very reason. • At its heart lies the city of Sonoma, arguably the birthplace of California. The surrounding oak-studded countryside is home to the state's oldest vineyards (1824), the oldest commercial winery in California (Buena Vista, 1857) and California's oldest still-family-owned winery (Gundlach Bundschu, 1858). Roots run deep here,

and farming is the lifeblood for many. The Bundschus, Benzigers, Kundes, Sangiacomos and others have kept their family winegrowing businesses thriving for several generations.

Touring the area, it's easy to imagine how it looked 100 years ago, with many historical structures—some dating to the Mission period—well-preserved. And while wine tourism has increased the hustle-bustle of late, there are few luxury resort-style lodgings and lavish, châteaulike wineries. Instead, the pace of life in Sonoma is slower and more down to earth.

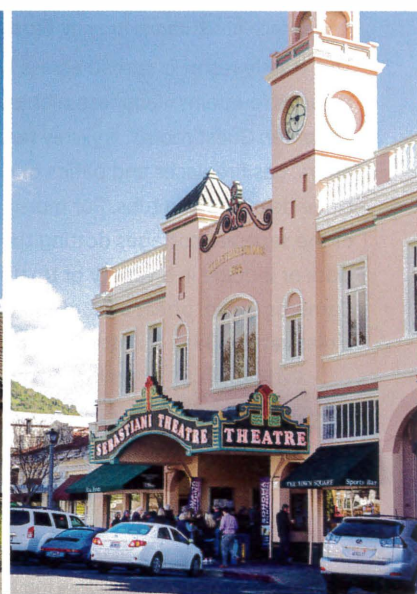
"It's kind of the place that time forgot," muses Chris Benziger, Benziger Family Winery vice president of trade relations, who was a teenager when his family moved to the hamlet of Glen Ellen in the northern part of the valley in 1980.

The landscape is remarkably diverse and beautiful. Flanked by the steep Mayacamas mountain range to the east and the bumpy

you can find his new place tucked behind a pizzeria in downtown Sonoma. Just off the plaza, Katie Bundschu blends wine tasting with retail, offering apparel, home decor and other novelties at her recently opened Abbot's Passage.

Of course, few folks were on the sidewalks in the last three weeks of October 2017, as fires raged in the hills above. Sonoma Mayor Rachel Hundley recalls those tense times, when volunteers packed up artifacts from the Mission barracks, chapel and museum within the Sonoma State Historic Park on the north side of the plaza and covered the buildings in flame retardant.

"The fire came within a half mile outside the northeast corner of the city," says Hundley, noting that it's easy to look back in disbelief now that winter and spring rains have returned the landscape to its seasonal hues of green, and much of the valley has returned to its habitual daily rhythms.



From left: Historic portrayal at Buena Vista winery; Mission San Francisco Solano, part of Sonoma State Historic Park; Sebastiani Theatre, built in 1933

Sonoma Mountains to the west, the valley spans 17 miles from the vine-clad rolling hills of Carneros in the south to its northern tip on the border of the city of Santa Rosa. The Sonoma Valley AVA also includes the four subappellations Sonoma Mountain, Moon Mountain, Bennett Valley and Los Carneros, and their many microclimates allow a variety of grapes to be grown.

When a new restaurant or shop arrives, Sonomans are abuzz. In this story, we highlight one of the recent additions, Salt & Stone in Kenwood; it's hard to get a table at this popular restaurant, so be sure to make a reservation. Winemaker Jeff Cohn recently gave up his urban tasting room in Oakland for a more intimate spot where guests can sample his bold Zinfandel and Rhône blends;

At press time in April, visitors too had returned in droves, wandering the plaza alongside the resident ducks and geese, nibbling samples at the Sonoma Cheese Factory and sipping Glariffée cocktails at the Swiss Hotel. (A drink reminiscent of a chilled Irish coffee, the signature Glariffée was created by proprietor Helen Dunlap, now 92, who has kept the recipe a secret for more than 50 years.)

