Why Now Might Be The Perfect Time To Visit Napa And Sonoma Wineries

by **Taryn White** — January 31, 2026 in **Food + Drink**, **California**, **Getaways**

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Sullivan Rutherford Estate in Napa Valley produces high-quality, small quantity Bordeaux varietals. Photo Credit: Jack Wonderly Photography.

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Winter quietly transforms Napa and Sonoma Counties into a season worth savoring. This time of year offers a welcome contrast to the rush of summer and harvest season. The vines are at rest, crowds have thinned and the hills glow under soft winter light. Fireside seating becomes a highlight, and hotels often feature attractive seasonal rates, resulting in a relaxed pace without the peak-season price tag.

Although Napa and Sonoma Counties are home to more than 800 wineries, including award-winning names like Robert Mondavi Winery and Aperture Cellars, whose founder Jesse Katz won Wine Enthusiast's "2025 Winemaker of the Year," winter is an ideal time to explore smaller estates. Visiting these wineries often means supporting a multi-generational family business that sustains local traditions in a way large commercial estates cannot.

Tastings are intimate and personal, with staff or, sometimes, the winemakers themselves sharing the story behind each bottle. There's usually no hurry, no crowded tasting room, just time to savor the wine and the experience. Here are a few smaller wineries to check out this winter, plus exciting activities and upscale places to stay nearby.

Three Sticks Wines

Three Sticks Wines offers six signature tasting experiences in its historic adobe. Photo Credit: Three Sticks Wines.

A visit to Three Sticks Wines feels more like stepping into someone's home than a traditional tasting room. Located in downtown Sonoma, the tasting room is housed inside the historic Vallejo-Casteñada Adobe, once owned by Salvador Vallejo, the brother of Sonoma's founder. Three Sticks specializes almost entirely in pinot noir and chardonnay, which account for about 95% of its production. The winery provides six signature tasting experiences available by reservation only, including The Adobe Table, which pairs estate wines with farm-to-table dishes from Brooke's Table.

Inman Family Wines

Using certified organic inputs and cover crops is central to Inman Family Wines' philosophy of supporting a healthy ecosystem. Photo Credit: Inman Family Wines.

In Sonoma County's Russian River area, Inman Family Wines brings an earth-focused approach to winemaking, practicing organic farming with certified organic inputs and cover crops, and supporting a healthy ecosystem for local wildlife through no-till soil management.

Owner and winemaker Kathleen Inman believes great wine begins with respect for the land. "If you want wines that truly express their origin, you must respect where they come from," she says. Sustainability has always been central to her philosophy, which she calls "eco-ethics." At her Olivet Grange Vineyard in the Russian River Valley, that philosophy comes to life through organic farming, a commitment to biodiversity and working in harmony with the natural ecosystem. A longtime innovator, Inman was an early adopter of Stelvin closures in 2002 and a pioneer of California rosé, producing her now-iconic Endless Crush rosé since 2004.

During winter, Inman Family Wines offers intimate, seated tastings from Thursday through Monday in its tasting room as well as vineyard walks that highlight what's happening in the vineyard and cellar. Guests may also book a Meet the Maker tasting, which Inman hosts personally, guiding visitors on a walk through the vineyard and garden.

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Ram's Gate Winery

Ram's Gate Winery features more than 21,000 square feet of modern tasting rooms and lounge spaces. Photo Credit: Ram's Gate Winery.

At Ram's Gate Winery in Carneros, sustainability is also part of everyday vineyard life. Sheep graze naturally between the vines to control weeds and enrich the soil, while trained falcons deter birds without disrupting the ecosystem. Together, these practices reduce the need for mechanical mowing and chemical treatments. The winery's commitment has earned several honors, including Regenerative Organic Certified status in 2025.

Ram's Gate welcomes guests to its striking barn-style tasting room, featuring soaring ceilings and sweeping vineyard views. The property is known for curated tastings and seasonal programming, from festive weekend events to elevated culinary experiences like the Seasonal Wine & Food Experience. This five-course pairing curated by director of winemaking Joe Nielsen and executive chef Kimberley Cosway is inspired by the land and highlights ingredients at their seasonal peak, many of which are grown on the property.

Bouchaine Vineyards

The winery's new semicircular hospitality center offers stunning panoramic views of the vineyards and the bay. Photo Credit: Bouchaine Vineyards.

Located on the edge of San Pablo Bay at the southernmost tip of Napa Valley, Bouchaine Vineyards is one of the Carneros American Viticultural Area's most respected producers of sustainably farmed chardonnay and pinot noir. A new hospitality center perched atop a hill, shaped in a sweeping semicircle to evoke an open embrace, provides panoramic vineyard and bay views that set the tone for what Bouchaine does best: welcoming people in.

Guest experiences include the Falconry in the Garden tasting, where guests can learn how owls, hawks and falcons aid vineyard harvests while enjoying a glass of Bouchaine wine. During the Vine to Vessel guided experience, guests compare wines aged in concrete eggs, large French oak casks, acacia barrels and clay amphorae, gaining a deeper understanding of how each vessel shapes a wine's aroma and flavor. For those looking to elevate their visit, food pairings by Bay City Chef are available by reservation.

