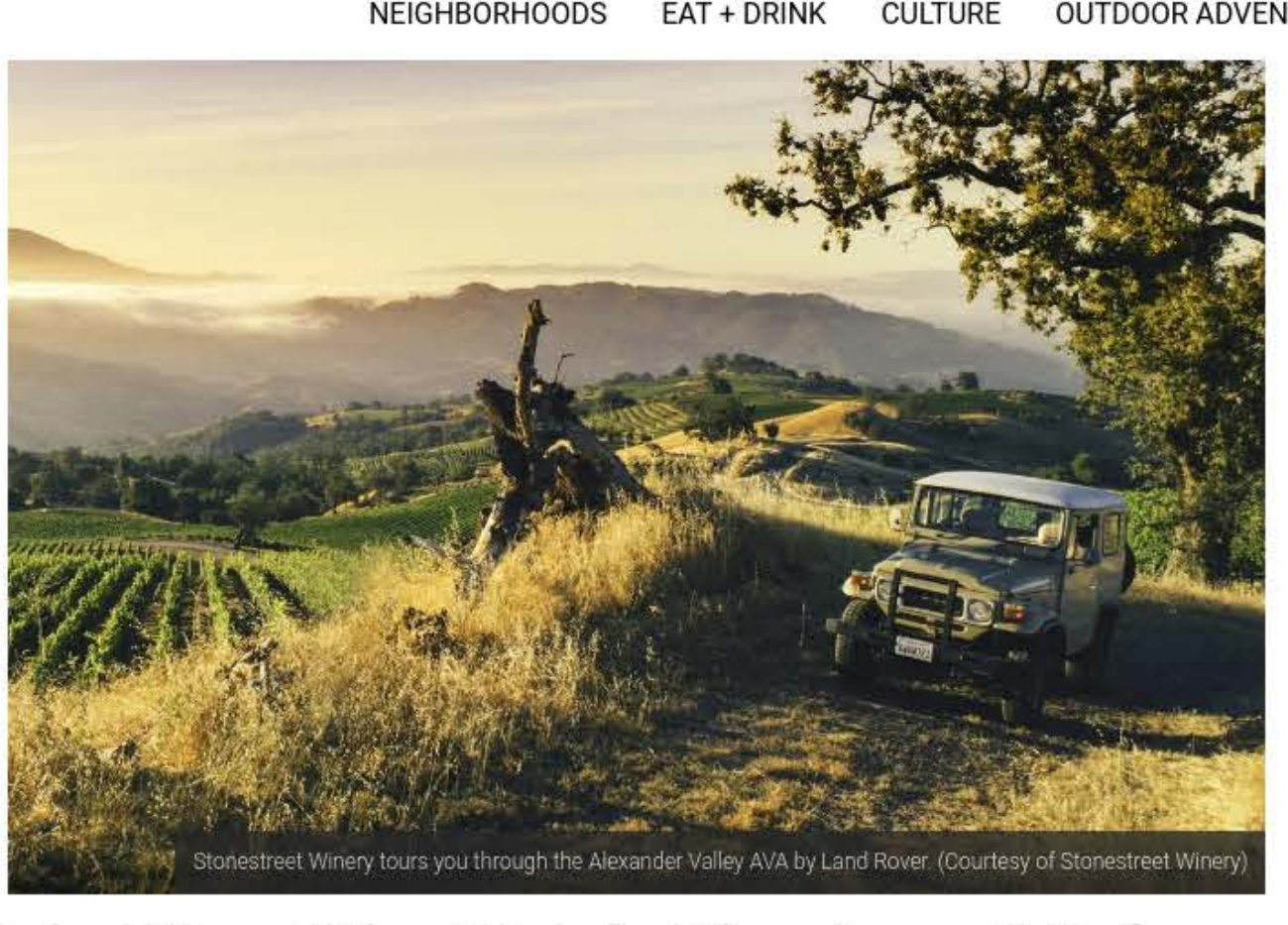

Stonestreet Winery tours you through the Alexander Valley AVA by Land Rover. (Courtesy of Stonestreet Winery)

Find Your Wine Match: There's an AVA for every taste in Napa and Sonoma.

By **Fredric Hamber** Apr 17, 2025

SHARE THIS STORY

So you and your crew have spent enough time in Wine Country to know your way around. If you've already visited Viansa, downed a Darioush, and sipped some sparkling at Schramsberg, it's time to level up: get to know an AVA in depth.

