

A Very Biased
Guide to the
Wine Country

By Marty Mazner

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useful format by *ClickBook*.**

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1 Important Notes

Following is a list of interesting places, hotels, restaurants and wineries based on my personal experiences. Please let me have your comments on the neat places you discover. I'll incorporate them into future editions of this guide and even give you byline credit!.

There are, of course, hundreds of other places in Northern California. Many of these places are listed in the "Complete Wine Country Guidebook," which is by far the best guide to the Northern California Wine Country. Copies of the book can be ordered from your local bookstore or from the publisher, Indian Chief Publishing House, P.O. Box 5205, Tahoe City, CA 95730

Wines are always higher priced at the wineries! Current release wines are usually available anywhere from 20-30% cheaper from K & L Wines or the Wine Club. Both of these stores have toll free numbers, ship to most states and accept credit cards. In fact, I usually get more respect from knowledgeable winery folk when I tell them I plan on tasting and then ordering the wines I like from The Wine Club (800) 966-7835.

The exception to this rule is when you find a winery with special reserve wines not available elsewhere. If you find a wine you really love, ask if it is available at K & L. You can always call their 800 number and ask if they have it prior to buying at the winery.

The wine country gets very crowded from June through mid-November. Hotels are fully booked every weekend during this period. Rooms are usually available to walk-ins mid-week in most places, except July thru Sept. when everything tends to get booked.

2 Armstrong State Redwoods Preserve

This is an undiscovered and wonderful state park filled with giant redwood trees. It is on the coast about 20 miles from Healdsburg and an easy 1 hour 15 minute drive from Calistoga.

The redwood grove is near the park entrance. Further up (2-3 miles) a very narrow winding road (passable with caution and although a real experience, well worth it) is a gorgeous mountain meadow overlooking the Pacific. Overnight camping allowed here.

The town of Guerneville is near the entrance to the park and has some OK restaurants. Better yet, go to Perry's Deli in Guerneville and buy lunch fixings and have a picnic at Armstrong.

3 Occidental and the Union Hotel

Occidental is a funky old hamlet nestled in the redwoods West of Graton and North of Sebastapool. It looks more like a mountain resort than a wine country area. The old Union Hotel does a great Sunday Brunch and features two wandering musicians. The hotel is old and definitely funky.

4 Healdsburg Inn on the Plaza

Definitely recommended. An old 1909 bank building meticulously restored with high quality period antiques by Innkeeper Jinny Jenkins (she is the mother of Dave Schnepfer who worked with me at Forefront on Framework). Cost is about \$125 per night and includes a full breakfast. The inn located on the main plaza of the town and is a very nice place. Ask for a room with an oversize claw foot bath tub. Great beds.

Two excellent restaurants within 100 yards, Jacob Horner next door and the Plaza Grill across the plaza.

5 Madronna Manor

A high quality, classy old Victorian manor house 2 miles from Healdsburg. It sits on a hill amidst a large garden. Very nice sleeping rooms, but known mostly for its magnificent meals. The chef here used to work at Chez Panisse, Alice Waters' place in Berkeley.

We ate there in April 1992 with cousins John and Betty from Long Island and rate it a 9 out of 10.

The rooms are more expensive than the Healdsburg Inn on the Plaza but worth it if you are not on a diet. Figure about \$50-60 per person for dinner with wine. Rooms are about \$150-170.

6 Plaza Grill/Cafe

Excellent Calif. Nouvelle food in Healdsburg on the Plaza. Reviewers think it is fabulous. I thought it was very good but not so incredible.

7 Jacob Horner

Good solid Calif. style. Friendly service, relaxed. Nice wines. Eat here if you have a room at the Inn on the Plaza and it's only 100 feet from your bed.

8 California Cafe

Part of a chain of very high quality California style cooking places. Excellent ribs, good fresh fish and nice steaks. Some Mexican influence on the food and very good, reasonably priced wines.

Possible to get a lighter salad type of meal here.

9 Lytton Springs Winery

Grows some of the best Zinfandel grapes around. Small, unimpressive winery building with very nice people. Recently purchased by Ridge Winery, who used to buy their grapes. Unknown if they still make wines here or offer tours. A must stop for Zinfandel lovers.

10 Matanzas Creek Winery

Small, elegant winery that produces big, oaky and wonderful chardonnays, very rich and mellow Merlots and grassy Sauvignon Blanc. Hidden away in the Bennett Valley and rarely visited except for true wine lovers who know the reputation of the wines. They do a nice tour for drop in visitors and offer a free tasting. Very nice people and excellent wines. The winery itself is very impressive. It also has a great picnic area and whale sculptures buried in the lawn as you drive up. Well worth the effort to find this place.

