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Drink Wine, Ride Horses and Fly in a Plane with These Sonoma Vineyard Experiences

These innovative and adventurous wine tasting experiences offer a little something extra to guests.

BY LINDA MURPHY
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SLIDE 1 OF 13



Saddle up and sip, though not at the same time, at Bartholomew Estate Vineyards and Winery in Sonoma. (Courtesy of Bartholomew Estate Vineyards and Winery)

Before wineries turned their ingenuity knobs to 11 to connect with consumers in new ways during the pandemic, some Sonoma producers already offered outside-the-box visitor “experiences” that were just that: adventures with a side of wine.

Among these forward-thinking wineries is Obsidian Wine Co., based in Sonoma and with wine-related excursions that include a seaplane flight over the Mayacamas Mountains, touching down on Clear Lake. (Obsidian’s Seaplane Wine Flight was recently named one of “**the most extreme wine tastings around the world**” by Food & Wine magazine)

In Alexander Valley, Sutro Wine Co. founder and winemaker Alice Warnecke Sutro has long led nature hikes on her family’s ranch and vineyard, giving guests an up-close sense of how volcanic-ash soils and moderating influences of the Russian River form the character of her wines.

Sonoma Valley’s treasured Bartholomew Park, for decades a favorite place to hike before tasting at the winery on the grounds, now offers guided horseback rides through the vineyards of the new winery on the property, Bartholomew Estate Vineyards and Winery.

And in Sebastopol, **Region is offering a new take on Sonoma wine tasting** by introducing guests to independent winemakers via their self-serve wine bar and weeklong experiences with small wineries without tasting rooms, such as Bucher Wines in Russian River Valley.



The Obsidian Seaplane. (Courtesy of Obsidian Wine Co.)

The most ambitious outings, without question, are those provided by Obsidian Wine Co. Founders Arpad and Peter Molnar (brothers) and Michael Terrien (winemaker) have a tasting room at Cornerstone Sonoma, a production facility nearby and vineyards in Napa Carneros and Kelseyville in Lake County — volcano country. They also share a zest for life and embrace the outdoors, blending fun with enology and pouring it out for wine lovers of like minds.

— VID inspired wineries to create new experiences, though we'd already been doing them, making them adventures," Arpad Molnar said. "It's part of our lives, to spend time outdoors, and we like to share it with others. We love flying, boating and hiking, and our adventures are meant to educate at the same time. It's why we take people outdoors; it's not a party thing."

In addition to the Seaplane Wine Flight from Sausalito to the company's Lake County vineyard, Obsidian Ridge, the Molnars and Terrien lead small-group tours of an oyster farm on Tomales Bay, Hog Island Oyster Co., finishing with gulping down just-harvested bivalves and Obsidian wines.

There are also hikes, without the seaplane flight, at Obsidian Ridge Vineyard, where volcanic lava flows 300,000 years ago turned into solid, razor-sharp obsidian, which has a dramatic and distinctive impact on the cabernet sauvignons Terrien produces. Saffron harvests, schooner outings on San Francisco Bay, horseback rides through Poseidon Vineyard in Carneros and garden walks are also on the menu.

Such intensive experiences are not inexpensive (seaplane flights are \$150 per person), but there are other, less pricey options for those wishing to experience Obsidian winery and wines. Educational videos on winemaking and viticulture are free to view on the winery's website. Standard (outdoors, of course) tastings at Cornerstone Sonoma are available by appointment, and a new tasting feature, Down the Rabbit Hole, introduces guests to unusual grape varieties, experimental winemaking methods and one-off versions of sparkling wines and cider blends.

"We want to be accessible to a broad range of people," Arpad Molnar said. "We want to change the overall climate of wine, to educate on nature, the outdoors and food sources."

As with all experiences mentioned here, reservations are required and the number of participants is limited. Visit company websites for details, dates and fees.