There are more than 70 tasting rooms around the valley and dozens of restaurants worth trying, as well as other tourist destinations and outdoor activities to enjoy. In the following pages, we offer a few suggestions for places to eat, drink and stay, both old and new, for a quintessential Sonoma experience.

SONOMA PLAZA

The hub of Sonoma Valley is Sonoma Plaza. Once a Spanish Mission village and later a Mexican military outpost, it was also the site of the Bear Flag Revolt that proclaimed California's independence in 1846. Today, it's an 8-acre pedestrian-friendly tableau of restaurants, quaint shops and alleyways that lead to hidden courtyards. On a typical afternoon, tourists and locals fill the streets of Sonoma, strolling, shopping, eating and drinking.

El Dorado Kitchen

405 First St. W., Sonoma **Telephone** (707) 996-3030 **Website** www.eldoradokitchen.com **Open** Breakfast, lunch and dinner, daily; brunch, Sunday **Cost** Moderate **Corkage** \$25

The tree-lined patio of this plaza-side restaurant is a great place to grab a cocktail. In the dining room, the vibe is casual, modern wine country, with wood furnishings and exposed beams blending with contemporary touches such as square light fixtures and potted succulents. The California-inspired menu is simple yet sophisticated. Dishes showcase seasonal regional ingredients. Mainstays such as the steamed mussels might be served with fennel, leeks, garlic and lemon in the winter and garbanzo beans and fresh herbs in the spring. Delicious housemade pastas also rotate with the season. The wine list leans heavily toward California—Napa and Sonoma in particular—and counts 200-plus offerings, with many bottles priced at less than \$100. —A.R.

Lodge at Sonoma Renaissance Resort & Spa

1325 Broadway, Sonoma **Telephone** (707) 343-8091 **Website** renaissance-hotels.marriott.com **Rooms** 178 **Suites** 4 **Rates** \$224–\$1,079

This stately resort is spread across 14 well-manicured acres. The property features fountains, Japanese maples and rose bushes, with a large pool at its center. Guest rooms, stylishly renovated, are outfitted with sliding barn doors, gas fireplaces and patios or decks; lodgings in the main building include deep soaking tubs. For more space and privacy, choose a room in one of the separate cottages dotting the property. Start the day with a yoga class or indulge in a variety of treatments at the spa. The resort's restaurant, Carneros Bistro, offers a list of 150 domestic and imported wines, or opt for a glass at the Bean & Bottle, a combination coffee shop and wine bar. —A.W.

MacArthur Place

29 E. MacArthur St., Sonoma **Telephone** (707) 938-2929 **Website** www.macarthurplace.com **Rooms** 64 **Rates** \$225–\$850

A few blocks from the plaza, mostly hidden from view by hedges and trees, this inn feels like a country estate, with manicured gardens ensuring peaceful surroundings. Ten rooms are located in the Manor House, the property's original residence, built in the 1850s; nearly half of the accommodations are suites and cottages, which offer various tiers of amenities, such as fireplaces, private patios and outdoor showers. An on-site spa provides an array of pampering treatments. Also on the premises is Saddles Steakhouse, where a *Wine Spectator* Award of Excellence-winning wine list complements the menu of steaks and chops. Beginning this summer, the hotel embarked on a facelift to bring the property to five-star status. The renovation, to be done in stages, is expected to be completed by summer 2019. —A.R.

Sojourn

141 E. Napa St., Sonoma **Telephone** (707) 938-7212 **Website** www.sojourncellars.com **Open** By appointment **Cost** Tastings \$35

A short stroll from the plaza, this cottage offers an intimate setting in which to taste Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay from some of Sonoma's and Napa's most established vineyards. Sit-down tastings in the cozy living room-like salon are casual and tailored to each group. Pinot lovers can compare three single-vineyard wines side by side, while Cabernets come from cofounder Craig Haserot's estate Home Ranch Vineyard, located 10 minutes northwest of Sonoma, or from Rutherford. Maps and soil samples offer visual references for learning about each vineyard. —A.W.



