

A WINE COUNTRY WEEKEND

Whether planning a family trip or a couple's getaway, Santa Barbara-area vineyards offer options for every traveler.

By ASHLEY RYAN
AND SHARON STELLO

WHILE MANY LOCALS HEAD TO Temecula for a wine tasting trip, there's another region ripe for exploring that's not too far away. The Santa Barbara wine region, about a 3½-hour drive from Laguna Beach, features more than 275 wineries and seven approved American Viticultural Areas with vineyards growing over 70 different wine grape varieties—meaning there's something for every palate.

The region's versatility is due to the east-west orientation of the coastal mountains, which form valleys that open to the Pacific Ocean, allowing fog and sea breezes to blow

in, thus creating distinct microclimates that can produce many grape varieties and world-class wines. In fact, the fog and ocean air make it one of the coolest viticultural areas in the state, allowing an unusually long “hang time” on the vine—which helps the fruit to fully develop tannins, acids and flavors required for wines with distinct character.

The various properties have unique personalities, too, from peaceful and secluded to hip and happening, so it's easy to put together the perfect itinerary whether traveling for a family vacation or a romantic getaway.



Above: Dovecote Estate Winery's bucolic setting; right: fresh dishes at Vega Vineyard & Farm

VINTAGE FAMILY FUN

On the way into the Santa Ynez Valley, driving inland from the coast through rolling hills along Highway 101, Vega Vineyard & Farm is a perfect place to stop and stretch your legs, sip some wine and enjoy a delicious lunch of fresh, seasonal dishes. On weekends, there's often live music on the patio all afternoon.

Savor farm-to-table fare like fire-roasted cauliflower with za'atar seasoning and hummus; seared tuna with ponzu, ginger and garlic; flatbreads (kids will no doubt like the margherita version) and handmade pasta

like pappardelle with wild boar Bolognese or cavatelli cacio e pepe while trying a glass of the bright and vibrant nebbiolo or the slightly spicy Barbera (a bestseller). If whites are more to your liking, sample the chardonnay or albarino with notes of citrus.

Nearby lawn games will keep the kiddos entertained, while farm animals can be found a short walk from the main tasting area. Children and adults alike will delight in seeing the goats, sheep, pigs and unusual breeds of chickens. Visitors can also purchase fresh greens to feed the animals. Spending time in the sunshine in this bucolic setting is the ideal way to ease into a wine country vacation together.



OPPOSITE PAGE: COURTESY OF SANTA BARBARA VINTNERS; THIS PAGE FROM TOP: COURTESY OF DOVECOTE ESTATE WINERY; COURTESY OF VEGA VINEYARD & FARMS



Top: The Landsby's courtyard features fire pits and s'mores kits can be purchased inside the hotel. Above: Kids can feed animals at Vega Vineyard & Farm. Below: Children will enjoy the open space and pond while adults sip vino at Dovecote Estate Winery.



STAY

After a leisurely afternoon at Vega, there's an option to stay at the vineyard—guests can book a two-bedroom casita with full kitchen and wraparound deck—or make your way to Solvang, a charming town with Danish-influenced architecture that offers a home base for visiting wineries in the region. The Landsby is a great place to stay overnight. This newly remodeled boutique hotel with 51 rooms features contemporary Scandinavian design and a courtyard with fire pits to gather around and even roast s'mores (bring your own fixings or purchase a kit at the hotel). On-site restaurant Mad & Vin offers wine country-inspired cuisine. Located on the main road through town, it's an easy walk to shops and other eateries.

A few blocks away, make sure to check out Hanson's Clock Shop Jewelers, a store filled with unique cuckoo clocks from around the world, as well as the Hans Christian Andersen Museum filled with books and displays related to the life of this Danish writer who penned fairy tales including "The Snow Queen"—upon which Disney's "Frozen" is loosely based—and "The Little Mermaid." Not far away, a Little Mermaid fountain is a perfect photo opp.

