FOOD AND WINE, GUIDE

8 Unforgettable Winery Culinary Experiences You Need To Book Now

By Correspondent Katie Sweeney

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Pair a rosé with a meal and magnificent views at Justin Vineyards & Winery. *Credit: Justin Vineyards & Winery*

When planning a trip to California wine country, instead of reserving a restaurant for every meal, consider dining at a winery. Many vintners believe that food is integral to a tasting and offer robust culinary programming that enhances the pours. A seafood or protein pairing can highlight the minerality of a sauvignon blanc or the subtle nuances of a cabernet franc. Full-time chefs with pedigreed backgrounds oversee these savory journeys that often involve a plant-to-plate ethos at vineyards with extensive culinary gardens growing alongside the grapes.

If you're seeking an immersive gastronomic affair in a beautiful setting, head to one of the following eight wineries. Note that all of these places require reservations, but these incredible winery experiences are worth it because they go above and beyond, providing a meal and a lifelong memory.

Justin Vineyards & Winery

Paso Robles' Justin Winery is known for its Forbes Travel Guide Five-Star eatery, The Restaurant at Justin. The culinary offerings change depending on when you visit the 480-acre Central Coast estate. Enjoy an à la carte lunch menu (Thursday through Monday) or dinner (Thursdays to Sundays) overseen by executive chef Rachel Haggstrom. Cuisine is seasonal and local — guests can even explore the 26-acre farmstead and pristine garden filled with herbs, vegetables and fruit trees.

The ahi tuna crudo is excellent alongside Justin's rosé, as is the A5 wagyu ribeye with the beloved red blend, Isosceles.

Where to Stay: The winery is a 26-minute drive from town, so if you want to make a night of it, consider staying at the Just Inn, the property's boutique bed-and-breakfast. With only a handful of rooms, it's private and magical.

Revana Estates' wines and impeccably prepared food stand out. *Credit: Revana Estates*

Revana Estates

Sitting on a stretch of St. Helena Highway that's full of larger and more corporate wineries, Revana Estates stands out as a hidden gem. The tasting room is a residence that the team built from the ground up. It feels more like a stylish country house than a traditional winery facility.

Hospitality is the name of the game here, and the tasting starts from the second you park your car. A host greets you with a splash of chardonnay from Oregon. The estate's proprietor, Dr. Madaiah Revana, also owns wineries in the Willamette Valley and Mendoza, Argentina, so besides tasting the label's superb estate cabernet sauvignons, there are also some other interesting labels to try.

After a quick tour of the grounds, the host sweeps you upstairs to the sleek, modern farmhouse's dining room and expansive kitchen, where chef David Gross is waiting with an impeccably prepared, entirely customizable three-course meal. Pillowy agnolotti stuffed with melt-in-your-mouth ossobuco and fatty pink hanger steak with *pommes aligot* (mashed potatoes with fondue) are a few delightful dishes on a recent tasting menu.

Where to Stay: For a nearby hotel, you can't go wrong with the Four-Star Alila Napa Valley, only a four-minute drive from Revana. An adults-only policy and deep soaking tubs in the guest rooms ensure tranquility after your meal.

The gourmet pairings at Palmaz are amazing. *Credit: Palmaz Vineyards*

Palmaz Vineyards

Old-fashioned Argentine hospitality and state-of-the-art technology are on the menu at Palmaz Vineyards in Napa. When you pull up to the gates, you'd never know that the estate hides an 18-story winemaking facility within its cavernous depths, but after being greeted with a taste of sensational Provence-style rosé, a tour reveals Palmaz's subterranean space. The winery uses proprietary tech to track everything from the soil's moisture levels to the temperatures of the tanks during fermentation; think of its app as an Oura Ring for the vineyards.

Back upstairs, you'll indulge in a private tasting with a scrumptious snack paired with each wine. Food has always been a part of Palmaz's tastings — chef Ryan Garbaciak reveals a new menu every season. The appetizers are so delicious you'll wish to have more than one. The spring slate includes a flavorful pesto chicken salad served on a thick round of radish paired with chardonnay and a wagyu and charred asparagus empanada served with cabernet sauvignon. Palmaz is so committed to its culinary program that it has a cattle ranch that supplies members and the tasting room with wagyu beef.

Where to Stay: The vineyard is in the Coombsville AVA, on the Southeastern tip of the Valley close to Stanly Ranch, Auberge Resorts Collection. Partake in the Forbes Travel Guide Recommended hotel's calendar full of activities, ranging from pasta-making and Craft Your own Cuvee classes to hiking and biking.

Have a chic dinner party in the middle of the day with Joseph Phelps. *Credit: Joseph Phelps*

Joseph Phelps Vineyards

Joseph Phelps was an agricultural visionary, construction genius and excellence seeker who founded his namesake wine brand in the early 1970s. The winemaking pioneer established Napa's first great red Bordeaux-style blend, Insignia, and his legacy lives on at his sophisticated, timeless hilltop estate.