El Dorado Kitchen



MacArthur Place

PAST MEETS PRESENT

Just a few miles east of the Sonoma Plaza lie the historic Buena Vista and Gundlach Bundschu wineries. The wildfires threatened both. The Bundschu family lost a house on their property, but the winery survived. The fire burned up to the doorstep of Buena Vista Winery, but firefighters stood with their backs against the walls of the building and were able to tame the flames to within 6 feet of the structure. A visit to either producer is a true Sonoma experience that provides insight into how the region's past has shaped its contemporary wines.

California wine pioneer and Hungarian count Agoston Haraszthy, one of the first to plant vineyards in Wisconsin, moved to California following the gold rush in 1848. Founding Buena Vista Winery in 1857, he began experimenting with viticulture and winemaking techniques such as using redwood for barrels and planting vines closer together and on hillsides.

Not far away, Jacob Gundlach began his own vineyard plantings, dubbing his estate Rhinefarm, inspired by his Bavarian homeland. Shortly after Gundlach's death in 1894, the winery was renamed Gundlach Bundschu. For six generations, the family has kept its heritage alive.

Buena Vista Winery

18000 Old Winery Road, Sonoma
Telephone (800) 926-1266 **Website**
www.buenavistawinery.com **Open** Daily,
10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; *tours by appointment*
Cost Tours and tastings \$20-\$100

Wine is paired with history at Buena Vista. Tastings are held daily in the Press House, the former winery site, and an array of tours and tastings showcase Buena Vista's storied past. The Historic Wine Museum Tour and Tasting, offered three times daily, focuses on California's winemaking origins, with an exhibit of antique tools and an audio-visual show. Don't be surprised to find the staff dressed in period clothing, and you may even meet "the Count," an actor portraying Buena Vista's illustrious founder, Agoston Haraszthy. Current-release wines are poured, and the tour also includes a stroll through the Champagne cellars and other hidden parts of the winery. —A.R.

Gundlach Bundschu

2000 Denmark St., Sonoma **Telephone**
(707) 938-5277 **Website** www.gunbun.com **Open** Winter, daily, 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; summer, daily, 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; *tours by appointment* **Cost** Tours and tastings \$20-\$85

Gundlach Bundschu is a favorite with tourists and is often packed on a Saturday afternoon. For a more intimate visit, make an appointment for the Heritage Reserve Experience. This warm and authentic tasting is hosted in the Bundschu Family Homestead, which dates to the 1920s. This seated tasting pairs

small bites with a medley of Bundschu's Heritage Selection wines, which showcase old blocks or heritage clones from the 250-plus acres of estate vines and are sold only at the winery. Sitting at the dining table in a room evoking 150 years of history, you'll feel like you're part of the family. —A.R.

NORTHERN HIGHLIGHTS

Highway 12 is the main thoroughfare in Sonoma Valley. A drive north from the town of Sonoma still reveals the wildfires' wrath. The formerly densely oaked forests have been reduced to sparseness. In some places, only foundations remain where homes once stood.

Fewer than a dozen miles north of Sonoma, the town of Glen Ellen is tucked into hills just west of the highway. As you drive down its main street, which meanders along a creek, turn-of-the-century buildings and wooded lanes create a sense of tranquility. A visit to Glen Ellen isn't complete without a stop at Jack London State Park. Its 800 acres include 29 miles of hiking trails and remnants of London's ranch, and the cottage where the author produced many of his later writings can be visited.

Despite Glen Ellen's small population (under 800), there is a handful of tasting rooms and wine-friendly restaurants, including new additions such as Kivelstadt's rustic yet high-tech tasting room,



Gundlach Bundschu



Benziger

where wines are served on tap, and local favorite the Glen Ellen Star, which serves up wood-roasted dishes with a Mediterranean bent.

Blink and you might miss the town of Kenwood, which straddles the highway at the valley's northernmost point. Most of the downtown buildings are unassuming—like the white cottage of Café Citti, a Kenwood mainstay for hearty portions of casual Italian food for nearly three decades—but this little town offers nearly a dozen tasting rooms in just a few blocks and is surrounded by numerous wineries.