PLAY

In Solvang, families might enjoy taking a ride in a horse-drawn trolley on weekends or a motorized trolley daily except Tuesdays, which depart from Copenhagen Drive and Second Street across from the visitors center roughly every half hour. Also, just outside town, going

toward Buellton, OstrichLand USA is worth a stop: Visitors can feed the enormous birds, with more than 100 ostriches and emus on-site.

As you continue driving through the region, wineries and vineyards abound. Those seeking a peaceful and secluded setting might want to head to Dovecote Estate Winery, north of Solvang in the Los Alamos area; a reservation and gate code are required for entry. Kids will have fun exploring around a large pond, surrounded by plenty of open space. Several picnic tables allow for an alfresco lunch. Pull up a seat at the historic redwood tasting shack or take a glass of vino back to your group picnic beneath a 250-year-old constitution oak tree.

Dovecote seeks to convey a sense of its location through its wines. Try Redtail, a complex but balanced red blend named for the families of red-tailed hawks on the property. Or sample the estate viognier, made with grapes from the label's single-acre vineyard—hand farmed without machinery—in the Los Olivos District, which offers a relatively cool growing climate.

But don't leave without drinking some dark, rich syrah, which put Dovecote's vineyard on the map. A previous owner, David Thompson, acquired coveted Estrella River syrah cuttings, which were snuck into the country by suitcase from the famous Chapoutier vineyard in Hermitage, France. At Dovecote, these prized vines grow in just a few rows of land that are sandy, windblown and nutrient depleted, producing tiny, nearly pea-sized grapes. But the high skin-to-pulp ratios create fruit with intense density that translates to highly acclaimed wines. Demand from soon made the Thompson property one of the most sought-after sources of single-vineyard syrah. In 2014, the Thompsons passed the reins to the Rowles family, which now crafts limited quantities of Dovecote Estate Wine.

About 30 minutes away, Babcock Winery & Vineyards offers another unique experience. Guests will feel transported back in time by the vintage furniture and decor throughout the eclectic tasting room and shop. Teens—and their parents—will enjoy flipping through a collection of vinyl records, pins and patches; perusing the retro band posters on the walls; and gawking at the antique television set, typewriter, clothes washer and more. Grab a glass of wine, along with some cheese and charcuterie, and nestle into one of the nostalgic spaces arranged like mini living rooms with throw-back couches, coffee tables and knickknacks.

With fun names like Status Crow and Opportunity Knocks carignan, Ocean's Ghost pinot noir, Once in a Lifetime viognier and



Eclectic vintage decor offers much to explore at Babcock Winery & Vineyards.

Love Garden rose, tasting wine here feels like a magical journey. One of the most impressive is an extremely rich port called Until Venus, a 2019 vintage made from late-season petit verdot grapes and fortified with brandy.

Owned by Bryan and Lisa Babcock, the property was originally purchased by Bryan's parents, Mona and Walter, who were also the proprietors of Walt's Wharf in Seal Beach. They transformed the land from growing lima beans to chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and gewurztraminer grapes and began producing wine.

Bryan cut short his studies in viticulture and enology at University of California, Davis, to join the effort, learning from other winemakers in the region. In fact, 20 years ago, he led a team of wine growers in proposing boundary lines for a new appellation, the Santa Rita Hills AVA, which was adopted in 2001. The area has grown over the years, producing top-notch wine.

DINE

When you're done traveling the wine trail for the day, return to Solvang, where some excellent dining options await. Consider Coast Range, which has been highlighted by the Michelin Guide—and for good reason. The intimate space features private booths with walls on three sides among the seating options in addition to a patio. Decor ranges from nautical to cowboy-inspired at this butcher shop and restaurant in one.