Short for American Viticultural Area, AVAs are delimited regions certified for their unique growing conditions. Factors like soil composition, water retention, and how much wind and sun the vines get through the seasons all impact the final product that hits your palate. For an AVA to appear on a wine label, at least 85 percent of the grapes must be sourced within its boundaries.

The best way to get to know an AVA is up close and personal. Take a vineyard walk on foot or horseback. Ride in a UTV and look at the color and texture of the ground. Is it rocky? Pebbly? Dusty? Notice the slant of light over the hills at wine o'clock. Try a terroir-focused experience at a tasting room in Healdsburg or downtown Napa. In time, the association between place and taste will sharpen. Then, when you're perusing the wine list at a restaurant, you can make it a game to find “your” AVAs.

These five Sonoma and Napa County AVAs that are well worth a second sip.

Fort Ross-Seaview

Named for the nearby 19th-century Russian trader settlement, Fort Ross-Seaview was officially recognized as an AVA in 2011. The drive there is scenic no matter which route you take—up Highway 1 beyond Bodega Bay, or through Occidental or Guerneville past old barns and silos. The elevation that makes for the great downhill views toward the ocean is the same thing that makes this AVA's superb wine. The vineyards are above the coastal fog, which means more hours and days of sunlight on the vines. This is pinot noir and chardonnay heaven.

Where to try it: Vist Fort Ross Vineyard Tasting Room (*5725 Meyers Grade Rd., Jenner),* where the last bit of the drive is uphill through hilly, green pastures. Fort Ross Vineyard also grows pinotage, a South African variety with notes of blackberry and some spice. A tasting includes tidbits paired by chef Holly Carter---like a king trumpet mushroom scallop with amethyst rice alongside the 2021 pinot noir. For a taste of this AVA in the city, order a bottle of Hirsch Fort Ross-Seaview Pinot Noir with your lamb chops at Dalida (*101 Montgomery St, Presidio*).

A rainbow over a vineyard in the Coombsville AVA

(Courtesy of Coombsville Vintners & Growers)

Coombsville

Just east of downtown Napa, around the base of the Vaca Range, Coombsville feels like a throwback to decades ago. You might even spot a wild turkey strutting about. Geologically, it's an ancient crater washed by streams. The volcanic and alluvial soils make for a superb product, including Paul Hobbs' 100-point cabernet. The area's southerly proximity to the Bay means cool nights and mornings, plus summer fog which, according to Annie Favia-Erickson of Favia Wines, gives Coombsville wines “more of a savory, as opposed to a fruit-forward, palate."

Where to try it: At Shadybrook Estate Winery (*100 Rapp Lane, Napa)*, take a 45-minute horseback ride through a vineyard, followed by a 90-minute tasting. They have five different clones of cabernet sauvignon and, as the server pours your cab franc or malbec, they may point toward the slope it's sourced from. The hospitality team takes charcuterie boards seriously, too. In terms of bang-for-your-buck, it's a perfect way to have an adventure without a long drive.

Another must-know winemaker from the region is Faust, which offers tastings and events at the splendid Faust Haus (*2867 St. Helena Hwy*) in St Helena. But since most vineyards in Coombsville are small producers or family-owned, they often don't have a robust digital presence. An easy way to get connected to off-the-beaten-path wineries is with the Coombsville Concierge, a free service of the Coombsville Vintners & Growers association. With just a few questions, they'll set you up with a day or weekend itinerary. The same organization holds their Discover Coombsville grand tasting experience with over 30 vintners and wine growers at CIA at Copia on April 26 (*500 1st St., Napa*).

Dry Creek Valley

If you're driving up Highway 101 in Sonoma County, Dry Creek Valley is to the west, starting a bit past Healdsburg, with Lake Sonoma at the north end. Named for a tributary of the Russian River, the region is known for zinfandel, and there are some decades-old vines still producing here. The soil in the lower part of the valley, called Yolo loam, holds a lot of water, making it perfect for sauvignon blanc.

Where to try it: Book a vineyard UTV tour at Dry Creek Vineyard (*3770 Lambert Bridge Rd., Healdsburg).* Hold a wine glass in your hand as you ride giddily along, listening to the guide chat about the history of the property and its different vineyard blocks. The driver stops regularly along the way to reach into the backseat stash of bottles and pour you a fresh sip of whatever grape you're currently gazing at.