Benziger

1833 London Ranch Road, Glen Ellen **Telephone** (888) 490-2739; (707) 935-3010 **Website** www.benziger.com **Open** Daily, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. **Cost** Tours and tastings \$20–\$100

One of California's leading practitioners of biodynamic and organic winemaking, the Benziger family has been growing grapes in Sonoma Valley for nearly four decades. A visit to the family's picturesque ranch on the slopes of Sonoma Mountain provides an excellent introduction to the winemaking process from vine to bottle. There is a variety of tours and tastings to choose from, including a tram ride through the rolling vineyards and gardens that explores the winery's biodynamic and sustainable farming practices. For a more up-close experience, choose the Tribute Estate option, which includes a behind-the-scenes tour of the property followed by a sit-down tasting in a wine cave. —A.W.



Salt & Stone's David and Diane LaMonica

The Fig Café and Wine Bar

13690 Arnold Drive, Glen Ellen **Telephone** (707) 938-2130
Website www.thefigcafe.com **Open** Dinner, daily; lunch, Sunday
Cost Moderate **Corkage** Free

Hungry wine lovers flock to the Girl & the Fig in downtown Sonoma, but locals gravitate to its more casual sibling in Glen Ellen. Farmhouse decor and colorful artwork lend an unpretentious air to the cozy yet open dining room. The menu features well-prepared comfort food inspired by French-country home cooking. Favorites include pizzas with crisp, crackerlike crusts, the signature fig and arugula salad with pancetta, pecans and goat cheese, and a perfectly tender pot roast served on a bed of creamy horseradish mashers. Each week, a rotating three-course meal of appetizer, entrée and dessert is offered for \$29. Start with a wine cocktail, then peruse the concise, California-dominated "Rhône Alone" wine list, or take advantage of the generous corkage policy. —A.W.

Kunde Family Winery

9825 Sonoma Highway, Kenwood **Telephone** (707) 833-5501
Website www.kunde.com **Open** Daily, 10:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.; tours by appointment **Cost** Tours and tastings \$15–\$60

To experience Kunde winery and the grandeur of Sonoma Valley at their best, make a reservation for a mountaintop tasting. At 1,400 feet, the estate's peak offers views of the Mayacamas range and much of the valley. Kunde ranch has grown from its initial 1,000 acres in 1904 to a remarkable 1,850 contiguous acres that stretch 2.5 miles along Highway 12. The tour

starts in the winery's caves before a shuttle winds you through the vineyards to the top of the property. Tastings take place on a wooden deck overlooking 700 acres of estate vineyards, in the shade of old oak trees. To complete the visit, a flight of winery-exclusive wines is poured, matched with bites. —A.R.

Salt & Stone

9900 Sonoma Highway, Kenwood **Telephone** (707) 833-6326 **Website** www.saltstonekenwood.com
Open Monday to Friday, 2:30 p.m. to 9 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 4:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. **Cost** Moderate **Corkage** \$18

Formerly the Kenwood Restaurant, this roadside spot along Highway 12 has been a local hangout for more than two decades. In 2017, new owners gave it a face-lift and a new name. David and Diane LaMonica, who owned Mendocino's renowned Café Beaujolais for the past decade, are behind the casual-chic eatery.

The extensive menu delivers assertive and gratifying flavors. The kitchen takes a sensible yet innovative approach to classics such as Caesar salad—here grilled and served with crumbly cotija cheese instead of Parmesan and topped with unctuous anchovies.

Entrées are represented in two sections. "Salt" includes dishes from the sea, with items such as crispy-skin salmon with lemon-scented couscous and salsa verde, and a classic cioppino in a tomato-fennel broth. "Stone" items are hearty standards such as short ribs over polenta with red wine jus. Come midweek for the three-course bistro night selections, which include classics such as beef bourguignon or coq au vin, served with a soup or salad and a dessert for \$30. The wine list is approachable, with 50 bottles priced at less than \$50, and features mostly local wines, with a dash of European bottlings. —A.R.