Diners can't go wrong with any of the menu items, but the French onion soup with truffle cheese gratinee is next level. Most of the menu is steaks (think bone-in rib-eye, wagyu tomahawk and filet mignon) and sides, but diners can also choose from oysters, shrimp scampi, chicken fried steak and miso-glazed cod. Those with children tagging along can rest assured



A patio and kid-friendly menu options are great for families at Coast Range.

that they have kid-friendly options too: grilled cheese, chicken fingers, pasta with butter or marinara, a 5-ounce steak and more.

In the morning, you must visit Olsen's Danish Village Bakery for coffee and all manner of pastries and baked goods. You'll feel like a kid in a candy store with the glass cases full of apple strudel, chocolate-dipped lady fingers, coconut macaroons, almond-raspberry tarts and, well, Danishes with cream or fruit filling. Get one or two for breakfast and a bag of others for the road—trust us, it's a long drive home without pastries in the car. —S.S.

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FROM TOP: DAVID TSAY PHOTOGRAPHY; SHARON STELLIO, COURTESY OF DOVECOTE ESTATE WINERY; OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT: COURTESY OF BABCOCK WINERY & VINEYARDS; RIGHT: JEREMY BALL

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Clockwise from top left: Cambria Estate Winery's panoramic knoll; the Mirabelle Inn in Solvang; a bottle crafted by McKinney Family Vineyards

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF CAMBRIA ESTATE WINERY; ASHLEY RYAN; COURTESY OF MCKINNEY FAMILY VINEYARDS

ROMANCE IN THE VINEYARDS

The drive from Orange County to Santa Barbara is just far enough to make you feel as if you've left the big city and ventured to the rolling hills of European wine country. In fact, Santa Barbara Vintners recently launched a campaign titled "West of France, Just North of LA"—and what could be more romantic than feeling as if you and your love have been transported to Europe for a weekend?

The similarities don't end with the chardonnay: Along the Santa Barbara coastline—just like in France—you can swim or fish, catch a wave or a sunset, or simply relax on the sandy beaches. With stunning views, fine dining and a blossoming art scene, there is much to see and do in this region. But stick inland if you're looking to unwind and sip vino in the sunshine. Local wineries and tasting rooms

offer the perfect recipe for rest and relaxation. Nearby towns provide other ways to amp up the romance.

STAY

Couples seeking that European feel can head straight for Solvang. While it may be more Danish-inspired than French, it is an endearing town with a very charming boutique hotel: the Mirabelle Inn. Book the suite for an intimate stay; located on the fourth floor, you'll have the entire level to yourself, along with a king-size bed, inset vanity and European-style decor.

Situated downtown only a few blocks away from Mission Drive, which doubles as the main highway that passes through Solvang, the Mirabelle is a great base as you can easily walk to nearby restaurants, shops and tasting

rooms. It also houses First & Oak, a New American eatery recognized with a Michelin plate designation. Here, you'll find expressive dishes inspired by the season, featuring produce grown along the Central Coast. Start with house-made bread with avocado butter, oysters, duck wings or caviar before enjoying mains like pan-seared halibut, beef tenderloin or Parisian gnocchi for a luxurious meal with your one and only. The restaurant also offers a five-course tasting menu.

The hotel is just a few blocks away from the popular Solvang Windmill—a great spot for a photo-op—while the Old Mission Santa Inés is just up the road, offering docent-led tours (which must be reserved two weeks in advance) of the historic property for a step back in time.

PLAY

Venture out to Riverbench Vineyard & Winery in Santa Maria to relax in the garden outside of the venue's 1920s Craftsman-style house. Here, you'll enjoy a tranquil afternoon under the sun with the vineyard's picnic basket for two, which contains rosemary crackers, prosciutto, various cheeses and other snacks. Pair it with a sparkling wine flight, pinot noir tastings or the Riverbench Tour of the winery's finest vinos.

The recently renovated Cambria Estate Winery is another perfect place for a picnic. Sit on the panoramic knoll overlooking 1,500 acres of vines. Here, you can enjoy bottle service, along with a charcuterie box of meats, cheeses, crackers, fruit and nuts. Guests can relax on the patio or in the tasting lounge for an estate flight, focusing on Cambria's specialties of chardonnay and pinot noir, or a reserve tasting featuring vinos from the winery's oldest vines and bottles named for the founders.