Among the offerings at Trattore Farms (*7878 Dry Creek Rd., Geyserville)* are white Rhône style wines like viognier and marsanne from winemaker and vineyard manager, Craig Strehlow. There's also a bold red blend from the rocky soil on the south end of the ranch. For a taste of a wide variety of the AVA's top hits, check out the annual Passport to Dry Creek Valley wine festival hosted by Winegrowers of Dry Creek Valley April 25-27 at venues throughout the region.

Stonestreet Estate Vineyards in the Alexander Valley AVA

(Courtesy of @stonestreetwinery)

Alexander Valley

East of Dry Creek, Alexander Valley is the northernmost of Sonoma's AVAs and includes a long stretch of the Russian River, a source of cooling fog. The area is warmer towards Cloverdale and cooler in the south. The first 100-point malbec in the U.S. came from here, crafted by winemaker Jesse Katz under his Devil Proof label.

“I swear the chamomile, the bay, and [the] chaparral come across in the wines,” says Stonestreet Estate Vineyards winemaker Kristina Shideler. “There's so much savory.” What's the hallmark of an Alexander Valley cabernet? Olive tapenade, she says, but advises "not to be obsessed about the aromatics" or to worry “what am I supposed to be tasting*?”* Instead, focus on your own first impressions. Like dipping a toe into the pool, do you want to dive in or take a step back?

Where to try it: At Aperture Cellars' architecturally stunning tasting room in Healdsburg (*12291 Old Redwood Hwy)*, you can do a “site series” tasting of cool-climate, single-vineyard Alexander Valley cabernets or red blends. At Stonestreet (*7111 Hwy 128, Healdsburg)*, where the vineyards are spread over more than 5,000 acres, an excursion for you and a pal in the winery's Land Rover makes sense. The diversity of the Stonestreet terroir provides an opportunity for compare-and-contrast tastings. You can sample a 2022 chardonnay from their Broken Road vineyard, for example, alongside the same vintage, same grape from their Upper Barn vineyard. Through May 25, the winery is offering Share & Pair Sundays, complimentary tastings for two.

Rutherford

The Napa Valley is long and narrow, with Rutherford at the widest point. The watchword here is “Rutherford dust, a term coined to describe the area's unique soil composition and microclimate,” says winemaker Brooke Price of Bella Union, part of the Far Niente winery portfolio.

Where to try it: At their clubby, two-story building with Belle Epoque accents (*1695 St Helena Hwy, St. Helena)*, Price recommends the Bella Union Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon, which she crafted in partnership with consulting winemaker Thomas Rivers Brown to express “Rutherford's terroir with intense flavors, rich fruit-forward aromas, and perfect balance.”

Just as a spa day can be day-dreamy, there's something day-dreamy about the experience at Sullivan Rutherford Estate (*1090 Galleron Rd., St Helena).* You're met at the small parking lot with a glass of sparkling wine, then led on a stroll around a pond before heading to the house where, in a high-ceilinged room overlooking gardens and fruit trees and vineyards, you may rethink everything you thought you knew about merlot. You can even book an hour-long yoga session followed by an hour-long wine tasting. Welcome to Northern California.

Wines from Bella Union

(Courtesy of @bellaunionwine)

MORE ON 7x7

9 Underground Wine Caves Open for Tastings in Napa + Sonoma ›
With a spate of new bar, cellar, and shop openings, wine is doing just fine in SF. ›
Wine Country - 7x7 Bay Area ›

MORE LINKS WE LIKE

About the Napa Valley American Viticultural Area (AVA) - Napa ... ›
American Viticultural Areas | Wine Institute ›

SHARE THIS STORY

wine country napa sonoma healdsburg ava wine tasting wine tasting napa wine tasting sonoma

Don't miss a Bay Area beat.

Sign up for 7x7's biweekly newsletter and get the latest events, restaurant openings, neighborhood guides, NorCal escapes + more right in your inbox.

*Email

By submitting this form, you are consenting to receive marketing emails from: 7x7 Bay Area, 6114 La Salle Avenue, Oakland, CA, 94611, US, http://7x7.com. You can revoke your consent to receive emails at any time by using the SafeUnsubscribe® link, found at the bottom of every email. Emails are serviced by Constant Contact.

Sign Up!

