

# SONOMA

## HEARTH TO HEART

Sonoma's rich agricultural and topographic diversity makes it more than a wine destination. Indulge in this itinerary with me for 72 hours of some the most sublime experiences, the region has to offer.

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## DIFFERENT YET NOT UNKNOWN

Sonoma is not the unknown. We know Sonoma, the county, coast, region, as one of the finest viticultural regions of the United States. There is much already written and talked about it - for the lushness of its vineyards, richness of the wines and the legalized intoxication of its tours.

Yet, today, I want to tell you about the lesser known Sonoma, the part that thrives as an agricultural paradise, the part that abounded with natural beauty, of majestic red woods and sensuous cliffs dropping down to a choppy sea. I hope to convince you, not of a Sonoma that you recall in a haze of perpetual swigs and swallows, but one that will leave an imprint on your soul, parching more than an avid thirst under the dry Californian sun, through a world of adventure and incredible food. Blessed with a stunning year round climate that climbs into the 90s during the day dropping back to temperate with the setting sun, this region is fertile for fun and frolic and a bit of ramble through varying landscapes within short driving distance.

Indulge in this itinerary with me and I will chalk out 72 hours of your life with some the most sublime experiences, the region has to offer. I recommend three whole days and two nights of stay in the region. From San Francisco, you drive up across the majestic Golden Gate bridge in to the heart of the land, where for the century before, not grape but apples, vegetables and farm animals were grown and reared.

## Day 1: Beer & Cheese in Central Sonoma + Garden dining

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Begin the day in leisure and drive into the valley into downtown Sonoma. Downtown Sonoma in Sonoma County, and, here is where the region's grape story began. This area has a rich multicultural history, spanning the Spanish and Mexicans before the arrival of the Americans. It is a quaint little town with a several boutique and food stores and some very good restaurants, spanning out into the surrounding original vineyards.

You can certainly begin your wine tasting at the several boutiques along the town, yet, I would recommend waiting for the wineries themselves later in the tour. A leisurely stroll through the neighborhood, soaking

in the indeed Californian way of life (that is oh very different from San Francisco) is a treasure. The Plaza propagates the "Slow" culture. Even if you don't buy into that new age sounding hype, you can simply relish in the time warp that it offers. If you are feeling fancy and are looking to plan in advance The Girl & The Fig on the main street has great French fare. Personally, I would recommend sampling the simple lures of American cuisine done right at Sunflower Caffé. Sitting under the gazebos in the backyard, sheltered from the sun but well in the warmth of it, sipping bellinis and digging into well made sandwiches, literally, sets the tone of the holiday!

Tipping their hat to the agrarian heritage of Sonoma, craft breweries are popping up all over the region. These days, when *Craft* has become less to do with art but more reflective of simply batch size, it is interesting to see passion and micro-sourcing that is afforded by the terrain of the region. Carneros Brewing Company is true salute to the demographic history of the United States as it is one of the few Latino owned breweries. Founded by four brothers of Mexican-American origins they brew classic ales and lagers with a mixture of science, taste and heart, and, hops grown in the backyard.



Sipping on a good cold pull amidst the hop vines, looking on to a vista of unending land shimmering under the afternoon sun, with the precipitation running down the sides of the glass, takes you back, takes you away, to a place that has nothing to do with work or routines. And, when you go back into the cool recesses of the taproom for a refill, you blink in the relative darkness and realize you really are on a vacation!

Another region to explore on the beer trail is Petaluma. 101 North Brewing Company and Petaluma Hills Brewing Co. have made their names with locally brewed ales and IPAs that are now flowing through several taps in CA and some around the country.

As the sun dips in the sky, dinner in the gardens under fairy lights, at Willi's Wine Bar is an experience that makes you want to give up city life entirely, buy a farm and just cozy up. As a first taste of what the micro-region of Sonoma grows and eats, it is a fabulous sensory journey through the freshest produce, fine grass raised meats and impeccable cooking all served with down home hospitality and flavor as the simplest styling.

As dusk gathers around you, the crickets buzz and the fire flies glow while you relax and indulge with fine wines, subtle snatches of nearby conversations carrying through in evening breeze and contemplate on the day. It is easy to think that things cannot be more perfect. Simple as it is, the day has been incredibly elegant and so distant from the worries of yesterday. Yet, it only gets better.







## Day 2: The Old and New - Wineries, Nose to Tail Dining, Local Art

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Today, we give in further into our memorable holiday with a mix of classic vineyard sampling and a contemporary twist of peculiarly Californian examples of farm to table and artisan on premises experiences.

Wine tasting experiences are structured in typical fashions to maximize the quantity rather than the quality. More often than not, one books a tour bus/driver to take you on a tour of wineries in the region making it a hard hitting day of several wineries. The trouble with this is that after the second one, the taste of the wines becomes indistinguishable. For a clear experience of the glory of the wines, I would recommend spending a luxurious amount of time in at most three wineries in a day, with at least a couple of hours spread between each. Also, I highly recommend visiting one of them during lunch as many offer wonderful lunch and wine programs set against the picturesque beauty of their wine yards.

Sonoma's viticultural regions are many and distinct. The biggest difference between Napa and Sonoma regions is that the heart of Sonoma today is still agrarian. Most of the wine grown here is by wine farmers who sell to wine makers. Today 95% of the cultivation in the Sonoma region is grapes and nearly 70% of all vineyards are farmer owned. They grow the grapes and then sell them in bulk to a wine maker who typically have ~100 acres of grapes planted themselves but also do a lot more volume of wine than can be made from their own vineyards.