Frank Family Vineyards

Frank Family Vineyards has nearly 400 acres of vineyards in Napa Valley and sells more than 20 different wines. Photo Credit: Frank Family Vineyards.

Frank Family Vineyards is known for food-friendly wines ranging from chardonnays to cabernets. General manager and senior winemaker Todd Graff describes winter at the vineyard as peaceful and cozy, noting that the season feels more personal, with a chance to reset and begin the year on the right note. He points to The Miller House, Frank Family's newest hospitality space, as an ideal spot to visit during the cooler months. The space's modern rustic design features reclaimed wood, high ceilings, expansive glass doors and cozy fireplaces indoors and out.

One of the vineyard's signature wines is Patriarch, a limited-quantity 100% cabernet sauvignon made from a special block at Winston Hill Vineyard in Rutherford and named in honor of Hy Frank, the late father of founder Rich Frank. When Rich was just 10 months old, Hy enlisted in the U.S. Army at the height of World War II, was deployed to Normandy and landed on Omaha Beach four days after D-Day.

After the war, Hy returned home, reunited with his family and founded Heide Meat Company. His hard work and success made it possible to send Rich to college, the first in his family to attend. Rich then built a highly successful career in entertainment and went on to found Frank Family Vineyards, thanks in large part to the dedication, work ethic and values Hy instilled in him from an early age. As a gesture of deep gratitude and love, Rich presented the first release of Patriarch to his father on his 98th birthday.

Sullivan Rutherford Estate

The J.O. Sullivan Founder's Reserve is a full-bodied red blend with dark fruits and aromatic herbs. Photo Credit: Sullivan Rutherford Estate.

Enjoying a well-aged glass of wine in a historic Napa Valley home—now a by-appointment tasting salon—feels perfectly in tune with the character of Sullivan Rutherford Estate. This winery is a must for anyone who appreciates red Bordeaux varieties, particularly cabernet sauvignon and merlot. Managing partner Juan Pablo Torres-Padilla was first drawn to wine around age eight, when his grandfather poured him tastes of Burgundy, Bordeaux and Napa Valley wines. Years later, while living in Paris, he deepened that connection by traveling through several French wine regions.

In 2018, his family's hospitality group, PA Capital Management, acquired Sullivan Rutherford Estate and assembled a world-class leadership team, including general manager Joshua Lowell and winemaker Jeff Cole, to build upon the winery's 50-year legacy. Torres-Padilla notes, "I am convinced that there is no other place in the world that shares Napa's unique combination of Old-World and New World: history, winemaking expertise and the American fervor for entrepreneurship, innovation and constant improvement." During the past several years, the family has taken steps to strengthen its future, including replanting a portion of its Rutherford estate, acquiring new land and vineyard sites and breaking ground on a state-of-the-art winemaking facility, scheduled for completion by the 2026 harvest.

Guests can choose from a range of curated tastings, starting with the Founder's Tasting, a seated exploration of the J.O. Sullivan Founder's Reserve Collection featuring the winery's top expressions. Guests can also enjoy the Merlot Mastery tasting experience, in which they blind-taste J.O. Sullivan Founder's Reserve Merlots alongside iconic producers from Bordeaux and Bolgheri. Torres-Padilla says, "Since launching this experience, we've seen strong engagement from both enthusiasts and connoisseurs, reinforcing the belief that world-class merlot can and does excel in Napa Valley."

Best Things To Do In Napa And Sonoma Counties

In winter, visitors can take advantage of cooler temperatures and far fewer crowds. The 4.5-mile round-trip hike to Table Rock provides some of the most rewarding views in the valley. Nearby regional parks such as Napa Valley State Park and Alston Park feature scenic, accessible trails. Sonoma County, named a top destination to visit in 2026 by Forbes Travel Guide, is home to Sonoma Valley Regional Park and Jack London State Historic Park, which is celebrating 150 years in 2026.