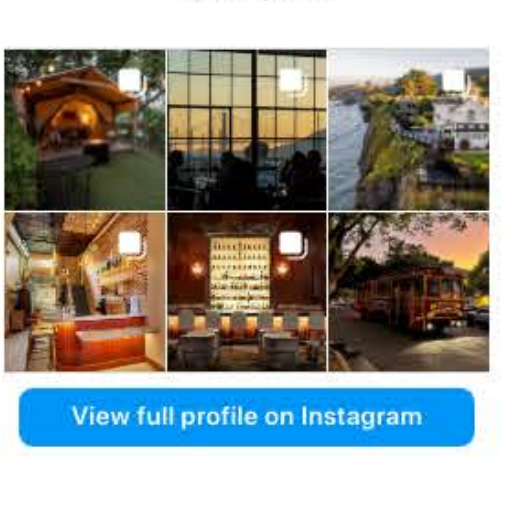
Now Playing at SF Symphony

Renowned Pianists Join Forces to Celebrate Gershwin at SF Symphony, May 20

Guerrero Conducts 'Pines of Rome,' May 2–3.

Common plays San Francisco Symphony, April 24

7x7bayarea
7x7
82K followers
2,616 posts


View full profile on Instagram

Neighborhoods

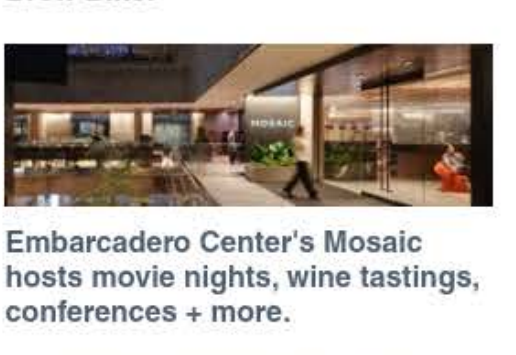
Downtown's last prewar bars are splendid slices of early SF history.

Downtown San Francisco is back: Here's how to spend a perfect Saturday.

Another buzzy opening makes it official: West Portal is having a moment.

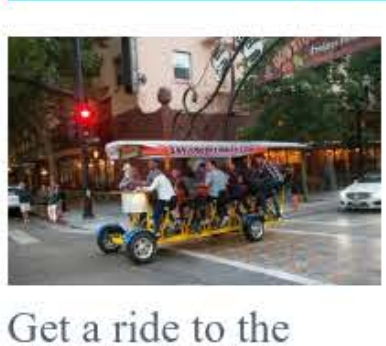
From Our Partners

Get a ride to the party on San Jose Brew Bike.


Embarcadero Center's Mosaic hosts movie nights, wine tastings, conferences + more.

West Edge Opera pushes boundaries at its striking summer festival in Oakland.

Related Articles


Get a ride to the party on San Jose Brew Bike.

7 Kickass Northern California Campsites with Treehouses, Hot Springs + More

Renowned Pianists Join Forces to Celebrate Gershwin at SF Symphony, May 20

Start Up Art Fair transforms a San Francisco hotel into a creative, immersive ecosystem.

Guerrero Conducts 'Pines of Rome,' May 2–3.

Greens, the SF restaurant that started a vegetarian revolution, debuts its first cookbook in 30 years.

The first U.S. retrospective of pioneering artist + filmmaker Sir Isaac Julien debuts at the de Young Museum.

28 Fun Things to Do This Week (4.14.25)

10 Music Festivals Rocking the Bay Area This Spring + Summer

Greens, the SF restaurant that started a vegetarian revolution, debuts its first cookbook in 30 years.

The first U.S. retrospective of pioneering artist + filmmaker Sir Isaac Julien debuts at the de Young Museum.

28 Fun Things to Do This Week (4.14.25)

10 Music Festivals Rocking the Bay Area This Spring + Summer

The Bay Area Ridge Trail is iconic. Here's how to hike its most scenic sections.

The Tiny Town Attracting Big Attention on the Northern California Coast

California cult-favorite amaro producers expand their bitter empire with SF's new Bar Brucato.

Two of San Francisco's best day spas finally return refreshed and beautiful.

30 Fun Things to Do This Week (4.07.25)

Ralph Lauren returns, 'White Lotus'-inspired resortwear, and more local style scoop.

Embarcadero Center's Mosaic hosts movie nights, wine tastings, conferences + more.

First Taste: Caché, the Inner Sunset's new French bistro, is rich with culinary memories.

Tahoe's spring ski season is hot with concerts + events.

Women-owned Napa winery Eleven Eleven celebrates the art of living well.

26 Fun Things to Do This Week (3.31.25)

7x7 Social Club delivers deals on a charming Wine Country stay, the SF International Film Fest, and more.