The exceptional Taste of Place experience is offered Wednesday to Sunday at noon. This culinary adventure is a multi-course wine and food pairing highlighting Phelps' latest releases, from its Sonoma Coast sparkler to its Oakville cabernet sauvignon. The journey is open to multiple couples, so you'll be paired with wine lovers from all over the globe. It's like a wildly chic dinner party in the middle of the day with some of the best wines you'll ever taste.

Chef Tod Kawachi is behind the inspired eight-course menu that recently included black truffle gougères, silky squash soup, duck with forest mushrooms and rum-soaked cake with toasted coconut ice cream. Although the website says to allot 2.5 hours for the luncheon, we recommend giving yourself an extra half an hour at least. You don't want to leave early, as everything from the welcome tour to the coffee service is impeccable.

Where to Stay: Our preferred lodging is just up Valley: the Five-Star Four Seasons Resort and Residences Napa Valley. Visit the culinary-minded hotel's working winery and seasonal-tasting-menu restaurant Auro.

Sullivan's Merlot works well with curated bites. *Credit: Jak Wonderly*

Sullivan Rutherford Estate

It's easy to tire of cabernet sauvignon when in Napa Valley. If you get fatigue, head to Sullivan Rutherford Estate for A Conversation on Merlot. This offering is a deep dive into the variety that starts with a blind tasting of the brand's merlot paired with other recognizable labels from France and Italy. The tasting takes place in the property's residence, which was built in the 1970s by acclaimed Bay Area architect John Marsh Davis. The open kitchen overlooks the dining room, and the effect is cozy but refined.

After the blind tasting, a knowledgeable team member pours a flight of Sullivan's Merlot. At the same time, chef Jim Leiken serves curated bites, which recently featured a gooey, satisfying ham and cheese tartine, and a unique take on an Oreo.

Where to Stay: Book a room at Sullivan's sister hotel, The Poetry Inn, and you'll enjoy more epicurean decadence, as it includes a multi-course breakfast with local ingredients, including fresh pastries from acclaimed chef Thomas Keller's Bouchon Bakery.

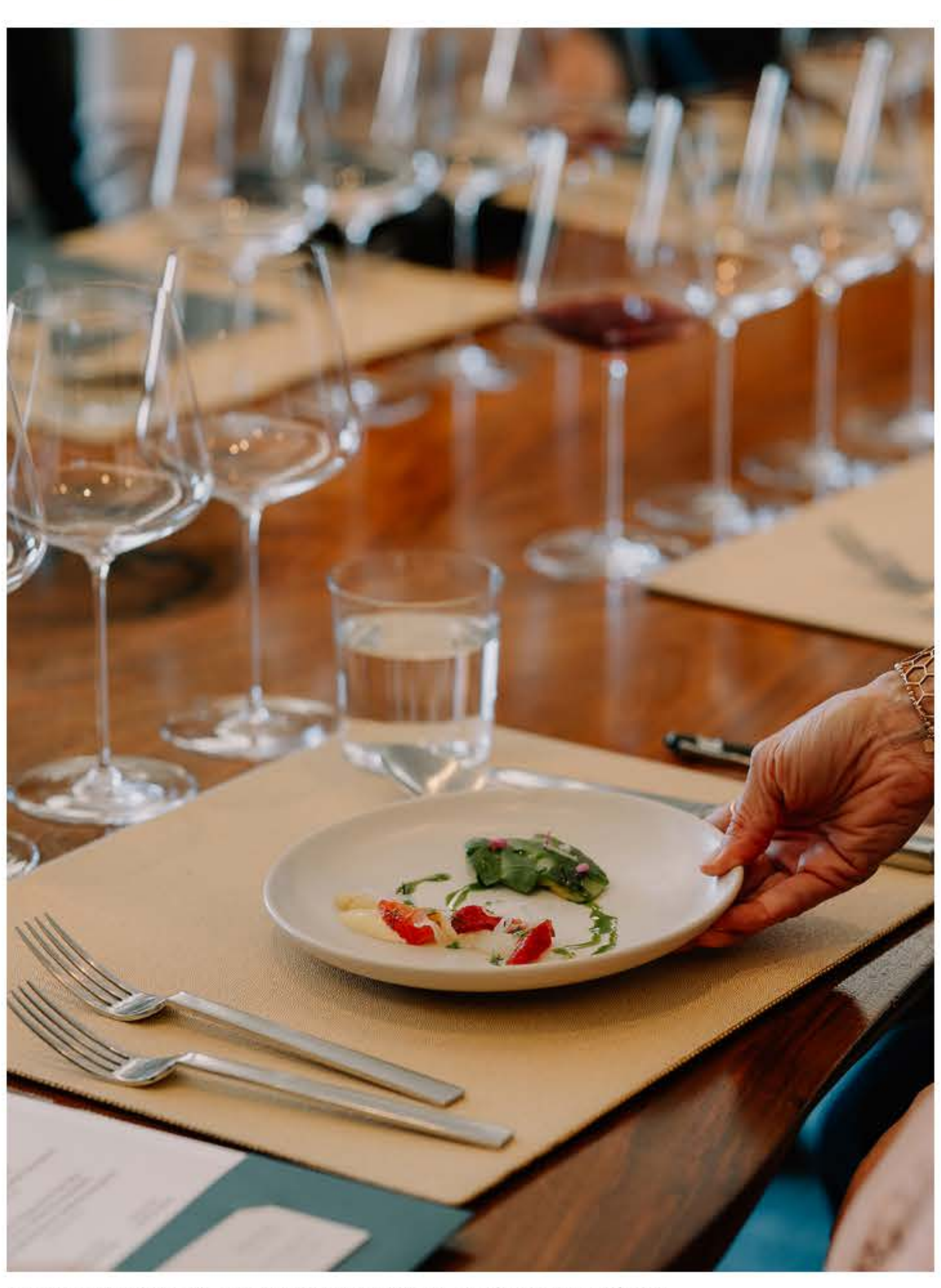
Enjoy chardonnay and seasonal cuisine at Jordan Vineyard & Winery. *Credit: Jordan Vineyard & Winery*