11 Jack London State Park

Off the path in Glen Ellen and worth the trip on a nice day. Take along a lunch and hike in a bit.

12 Chateau Montelena

Just north of Calistoga 2 miles or so, a magnificent old building and grounds. Walk behind the winery to find a hidden lake with giant catfish, ducks and a gazebo. Don't taste the wine. They charge \$5 and taste mediocre wines. Montelena produces some excellent red wines--they just don't serve them at the tasting room.

13 Mt. View Hotel in Calistoga

(707 942-6877) This is A GREAT place. Nancy Natemeyer is the manager. Use my name. My favorite room is 207, the Brannon suite. It usually rents for about \$95-105 per night and includes breakfast. Other rooms start at \$85-90 and go up to \$160 for a private cottage with its own hot tub on an enclosed private deck.

Funky old 1910 hotel very nicely restored on the main street of Calistoga. Michael Malone, a tres chic and tres famous San Francisco designer re-did the rooms. But they are comfortable and fun none the less. A health spa was built in July 1992 and it is truly first class and fabulous. Sign up for a relaxing massage.

Also ask (you sometimes have to ask repeatedly) if they have any packages or specials. One friend got a room for two nights, a trip in a glider for him and spouse and a great dinner for \$150! They also offer spa packages.

Make sure you eat at the restaurant in the hotel, Valeriano's. Everything is made from scratch. It is classic Italian peasant cuisine and is simply incredible. Good wines at very fair prices. Save lots of room for the luscious home made chocolate deserts. (Update!! Jan Birnbaum, executive chef of Campton Place in San Francisco has announced that he is taking over the restaurant in the Mt. View Hotel. Birnbaum trained at K-Pauls in New Orleans and the Quilted Giraffe in New York and has turned Campton Place into the finest restaurant in SF.)

14 Sharpsteen Museum

Ben Sharpsteen was an early animator for Walt Disney who had a second home in Calistoga until he retired here in the 70's. He got a bunch of his friends from Disney to help build some awesome diorama's. The museum itself is two blocks from the hotel and well worth an hour or two.

15 Valerino's

See The Mt. View Hotel.

16 Petrified Forest

Touristy but fun. See giant redwoods petrified. A great ride about 8 miles from Calistoga.

17 Calistoga Soaring Center

The Mt. View Hotel can give you their phone number. A skilled pilot takes you and one other rider for a ride in a glider. You soar along over the wine country picking up thermal currents. For those who have always wanted to fly in formation with hawks and other large winged creatures. Memorable at any time, an incredible experience on a warm and clear day.

Do this!!

18 Markham Winery

Pioneer winery that has been fully restored to greatness on Highway 29 about 5 miles south of Calistoga. Very quickly making a mark for their great Chardonnay's and Merlots.

19 Spring Mountain Winery

This is where they film Falcon Crest. The wines are average to poor but the house is really cool and well worth the trip. About 4 miles from Calistoga off Highway 29.

20 Christian Brothers Greystone Cellars

Miserable wines but an absolutely wonderful old winery and building. Awe inspiring! Off Hwy. 29

21 Beringer Vineyards

Beringer made some watery, thin wines in the late 70's and early 80's. Since 1984 however, they have made a stunning turn around and now produce some of the finest Cabs in Calif.

The Winery itself is a marvelous old building that is a must stop on any wine country tour.

Make sure to taste their private reserve wines upstairs. They charge by the glass based on the value of the wine. \$3 recently purchased a taste of their world famous 1987 Private Reserve Cabernet. Skip the thoroughly average free tasting and head upstairs.

22 Mondavi Winery

Large, prestigious winery making some excellent wines as well as some very average wines. The winery tour is very good and highly informative but the wines in the tasting room are just awful. You need to make reservations for the tour well in advance!

Perhaps one reason for the mediocre wines in the tasting room is that this place serves most of the tour groups in the Napa Valley and most tourists have no idea of what fine wine is all about.

They do great live concerts during the summer so call ahead and find out times and availability. It is well worth a trip! Pack a picnic dinner and have a great time.

23 Joseph Phelps Winery

Beautiful winery tucked away off the Silverado Trail. Call and set up a free tour. Tours by appointment only. Nice people, good white wines especially their Reisling.

24 Rutherford Hill Winery

Mediocre wines except for their Merlot which is good but not great. They do have a very nice building just above Auberge De Soliel and have good picnic areas. Etiquette for picnic areas is to buy one bottle of wine from the winery if you use their picnic area. Do not consume other brands of wine on the premises.