6 Epic Northern California Hikes Worth the Road Trip from San Francisco

Where to Score Secondhand Fashion in the Peninsula's Booming Scene

Common plays San Francisco Symphony, April 24

This year's San Francisco Art Fair is the most cutting-edge yet.

First Taste: Palo Alto's Macarena is a Michelin-backed love song to Spain.

27 Fun Things to Do This Week (3.24.25)

7 Unique Ways to Experience Northern California Wildflowers

What's in your Bay, style consultant Lisa Raja?

Escape into a fresh crop of Bay Area books.

West Edge Opera pushes boundaries at its striking summer festival in Oakland.

24 Fun Things to Do This Week (3.17.25)

Fun Spring Cocktails Pop up at SF Bars + Restaurants

The Bay Area Leaders Teaching Women to Step into Their Financial Power

6 Wellness Practices to Help You Refresh in SF

There are no steep hills to climb on these 5 easy(ish) Bay Area hikes.

Rocky Mountain National Park's crowd-free winter season is its best kept secret.

Beach bonfire season is officially on in the Bay Area.

27 Fun Things to Do This Week (3.10.25)

Gap collaborates with Harlem's Fashion Row, and more local style news.

Wildflower season is great but have you heard of orchard blossom season?

Sleep under the stars at Under Canvas Yosemite's new glampsite.

Spring Arts 2025: Ruth Asawa, Colman Domingo, Bay Area Dance Week + More

25 Fun Things to Do This Week (3.3.25)

See Beatlemania through the lens of Paul McCartney at the de Young.

From 'Frankenstein' at SF Ballet to Snow Patrol at the Fox, 7x7 Social Club has deals on fun.

28 Fun Things to Do This Week (2.24.25)

Winter wellness heats up at Bend, Oregon's transformed Juniper Preserve resort.

Zac Posen designs SF Ballet costumes inspired by views from his new Telegraph Hill home.

A Lake Como chef and his popular pizzeria move to the Peninsula for love.

24 Fun Things to Do This Week (2.17.25)

First Taste: Chef Sri Gopinathan brings Cal-Indian live-fire cooking to an exuberant space in Menlo Park

These walkable dates feel so San Francisco.

23 Fun Things to Do This Week (2.10.25)

Where to Eat the Freshest Dungeness Crab, from Marin to Mendocino

Yolo County is the wine country you didn't know you were missing.

Discover the unique mangala tattoo artistry of Mimi-Sama.

24 Fun Things to Do This Week (2.03.25)

What's in your Bay, new Asian Art Museum director Dr. Soyoung Lee?

6 SF restaurateurs recall the influence of trailblazing chef Charles Phan.

Shipyard SF delivers modern luxury homes under $1 million.

24 Fun Things to Do This Week (1.27.25)

Fog Design + Art's retail MRKT debuts at this year's fair, January 23-26.

Fiat Lux announces its Squint Games design competition + more local style news.

At West Portal's new George's Donuts & Merriment, the name says it all.

7x7 Social Club's February perks are perfect for lovers of freebies—think drinks, concerts, adventures + more.

23 Fun Things to Do This Week (1.20.25)

Studio Tours, Surreal Fantasies and, Yes, Foam at SF Art Week (Jan. 18-26)

There's more to the public bench than meets the eye at Works in Progress III.

22 Fun Things to Do This Week (1.13.25)

Soundbox 2025 opens with a dynamic musical journey through the African diaspora.

8 Best Spas to Chill With Friends + Groups

6 SF Tasting Menus with Creative Non-Alcoholic Beverage Pairings

22 Fun Things to Do This Week (1.06.25)

12 Bucket List Hikes, One For Every Month of 2025

We need connection more than ever. SF's modern social clubs are where to find it.

25 Fun Things to Do This Week (12.30.24)

24 Places to Dine Out and Dance in San Francisco on New Year's Eve

Epic NYE celebrations + Wine Country R&R—these are the perks of 7x7 Social Club in January.

Boutique Wine Tasting Lounges, Casual Eats + More in Downtown Napa

21 Fun Things to Do This Week (12.23.24)

7 Dog-Friendly Hikes in Marin and Sonoma for a Howling Good Time

20 Fun Things to Do This Week (12.16.24)

With a stunning new Victorian showroom/events space, designer Erica Tanov is still going strong.

Resilience after tragedy makes Maui more beautiful than before.

First Taste: Gigi's Wine Lounge is an unusual delight.