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**SONOMA COUNTY**

PHOTO BY ANDY KATZ

## Savoring Sonoma

*Late Summer and Fall bring one-of-a-kind opportunities to experience food and wine in a whole new way*

There is a saying in Sonoma County: “What grows together, goes together.” As sophisticated as Sonoma’s Wine Country is, at its core, this is authentic farm country. Local growers, and the businesses that support them, have deep connections to the land and to each other. This strong sense of community isn’t limited to those who live here — it extends outward to all those who want to get involved and experience the Sonoma lifestyle for themselves.

The best way to capture the local vibe of Sonoma Wine Country? Just dig in. Get hands-on at a vineyard, up close to celeb chefs, learn from some of the nation’s top sommeliers and immerse yourself in one-of-a-kind events that celebrate the distinctive flavor of the region.

### Get Your Crush on at Grape Camp

If you’ve ever sat with a bottle of wine and wondered what it takes to bring grapes to the glass, Sonoma County Grape Camp (Sept. 23-25) may be your kind of camping experience. During this intensive, three-day adventure, campers are entrenched in Sonoma County’s harvest season.

Armed with buckets and clippers, attendees pick ripe grapes, get an insider’s look at the sorting process and discover the science behind making great wine. A group of around 25 campers spend time at a variety of vineyards including smaller, multi-generational, family-run properties and large estates that supply grapes to some of America’s most recognized wine labels.

Not all of it is hard work. The camp offers wine education classes hosted by leading winemakers, cooking classes, gourmet winery lunches and dinners, and luxury accommodations — just the kind of vacation couples like Greg Peluf and Anne Dykstra say they’ve always dreamed about. Summing it up, Peluf calls the trip “one of the best vacations we’ve ever had.”

The Minnesota campers were among the two dozen 2012 attendees given the challenge of picking more than a hundred pounds of grapes on a warm Fall morning. In less than an hour, Peluf proudly says the greenhorn pickers easily reached their quota — then promptly congratulated themselves with a celebratory glass of wine.

Fast on the heels of Grape Camp is the Sonoma Valley Reserve (Oct. 20-21), which offers 10 behind-the-scenes winery tours that reveal some of the area’s hidden gems, several of which are rarely open to the public. Spend a day with a sommelier touring four revered wineries or attend a Pinot Noir tasting in a cave. These tours sell out fast so be sure to make your reservations early.

### Uncork the Ultimate Wine Experience

Imagine a weekend where you can embed yourself in a down-to-earth community that genuinely shares your love of wine and food — and welcomes the chance to bring newcomers into the fold. During Sonoma Wine Country Weekend (Aug. 30-Sept. 1), 200 chefs and winemakers, along with hundreds of locals and visitors, live and breathe Sonoma’s best in all its glory. Its three days of wine immersion where locals catch up and compare notes, and corks and conversation fly.

By day, there are tours and al fresco luncheons in spectacular settings — on terraces, in a rustic schoolhouse or in a vintage barn. The evening invite of the

year: filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola’s starlit soiree at his namesake winery in Alexander Valley, where you can dine and dance the night away next to the winery’s epic pool.

Just be sure to get a little shut-eye because the weekend’s biggest event, Taste of Sonoma, starts the next morning at MacMurray Ranch, the former home of actor Fred MacMurray. Wear comfortable shoes and plan for full days — there’s so much ground to cover, you’ll want the extra time to experience it all.

A highlight of the event is sommelier-led tours to and through the grand tasting tents, giving guests an easy way to explore new wines and hear what goes on when wine experts and winegrowers get together to talk shop. Each tour offers a different perspective, based upon a specific wine niche

— high-altitude red wines or cool-climate Pinots and Chardonnays, for example. Wearing headsets, you can listen in on the conversations held between winemakers and sommeliers as each wine is tasted. No need to be a wallflower: feel free to share your thoughts and questions as they come up. And don’t be surprised if a winemaker pours an “under-the-table” wine — a special bottle just for the tour, kept hidden below deck.

A more rigorous tasting event is the Blind Tasting Challenge, where 10 guests at a time can test their sense of sight, smell and taste against a “star” sommelier such as Greg Rivers from The Breakers in Palm Beach or Kevin Weeks from Canlis in Seattle. Guests taste a flight of four different wines that are unlabeled and unmarked, guess which wines they are, and see how their favorites rate against the sommelier’s choices. It’s a great way to learn the “tricks of the trade” — the basics of evaluating and identifying

wines that every aficionado needs to know.

You can get hands-on with local Sonoma winemakers and growers at “The Crushpad.” Taste freshly picked wine grapes, see and sample the results of basket-pressing, and top it off with a taste of a finished bottle. This is a rare opportunity to examine the process of winemaking from vine to bottle.

The Bubble Lounge offers something distinct as well — a chance to sample some custom-prepared foods to complement the array of sparkling wines on hand. While most people think of “bubbly” for celebrations, the higher acidity of sparkling wines works particularly well to heighten the flavors in foods. Think of it as an enhancer, like a squeeze of lemon.



