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Tourism in Napa and Sonoma Bounces Back With Posh, Outdoorsy Resorts

As travelers want deeper experiences in wine country, the hospitality industry is responding with more options including even more luxe resorts, decadent dining and new takes on tastings and tours.



The Russian River as seen from the newly reimagined Dawn Ranch
Photographer: Gentl & Hyers

By

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Glass of Champagne in hand, I sipped a tiny shot of creamy mussel soup and gazed out over the verdant cabernet vineyard fronting Sonoma's Cyrus restaurant.

I was in the Bubble Lounge, the first stop on what Cyrus chef Douglas Keane calls a "dining journey." Next it was on to the kitchen for more bites and a chat with Keane, then to the clean-lined formal dining room for sit-down courses and finally to a dark, hidden space with a chocolate waterfall. This former Healdsburg tasting menu temple, which reopened last fall in Geyserville after a 10-year hiatus, already has a Michelin star. And it's only one example of why Northern California wine country is buzzing right now.

During the pandemic, tourism in Napa and Sonoma mostly dried up, kitchens closed, and hotels were practically empty. On a mid-May trip to both regions, though, I was impressed by how many exciting new tasting rooms, restaurants and luxury resorts had sprung up, ready to cash in on pent-up tourist demand. Is wine still why they come—or is it for the expanded luxury wine country is now peddling?

Napa has long been the US's primo wine destination, noted for high-end accommodations and pricey dining rooms. But in Healdsburg—the flashiest town in neighboring Sonoma County—serious Napafication has arrived. Locals say the transformation began with the 2016 opening of SingleThread, which was named as one of the World's 50 Best Restaurants in 2021, and currently sits at No. 68 in the most recent awards released Tuesday.



Napa Valley

Photographer: © Allard Schager/Moment RF

The second edition of the Healdsburg Wine & Food Experience in May was a showcase of what's new: Chefs did cooking demonstrations at the Matheson, a three-level farm-to-table restaurant, for example. Opened in fall 2021 right on the town's central plaza, the Matheson is worth the visit just for the futuristic wall of 88 top wines by the splash or glass and the rooftop lounge with its savory cocktails.

In both regions, there's been a surge of \$1,000-a-night-and-up resorts, such as the Montage Healdsburg, the Four Seasons Resort & Residences in Napa Valley and the recently opened Stanly Ranch. They come with working vineyards to explore, acres of bike and hiking trails, wellness activities such as yoga among the vines, light therapy and, at Stanly Ranch, a hyperbaric oxygen chamber to promote circulation—plus plenty of outdoor decks. (Each resort offers residences to buy as well, if you have a few extra million dollars.)

These lodges promise an intimate experience in wine country, a way to be more than a visitor.

“That’s what people want now,” says Atit Jariwala, chief executive officer of real estate development company Bridgeton Holdings LLC, which opened Dawn Ranch resort on Sonoma’s Russian River on Memorial Day weekend. “Covid and work from home led people to

rediscover nature and the landscape. They want more than tastings. They want to be rejuvenated.”

Those tourists—about 4 million in busy Napa in 2018, the most recent data available, and almost 5 million overnight visitors in the larger Sonoma in 2022—also feed the many new winery “hospitality” spots with \$120-plus tastings, where appointments are a must.



The new Vérité tasting room in Sonoma
Courtesy of Vérité Winery

A space in Sonoma that’s worth the price is the one for cult label Vérité, whose first vintage was released in 1998 but which only recently opened a stunning French château-style tasting room and winery in May. When I arrived after a 20-minute drive down rural roads from Healdsburg, the Irving Berlin classic Cheek to Cheek was playing softly in the main salon, which featured a beamed ceiling, deep couches and a graceful fireplace from France. It was the ideal setting to enjoy pours of Vérité Winery’s three collectible Bordeaux-style reds, La Muse, La Joie and Le Desir, which sell for \$400 to \$500 a bottle.

In Napa, the must-go place is Cathiard Vineyard, which also has a French flair. The owners of Bordeaux château Smith Haut Lafitte purchased the 280-acre estate in Rutherford in 2020 and, after extensive renovations, opened it in March. I sampled the first vintage of their three dark, savory, complex Bordeaux-inspired reds in a

private salon outfitted with French antiques, where the musical backdrop was jazz artist Stacey Kent’s songs. Later this summer you’ll be able to watch workers crafting barrels at the winery’s in-house cooperage.



Tasting on the deck at Cathiard Vineyards
Photographer: Pierre Massimi

What wineries call “elevated experiences” have become more diverse. For example, techies may geek out on a tour at Napa’s Bouchaine Vineyards that shows how sensors gather data on soil moisture and how much light is hitting each grapevine in a single vineyard block. And the wine and food pairings have become increasingly sophisticated.

During the pandemic lockdowns, wineries added relaxing al fresco tasting areas, such as the vast patio overlooking the vineyard at Sonoma's new Aperture Cellars, where a group of friends were chilling when I stopped by on a Sunday afternoon. The tasting experience at Napa's Burgess Cellars, which opened on June 13, has you sipping wine under the shade of olive trees and strolling through pollinator gardens.



Barrels of vintages at the Vérité Winery near Healdsburg, California
Courtesy of Vérité Winery

Not surprisingly, there's been pushback against escalating prices; a wine country weekend this summer could easily cost \$5,000.

But according to Linsey Gallagher, president and CEO of Visit Napa Valley, occupancy for its 5,700 hotel rooms is only 10% below what it was in 2019, and those who come stay longer and spend more. Still, in Sonoma, April occupancy was 60.8%, which is 11% below the same month last year. The historic Trefethen Family Vineyards estate is taking hints of a slowdown seriously and on June 1 introduced a casual \$30 tasting and tour.



Serge Sorokko Gallery + Martin Ray Vineyards & Winery tasting room

Photographer: Bruce Damonte

Downtown Napa is a hotbed of new, less expensive places to sip, but what fascinated me was another kind of opening in June: the pairing of serious contemporary art and wine at the Serge Sorokko Gallery + Martin Ray Vineyards & Winery tasting room on 1500 First Street. In the minimalist space with glossy white floors, I contemplated stylized Hunt Slonem paintings of rabbits and butterflies while enjoying the winery's brut rosé of pinot noir. Sorokko, who also owns a gallery in San Francisco, said, "We believe wine tastes better when surrounded by art."

Sounds like another luxury trend in the making.