Jordan Vineyard & Winery

Discover the crème de la crème of food and wine pairings at Jordan in Healdsburg. The French-inspired chateau, which was built in 1976, is more stylish than ever, thanks to a recent renovation. There are stunning florals, an intricate art piece with porcelain blooms by Parisian sculptor Alice Riehl, manicured lawns and an intimate and inviting chef's dining room. Jordan only makes chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon, so the lavish lunch from chef Jesse Mallgren allows diners a retrospective of recent releases of these varietals.

The menu changes depending on what's growing in the garden, but at a spring tasting, delicate and delectable Parisian gnocchi with English peas and seared scallops with roasted carrots were a few featured items. Jordan also employs a pastry chef, so dessert is less afterthought and more a decadent finish to sensational service.

Where to Stay: The Five-Star Montage Healdsburg is a seven-minute ride from Jordan. After a day exploring wineries, cozy up to the outdoor firepit in your room or treat yourself to some wine-country-inspired pampering at the Four-Star spa.


Try Hamel Family's memorable Chef Experience. *Credit: Verena Dohmen*

Hamel Family Winery

Hamel is in Sonoma's Moon Mountain District, a region known for its volcanic soil that adds exceptional minerality to the wine. The team practices dry, biodynamic and terroir-driven farming to produce complex, energetic sauvignon blanc, grenache, cabernet sauvignon and red blends.

to the expansive vineyards. Chef Thomas Mendel prepares each gourmet course, and if you're lucky, it will include unique ingredients like fresh white asparagus, black truffles and morels. Reserve and library wines are poured alongside the five-course tasting, so it's an expansive look at what the family-owned and -operated winery excels at doing.

Where to Stay: After spending time at the winery, retreat to Four-Star MacArthur Place Hotel & Spa, which is just off Sonoma Square, about 15 minutes from Hamel's pristine grounds. The more than 150-year-old property provides lush gardens and meandering paths among its six acres.

Food plays an important role at Bricoleur Vineyards. *Credit: Bricoleur Vineyards*

Bricoleur Vineyards

Over in Sonoma's Russian River Valley is a newer best-kept-secret winery, Bricoleur Vineyards. The massive tasting room is a former horse barn transformed into a stylish dining room with an open kitchen in the middle of the space. The winery wanted to incorporate food from the get-go and joined forces with renowned local chef Charlie Palmer to create the culinary program.

Reserve the Rooted experience and you'll be in for a delicious treat. The servings are hearty and prettily plated with edible flowers and micro vegetables from a farm that's steps away from the kitchen. A recent menu included risotto two ways, one with spring favas and peas, another with buttery shrimp and saffron risotto, each pairing with a different wine, the rosé of grenache and sauvignon blanc, respectively. Senior sous chef Rebeca Robinson excels at pasta production, so there is usually a dish like poppy seed ravioli stuffed with ricotta, served with a lemony morel mushroom sauce.

Where to Stay: The best place to rest your head is the Forbes Travel Guide Recommended Farmhouse Inn, which is only 11 minutes from Bricoleur. The charming 25-room boutique hotel has been run by the same family for five generations.

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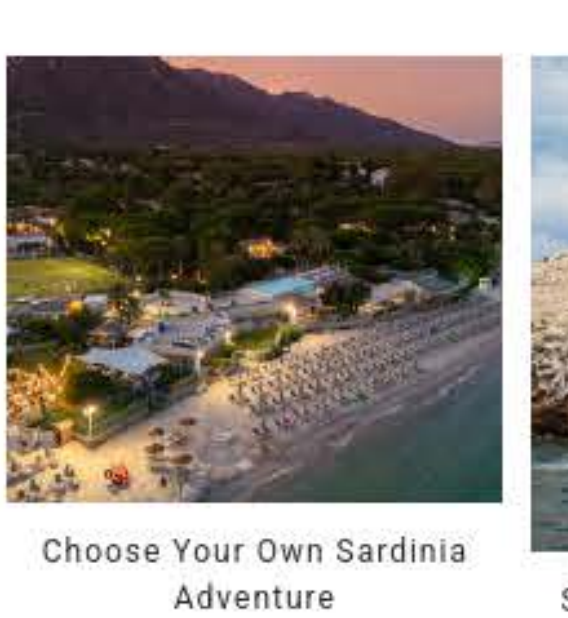
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