

Travel CHANNEL™

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Wine Tour Weekends

Any old day of the week suffices for sipping wine, but food and drink travelers hot on the trail of great vintages need a long weekend to really savor the best of the barrels. Here are 5 diverse wine-producing regions and ways to immerse yourself in their wine offerings.

Napa Valley

Sip and cycle through Napa Valley. The Calistoga area, in upper Napa Valley, features 20 miles of easy-to-pedal terrain, with family-owned vineyards, such as Chateau Montelena, Vincent Arroyo and Frank Family Vineyards. Go it alone or with a company like Napa Valley Bike Tours; its 3- to 5-mile rides take you to several vineyards, such as Baldacci Family Vineyards (try their pinot noir and syrah) and Andretti Winery (chardonnays, cabernet sauvignons and merlots.) Or take a train ride with Napa Valley Wine Train. While on board, guests learn about wine tasting, eat a meal (tastefully paired with wine), then disembark for tastings at local vineyards such as Domaine Chandon, known for sparkling wines, and the organic ZD Wines, known for its chardonnays, cabernets and pinot noirs.

Sonoma County

Sonoma County's 3-day Barrel Tasting Weekends feature more than 100 wineries located along the Russian River Wine Road. The wineries include large-scale household names such as Kendall-Jackson and Clos du Bois, and smaller family-owned operations such as Stryker Sonoma and Harvest Moon Estate and Winery. The wineries typically offer "futures" on their barrel samples -- a chance to purchase wine while it's still in the barrel, at a discount, before the wine is bottled in 12-18 months. So, why live in the "now" when you can live in the "future"? The Wine Road, an association of 165 wineries spread throughout the Alexander, Dry Creek and Russian River valleys in Sonoma County, sponsors at least 2 of these major barrel events each year. Hit a barrel weekend, and put your money where your wine-tasting mouth is.

Mendocino County

Wine grapes were first planted in California's Mendocino County in the 1850s by immigrant farmers who'd failed to strike it rich in the Gold Rush. Today, the region is home to some of California's finest vineyards and wineries. Mendo Wine Tours, a regional tour company, offers daily tours with VIP amenities such as chauffeured SUV limos, an outdoor lunch that includes locally crafted cheeses with artisan breads, and barrel and reserve wine tastings at 11 area wineries. Stops along the way include Parducci Wine Cellars, the oldest winery in the county with a reputation for chardonnays and sauvignon blancs, and the small, family-owned Brutocao Cellars, which features pinot noirs and zinfandels. Who says Napa and Sonoma get all the wine weekend action?

Blue Ridge Mountains

The nation's first wines were produced in Virginia more than 400 years ago; today the state boasts almost 100 wineries. The Blue Ridge WineWay is home to several wineries nestled along Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. Each features unique blends of hybrid varietals and sparkling wines. Tastings at Pearmund Cellars include merlot, petit verdot and viognier wines. At family-owned Gray Ghost Vineyards, its 2009 reserve chardonnay has won 14 national and international wine competition awards for its vanilla, oak and buttery character. The romantic village of Little Washington in the Blue Ridge Mountain foothills is home to a country retreat, The Inn at Little Washington. Its wine cellar includes more than 2,400 different selections from France, California, Italy and, of course, Virginia.

Finger Lakes

Finger Lakes, NY, is home to many wine touring options along the region's different lakes. With 34 member wineries, the Seneca Lake Wine Trail is one of the largest appellations in the Northeast, and boasts a variety of wines. A wine tour trolley offers jump-on public tours around Seneca Lake. Try award-winning pinot noir at Lakewood Vineyards and a reserve riesling at Fox Run Vineyards. **Next, head to Keuka Lake for a mandatory visit to Dr. Frank's. The winery's founder, Dr. Konstantin Frank, was the first to cultivate European vitis vinifera (wine grape) grapevines in the eastern United States. But carry on quickly; 33 other vineyards remain for tasting.**

Clear the calendar for a wine-soaked weekend getaway as you indulge in the decadence of 2 days filled with wine tours and tastings. Remember to bring home a bottle or 2 to savor -- and keep the memories alive!

Valerie Conners, a freelance writer and editor, has worked for publications such as the Travel Channel, Discovery Channel, Animal Planet, Boston Globe, Philadelphia Inquirer and Frommer's Travel Guides. She's happiest when eating spicy massaman curries on the beach in Koh Mook, Thailand, snorkeling with sea turtles in Indonesia and bargaining for bangles in Indian markets.