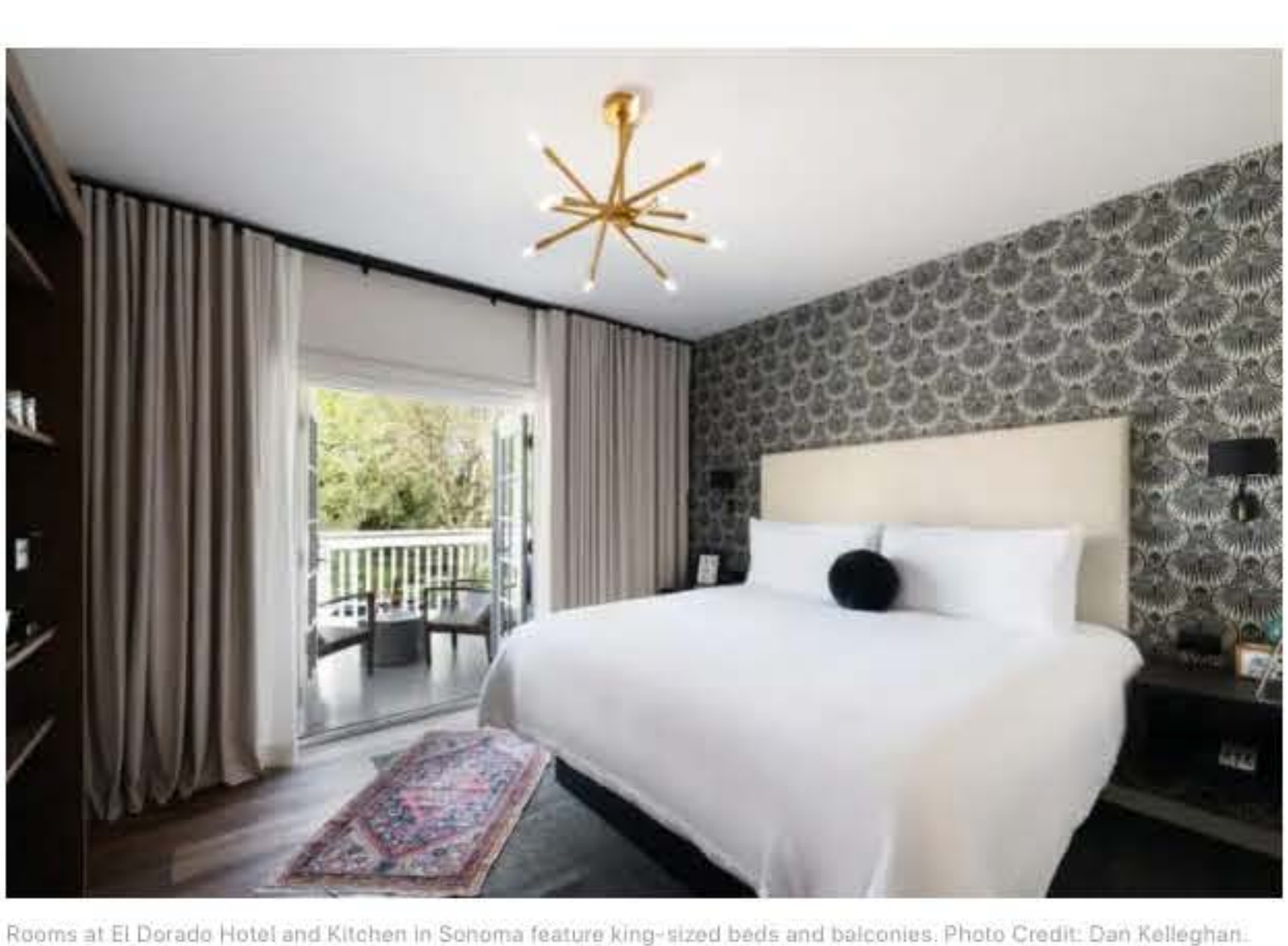
It's also the perfect season for restorative spa experiences, from the mud baths and mineral pools at Dr. Wilkinson's Backyard Resort and Mineral Springs and Indian Springs Resort to the luxurious spa setting at The Spa at Solage in Calistoga. Sugarloaf Ridge State Park in Sonoma County offers a monthly Forest Therapy Series through its Park Rx Program, running on the fourth Sunday from March through November. For stunning, often fog-covered vineyard views at sunrise, book a hot air balloon flight with Napa Valley Balloons.

A visit to this wine region would not be complete without time spent wandering its charming towns. In winter, Sonoma Plaza takes on a cozy charm, with fireplaces lit inside tasting rooms and restaurants, like Michelin-starred Enclos, and a walkable mix of bakeries, cafés, shops and small galleries. Downtown Napa leans more culinary and contemporary, with a lively collection of restaurants, such as Angèle Restaurant & Bar, tasting rooms and art spaces along the riverfront.

Where To Stay

The spacious Robert Louis Stevenson suite at Poetry Inn. Photo Credit: Michael Hospelt.

While Napa Valley has renowned luxury resorts such as the Four Seasons Resort and Residences Napa Valley, travelers seeking a more intimate, luxury experience will find it at Poetry Inn. Perched high above the valley, this secluded boutique property offers exceptional privacy and a sense of calm, with just five spacious suites, private terraces and attentive service.



Rooms at El Dorado Hotel and Kitchen in Sonoma feature king-sized beds and balconies. Photo Credit: Dan Kelleghan.

In Sonoma, the 27-room El Dorado Hotel and Kitchen enjoys one of the best addresses in the county, located right on Sonoma Plaza, making it easy for guests to walk to nearby tasting rooms, shops and restaurants. The hotel's restaurant, El Dorado Kitchen, serves seasonally-driven California cuisine sourced from local farmers and purveyors. The new Madeira House just opened in Sonoma County, a rustic property featuring 11 charming rooms across three restored houses.

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