25 Auberge De Soliel

Very expensive, very snooty Super Luxury resort. Food is 4 star and costs like it was Maxims in Paris. Actually it may be even more expensive at dinner here than in Paris. Best bet is lunch on the patio on a nice day. Food at lunch is good, prices are more reasonable and the view is fabulous. Lots of Ferraris and limos in the parking lot as well as people with multiple gold chains jangling inside.

26 The Cinnamon Bear

Cute, small bed and breakfast on a side street in St. Helena. Also owned by Jinny Jenkins (See Healdsburg Inn on the Plaza)

27 Paitti

Excellent Italian in Yountville. Also in Sonoma. Reasonable prices and solid, hearty food. A very enjoyable experience.

28 Grigch Hills Winery

Among the 3-4 top chardonnay wine producers in the valley. Also nice people. Avoid during weekends, if possible, as it gets very crowded.

29 Cakebread Winery

Also a great place for chardonnay. Unimpressive small winery building tucked away off Hwy. 29, which is missed by most tourists who don't know that Cakebread is a world class producer.

30 V. Sattui Deli & Winery

The best deli in the Valley. Stop here and buy fresh sourdough bread, cheese, meats, salads and goodies. Then have a picnic at a winery elsewhere. Their wines are mediocre.

31 Sterling Vineyards

Average to awful wines but a neat winery. An aerial tram takes you from the parking lot to the winery.

32 Flora Springs Winery

Small winery, but great chardonnay. Big, oaky, smoky and intense. Go for a tasting and have fun.

33 Silver Oak Winery

These guys make the best cabernet in the valley. Call to set up a free tour by Appt.

34 Mustards

Highly rated restaurant off Hwy. 29. I've eaten there 2 times and found it filled with pretentious types who don't know either food or wine telling each other how wonderful it is. Maybe I am missing something. These guys couldn't wipe the tables at Valeriano's in Calistoga.

35 Trefethen Winery

Just outside the city of Napa off Hwy. 29. A wonderful winery in a gorgeous old building and they make very good white wines. Last time I visited they had a great spread of free munchies including pate, fruits, cheese and crackers to go along with their free wine tasting.

Turn right on Oak Knoll road as you head north on Hwy. 29 just thru the city of Napa. The winery is not visible from 29. Turn left into the winery at their sign off Oak Knoll. Then follow the signs as you drive through a mile of vineyards to the winery itself. This is one reason why most tourists miss this place.

36 Table 29

This is a relatively new restaurant located on Highway 29 just outside Napa. Great french fries.

37 Heritage House

(707) 937-5885. About 150 miles north of San Francisco on the Mendicino Coast near Fort Bragg. Gorgeous inn with detached cottages. Ask for a unit with a fireplace. Big comfortable beds, great scenery. Not much to do but watch great waves crash ashore and relax. The ride to this place is through one of the most beautiful valleys in California.

The price is \$200 per night but this includes a four star dinner for two in the Heritage House Restaurant and breakfast the next morning.

"A day without wine is like a month at Comdex, "

Shel Israel, 1991

38 Sample Trip

Hwy. 101 north across the Golden Gate Bridge thru Petaluma to State Hwy. 116 which is also called Gravenstein Highway (about 70 miles north of the Golden Gate).

116 North and West to Guernville passing through Sebastapool and Graton (about 45 miles and 70 minutes from 101). Visit Armstrong Redwood Preserve (just outside Guernville).

Take River Road east toward Santa Rosa. River Road turns into Mark West Springs Road at 101. Follow Mark West Road to Petrified Forest Road. Follow Petrified Forest Road into Calistoga (about 20 minutes from 101/Mark West Road)

Spend night one at the Mt. View Hotel and have dinner at Valeriano's. Spend day two visiting wineries in the Napa Valley and night two at the Mt. View.

On the morning of day three, drive north on state Highway 128 toward Cloverdale. At Hwy. 101/128 junction, go north on 101 for 8-10 miles, passing through Cloverdale and pick up Hwy. 128 once more again heading west (your left) to Mendicino and the Heritage House Hotel (about 1:40 minutes from Calistoga to Mendicino). Hwy. 128 ends at the ocean and runs into State Hwy. 1. Go north (your right) on Hwy. 1 for about 7-8 miles until you pass Albion. You will see the sign for Heritage House on your left after Albion. Spend the night and have dinner at the Heritage House Hotel.

Normally, it is about 2:45-3 hours driving time from Mendicino to the SF airport. Add an extra 30 minutes if you arrive in SF between 3:30-5:30 M-F and one hour extra if you arrive at the Golden Gate Bridge on a Sunday afternoon.

About this booklet:

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