Not far from Solvang, you'll find the boutique McKinney Family Vineyards. Founder Matt McKinney, a former volleyball player, converted the barn behind his parents' Santa Ynez home into a winemaking facility, using it to produce 2,500 cases of vino each year. Though the company maintains small-batch labels, it prides itself in the quality of the wines and the use of organic grapes. Book a private tour of the vineyard to explore the charming property, see the equipment used and feed the goats. Tastings range from single varietals, such as rose or syrah, to bold red blends, and the names—like Blood of Jove, Queen Charlemagne and Napoleon's Secret—are nods to when McKinney majored in history at UCLA.

But if you're looking to really delve into the environmentally friendly aspects of the Santa Barbara wine region, consider a private experience with Sustainable Wine Tours. The company often enjoys exclusive access to properties that may not be open to the public; tastings, lunch and transportation are included.

If you'd rather stick around Solvang, tasting rooms galore fill the local streets. Alma Rosa Winery, which was one of the first to plant grapes in the Santa Rosa Hills, has a downtown tasting room offering sips of its pinot noir, chardonnay, syrah and grenache varietals plus sparkling wines crafted from separate Sonoma vines. Visit the estate itself for private, guided hikes through the vineyards as well as surrounding oak woods or grasslands. McClain Cellars, which has both a tasting room and wine library in Laguna Beach, also offers sips in its Solvang lounge, with flights that can be



Clockwise from top left: the Alma Rosa Winery patio; a romantic ride with Sky's the Limit Ballooning Adventures; the Riverbench Vineyard & Winery lawn; Clean Slate Wine Bar, which serves local vinos and Cajun-inspired fare



paired with artisanal popcorn or cheese plates.

Aside from wine-centric experiences, you'll find a number of romantic options elsewhere. Get out in nature and view the beauty of Santa Barbara County with a hike at Nojoqui Falls Park, where a nearly 100-foot waterfall tumbles down into a peaceful pool, or book a ride with Sky's The Limit Ballooning Adventures.

Another way to heat things up is with a trip to Chiffon day spa in Solvang, where couples can enjoy the Bliss Retreat, complete with hot stones, aromatherapy and a custom massage. Opt to add Champagne and chocolate truffles.

DINE

Wandering the enchanting streets, you won't feel as if you are nestled just north of L.A. Stop by Mortensen's Danish Bakery, where you can peruse sweet treats displayed behind glass. Favorites include cream cheese danish, kringle and chocolate rum balls while pistachio squares and butter rings are house specialties.

Later in the day, Clean Slate Wine Bar, also in town, offers a menu of local wines and tapas-style plates with Cajun flair. A map on the menu reveals where each of the vino

offerings is from so you really get a feel for the region without venturing out. Melissa Scrymgeour, co-founder of Clean Slate, grew up in Louisiana, where she learned to create menu items such as flatbreads, gumbo and jambalaya as well as innovative items like "peanut butter and jelly" crostini, made with pimento cheese, bacon and local pepper jelly.

And for dessert, Via Gelateria is walking distance from both Clean Slate and the Mirabelle Inn. Owned and operated by a native of Italy, the authenticity and flavors of the fresh-made daily gelato are unrivaled.

If you're looking for a fine dining restaurant nearby, don't miss The Hitching Post 2 in Buellton. This Western-inspired eatery, which was featured in the acclaimed film "Sideways," is best known for its oak-grilled steaks, unique appetizers like Texas quail and a stellar wine list, featuring its own bottles of pinot noir and other Santa Barbara-area vinos.

Whether you've come to sip, dine or simply explore—with the whole family or on a romantic couple's getaway—you will leave feeling refreshed and rejuvenated after wandering this versatile wine region. —A.R. ■