PHOTO BY KENT PORTER

*Starlit dinners among the vines are one of the highlights not only during Grape Camp, but also throughout the year in Sonoma County.*



PHOTO BY SONOMA WINE COUNTRY WEEKEND

*At Taste of Sonoma at MacMurray Ranch, there is so much to do, they provide signposts to help you find your way.*

And what better food to accompany sparkling wine than oysters? Aluxa and Jazmine Lalicker, better known as “The Oyster Girls,” will be there to show everyone a thing or two about how to pair the fruit of the sea with the sparkling grapes of the land. The attractive young owners of the Tomales Bay-based traveling oyster bar are happy to share their extensive knowledge of the history and art of eating oysters, including the correct shucking techniques. And there’s a good chance they’ll spice it up with some of their otherworldly sauces and condiments, such as “Sassy Pink” horseradish and mango chutney mignonette, which are, of course, made with locally grown ingredients.

### Tasting While Touring

While festivals like Sonoma Wine Country Weekend can give you a multitude of real-world wine experiences all in one place, nothing beats exploring Sonoma Wine Country at your own pace. The annual Wine and Food Affair (Nov. 2-3) speaks to the adventurous spirit in all of us. Attendees get a tasting glass, a wristband and a map to more than 100 participating wineries in Northern Sonoma County that are serving up something special everywhere you go.

Teaming up with top local chefs, or sometimes dusting off a secret family recipe, wineries throughout Dry Creek Valley, Russian River Valley and Alexander Valley offer up highly original food and wine pairings in some intimate venues on their properties such as picturesque patios, secluded gardens and the private areas of barrel rooms. With the year’s vintage put to rest for the winter, winery staff are at their most accessible, eager to talk about what’s in the cellar and what wines they’ll soon be releasing.

The food selections run the gamut, from the elegant (Jacques Pepin’s Rabbit & More at C. Donatiello) to the eclectic (Day of the Dead Oaxacan Turkey Mole & Mashed Acorn Squash at Acorn Winery/Alegria Vineyards) to the altogether fascinating (Chocolate Budino with Salted Caramel & Chocolate Covered Pop Rocks, anyone?). If you’ve never had bison meatballs or golden beet croquet, now is the time to sample it all.

Don’t worry if you can’t make it to every winery

along the way. Wine and Food Affair attendees receive a prized cookbook full of recipes for the foods served throughout the two-day event, so you can go back home and recreate your Sonoma County experience, or cook up some of the tastings you may have missed.

### Take a Taste of Tradition

Sonoma’s Wine Country is as much about food and its origins as it is about grapes. Throughout the county, local farmers are renowned for their heirloom fruits and organic vegetables, and visitors come to share their passion and stock up on seeds and supplies.

A first stop for many is the Petaluma Seed Bank Exchange, home to Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company’s West Coast location (it’s based in Missouri). It carries one of the largest selections of seeds from the 19th century, including many Asian and European varieties, as well as locally sourced garlic and herbs, and books and DVDs on gardening and genetic engineering. More than 1,200 types of heirloom seeds are housed in an 88-year-old bank building, with its 30-foot high ceilings, ’20s-style rosettes and the slogan, “Invest in Your Garden” etched on one of its arched windows — a playful nod to the structure’s former life.

If heirloom gardening is your *raison d’être*, nothing beats The National Heirloom Exposition (Sept. 10-12), dubbed the “World’s Fair of Pure Food,” which draws more than 20,000 people focused on organic farming and community gardening to the Sonoma County Fairgrounds. There are 30,000 heirloom varieties and livestock to explore, along with music, hundreds of vendors, and a Giant Pumpkin Contest (last year’s entries boasted several pumpkins in excess of 1,000 pounds).

From pressing grapes and growing crops, to kicking back with winemakers in their barrel rooms and cooking alongside area chefs, there is no shortage of activities where you can roll up your sleeves, get your hands dirty and become a full-fledged citizen of Sonoma Wine Country.



PHOTO BY SONOMA COUNTY WINEGROWERS

*Grape Campers harvest Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir early in the morning during their Fall excursion.*

## Learn more: **WeAreSonomaCounty.com**

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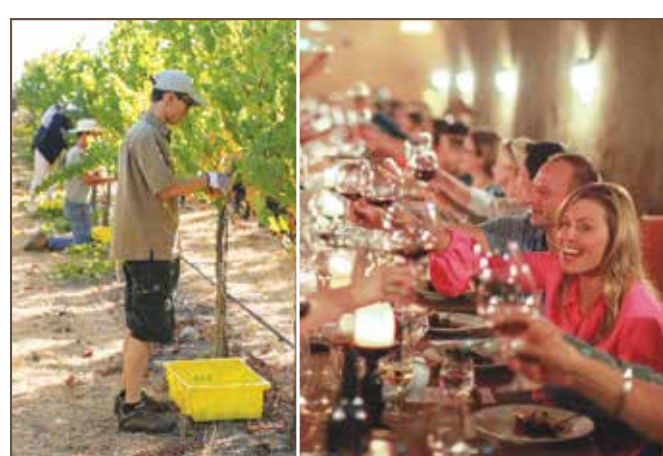
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