The wine regions within Sonoma can be ranked, from best to least, as Alexander Valley, Dry Creek Valley, Sonoma Valley, Sonoma Coast to Sonoma Mountains. The most well known names like Robert Mondavi, Jackson Family etc. are regional blends and estate wines are few and not typically available outside the vineyard. Yet, you can enjoy any of these big names in comfort of your living room. What makes a wine trail in Sonoma memorable is finding the hidden gems and tasting not blend but single estate wines.

This day would begin with a continuation of the Central Sonoma experience with tasting and lunch at Lynmar Estate. The vineyard, with vines over forty years old, 15 clones of Pinot Noir and 4 clones of Chardonnay has an array of canopy and rootstock combinations that yield exquisite fruit. While they do a range of blended wines, their single estate, single grape blends are the best and rather spectacular. Their offerings are best experienced in the cool glades of the garden under a bright yellow canopy with a clear view of the nearest vineyard a stone's throw away. If you want to sip wine, while literally sitting on top of a vineyard, this is your place.

The next region to hit is the Dry Creek Valley, the single most venerable terrior for American grapes! It is a really tiny viticultural region that by geography produces some of THE best wines in the country.





Throw a stone in any direction and you will find yourself sipping some of the very best, the region has to offer, distilled conveniently into a long stemmed, wide bellied glass. My favorite winery here is the Mounts Family Winery, a micro operation that is primarily a grape farm, with a few bottles aged with passion. A third generation farmer, David came to the family business of wine growing and has over the years, developed a passion for making wines. Here is my full review of the experience.







## AT THE BARLOW

Finally, as the days cool off with a dipping sun, the place to explore is nearby Sebastopol. Sebastopol is leading the conversion of previous warehouse areas into new age artistic influences. The Barlow, set just outside the city limits is a veritable craft marketplace akin to the Ferry market in San Francisco, only a lot more sprawling and grandiose in concept. You can spend a few hours, strolling about, shopping and taking in some uniquely artistic creations from a larger than life size Buddha painting, inlaid with real gold to a display of red carts stacked and fused together at a new wine bar.



The final lure for the evening is at one of the best restaurants in the country that subtly salutes the farm to table as well as nose to tail dining experience. Chef Duskie Estes of Zazu Kitchen and Farm is the spirited, enthusiastic chef in pig tails and glasses, you may recognize from the Iron Chef competitions. Under the bubbly exterior is a lady passionate about the way her pigs, the ones on your plate, are raised, on her farm. As farm to your table is it gets with no detours! The food is spectacular and well complimented with cocktails made using locally distilled spirits. The bacon wrapped dates tastes of not just the love from the kitchen but the joy of nurturing a healthy, happy pig on her farm. If you are in Sonoma for any period of time, this is one restaurant





## Day 3: The Great Outdoors and the Coast

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From coast to inland, Sonoma offers many reasons to hit the pause button on life and lure one to give yourself up to the moment. Whether you are by the cliffs of Bodega head with the hypnotic effect of the crashing waves or the utter peacefulness deep in the forest of giant red wood trees, they abruptly and decidedly yank you away from the rigors of city buzz, resetting your outlook into an optimistic note.

The last day is one for taking the time to get lost in the beauty of the region's landscape. It is about experiencing the splendid range of vistas that the region offers.

Begin the day early, with a hike in the Armstrong Redwoods which also boasts the 1400 year old redwood tree, Colonel Armstrong. There are several ones but even an hours walk into this giants' forest, at an early hour when there are few visitors, is an incredible opportunity to simply tune out the city's screeches and surrender to inner calm.





Next, a scrumptious three course breakfast at [The Farmhouse Inn](#). The luxury B&B and restaurant is one of a kind. Operated by a brother and sister duo, who live only a stone's throw away, the lodgings are designed as retro fit barn inspirations fluidly interlaced with every possible modern comfort. Best of all, their kitchens and cellar bring out the best of Sonoma produce from their own family gardens as well as from local farms. A three course pre Fixe breakfast at \$25 is simply one the best starts of the day you can possible have. Also, since one of the owners is gluten intolerant they are very conscious of dietary restrictions.

Then, off to a drive to the coast to Bodega Bay and Head, a stunning jut of land that ends in cliff like terrain, interspersed with water weathered beaches, finishing in a churning sea with attitude. If you thought the Pacific was a calm body that the Aussies love to swim and surf, then you get a different thrill from watching the waves crashing onto the boulders by the coast. It is stunning and a perfect place to enjoy a picnic.







When you are in the area, don't forget to make a stop at the [Spud Point Crab Company](#), a tiny fish shack on the road to the Head. If the place is known by the company it keeps, you can surely trust the seafood here as it is a popular place with the local fisherman. With a large front yard seating space that is reminiscent of a truly old style Fishermen's Wharf, it offers a splendid view of the calm bay with research and fishing boats neatly moored to the pier. They are known for their home smoked salmon, yet, my favorite was the humble clam chowder. It can easily rival the New England one, rich in its meatiness from chunks of clams with a distinct brine of the sea a consistent undercurrent in the dish.

Finally, drive down the glorious coast through some of the most scenic and daring cliff huggers of the Pacific Coast Highway, into a relaxed evening back in San Francisco. Hopefully, you would have picked up enough wine from the stellar vintages up North to ease heart and soul back into the routine of city life.















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