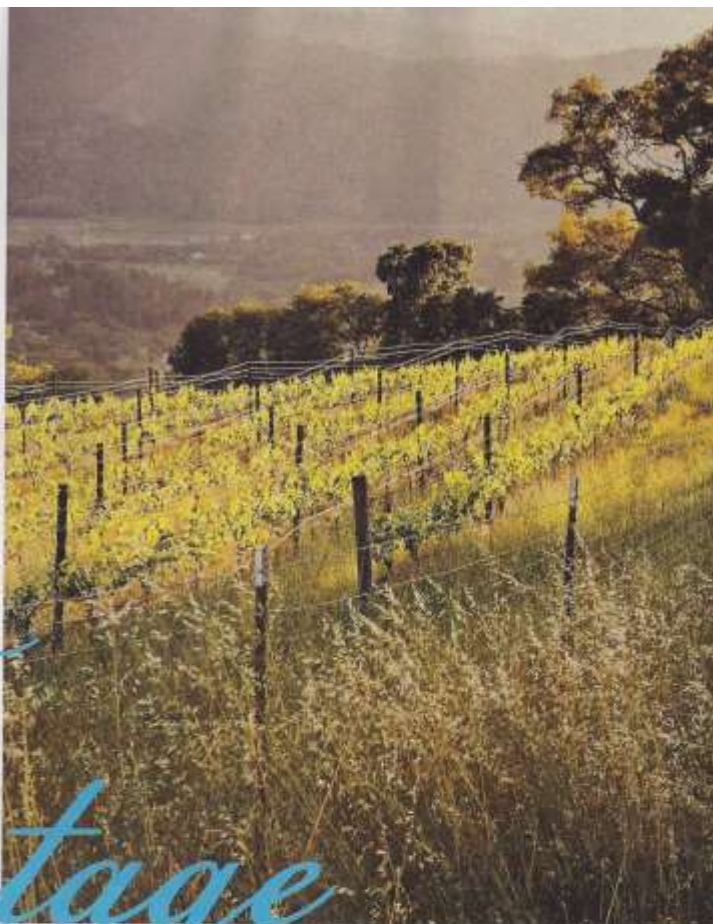


Fine wines, delicious eats, friendly people, great outdoors. Find all that and more in California's charmed Anderson Valley.



Vintage ROAD TRIP



FOR TRAVELERS DRIVING California's sinuous Highway 128, Anderson Valley was once just countryside out the car window—a flickering film of rolling farmland and stately redwoods linking the Sonoma wine country to the Mendocino coast 60 miles away. Folks pulled over for gas in Boonville or a bag of apples from the local orchards, but their sights were always set farther down the road.

Today there still isn't a single traffic light along this pastoral corridor, but visitors from wine lovers to locavores to urban escapees are finally stopping, drawn by a recent bloom of restaurants and tasting rooms that combine serious connoisseurship with low-key charm, a pairing largely vanished from California's more famous wine regions.

"It's Napa 30 years ago, Sonoma 20 years ago," says Kristy Charles of Boonville's Foursight Wines. "We still have sheep roaming the hills, there's still open space, and a lot of the wineries are family run."

Another delightful anachronism: one-on-one tastings with the winemaker or owner—folks like Mary Elke of Elke Vineyards, who

By Kristina Malsberger // PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIN KUNKEL

pours her small-lot, handcrafted wines in a rustic red shack with just three stools and a crush pad out back. Or Douglas Stewart of the stylish new Lichen Estate, who will happily share tales of his one-man quest to produce a sparkling pinot gris that rivals the finest French champagne.

Sparkling wine is a regional specialty—the bubbly barons Roederer and Scharffenberger both call Philo home—but the valley's true star is pinot noir, celebrated each spring during the Pinot Noir Festival (May 16 to 18 this year). Pinotphiles and dog lovers will enjoy Toulouse Vineyards, with its winning reds and resident yellow lab, Tess. At nearby Phillips Hill Winery, the earthy pinots complement the recently opened tasting room in a historic apple-drying barn above a burbling creek.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT, vines bud out above the 25-mile-long valley; diners linger at the Boonville Hotel's Table 128 restaurant; oysters are offered there on the half shell.

Alsatian whites such as riesling, gewürtztraminer, and *edelzwicker* are a focus at popular Navarro Vineyards, one of the valley's oldest wineries and a lovely spot for an alfresco feast,

with scenic picnic sites and a deli case stocked with charcuterie and artisanal cheese from the family's new Pennyroyal Farm. Or pick up sandwiches in Boonville and head to Hendy Woods State Park, where lunch spots overlook the lazy Navarro River. From here, trails wind into the ancient stillness of the redwood groves, passing sword ferns, blooming rhododendrons, and the hollowed-out log that once sheltered a resident hermit.

More sociable types should eventually emerge from the forest for a family-style dinner at the Boonville Hotel, a legendary outpost of California cuisine since the 1980s. The hotel remains a culinary force. Home to Table 128 restaurant, it also opened the Paysanne ice cream shop, helped introduce Bite Hard cider, and continues to host the Boonville Farmers' Market. But the valley's food scene has expanded to include the newcomers Aquarelle, serving such inventive dishes as duck tostadas and crab risotto with saffron, and Coq au Vin, where diners happily ditch their diets for pork à la normande and buttery beef bourguignon. Stone and Embers, a tiny temple to the wood oven, also opened last year in the Madrones, an inn that includes four boutique tasting rooms—a sweet setup for wine lovers wishing to imbibe without driving.

Still, there's something to be said for a day spent seeing where the winding curves of Highway 128 take you. Whether it's a sunny swimming hole, a grove of giants, a weathered farm stand, or simply an intriguing little sign reading **TASTINGS TODAY**, there are excellent reasons to apply the brakes. ●

KRISTINA MALSBERGER is a *Via* contributing editor.

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Request the *Northern California TourBook* and *Mendocino & Sonoma Coast* map at AAA.com or any AAA branch. To find a place to stay, see AAA.com/viahotels. For more information, contact **Visit Mendocino County**: (866) 466-3636, visitmendocino.com. Area code is 707.

Anderson Valley Brewing Company Beer tastings, tours, and disc golf. 895-2337, avbc.com. **Aquarelle Cafe & Wine Bar** 895-2767, facebook.com/aquarellecfe. **Boonville Farmers' Market** Saturdays, May–October, mcfarm.org/boonville. **Coq au Vin** 895-9255. **Elke Vineyards** 246-7045, elkevineyards.com. **Foursight Wines** 895-2889, foursightwines.com. **Hendy Woods State Park** 895-3141, www.parks.ca.gov. **Lichen Estate** 478-4218, lichenestate.com. **Navarro Vineyards** 895-3686, navarrowine.com. **Paysanne** 895-2210, sweetpaysanne.com. **Phillips Hill Winery** 895-2209, phillipsbill.com. **Stone and Embers** 895-3471, stoneandembers.com. **Table 128** 895-2210, boonvillehotel.com/eat. **Toulouse Vineyards** 895-2828, toulousevineyards.com.