Obsidian Wine Co., 23568 Arnold Drive, Sonoma (at Cornerstone Sonoma), 707-255-4929, obsidianwineco.com

Bartholomew Estate Vineyards and Winery

Saddle up and sip, though not at the same time, at this northeastern Sonoma winery. In conjunction with Sonoma Valley Trail Rides, "Bart Estate" offers 45-minute horseback rides through its vineyards and estate on relatively flat trails and with each horse expertly matched to the personality and experience of the rider. Horse wranglers sub in for tasting room staff to share enological, viticultural and equine knowledge along the way. The experience (\$140) includes one bottle of the winery's sauvignon blanc or zinfandel to take home. As an option, visitors can book, separately, tastings at the winery's Oak Knoll and Courtyard Patio spaces and enjoy the Sonoma Plein Air art gallery on site.

This "new" winery opened its doors in 2019, in the middle of the 375-acre, nonprofit Bartholomew Park. Previously called Bartholomew Park Winery and managed by Gundlach Bundschu, the renamed wine estate is now operated by Frank H. Bartholomew Foundation trustee Anna Pope

— winemaker Kevin Holt. It continues to honor Frank and Antonia Bartholomew, who bought — and in 1943 and founded Hacienda Winery on a site where Hungarian-born Agoston Haraszthy in 1857 planted some of the first European vine cuttings in California.

1000 Vineyard Lane, Sonoma, 707-509-0549, bartestate.com/visit. The website directs those interested in the horseback rides to reserve at sonomavalleytrailrides.com

Region

Russian River Valley grapegrowers Diane and John Bucher and their winemaker, Adam Lee, don't have their own winery or tasting room, yet their racy sauvignon blanc, sumptuous pinot noirs and a spicy red blend that's mostly zinfandel — all estate-grown — are served and sold at Region, a cooperative tasting venue that opened at The Barlow in Sebastopol in July 2020.

Bucher's "featured winery" week at Region is May 17-23, with each day offering a different experience. Among them are May 17, Magnum Monday and library selections; May 18, favorite Bucher cheeses and chocolates paired with wine; May 19, Happy Hour with Adam Lee and May 22, taste new Bucher wines, rosé and sauvignon blanc. The wines available for tasting throughout the week include sauvignon blanc, rosé of pinot noir, Sonoma Rossa red blend, Rosemary After Dinner Zinfandel and four still pinot noirs.

Region is distinctive in that it recruited two dozen small, independent, mostly Sonoma wineries to showcase their wines in sample and by-the-glass portions; guests serve themselves with a push of a button at dispensing stations. With ample outdoor seating and the option to order food from several Barlow restaurants, the site gives consumers a chance to taste and buy hard-to-get bottles, meet the winemakers and make a meal of their visit. Other upcoming featured wineries include Eric Kent Winery, Chenoweth Wines and Calluna Vineyards.

Region, 180 Morris St., Suite 170, Sebastopol (at The Barlow), 707-329-6724, bucher.wine/tasteatregion. Bucher direct: 707-484-5162, bucher.wine

Sutro Wine Co.

Alice Warnecke Sutro is the founder and winemaker for this Alexander Valley brand. Grapes for her sauvignon blancs, merlots and cabernet sauvignons, which she began producing in 2012, are grown on Warnecke Ranch & Vineyard, east of Healdsburg on Chalk Hill Road. With no tasting venue and small-production volume, Sutro figured sharing her love of the land — its oak forests and calming beauty along the Russian River and the volcanic Mayacamas Mountain soils that produce excellent Bordeaux varietal grapes — could best be done with guided hikes through the vineyard followed by a tasting of the wines.

Sutro's ancestors established the ranch in 1911. In the late 1960s, 80 of its eventual 265 acres were planted to wine grapes. There, in 1983, her grandfather, accomplished architect John Carl Warnecke, established Warnecke Institute of Art and Architecture. Armed with bachelor's and master's degrees in art history and fine art, Alice and her husband, architect Eliot Sutro, moved to the ranch, where she helped her aunt, Margo Warnecke Merck, manage the vineyard and the artist



lencies on the property. Alice buys her grapes from the family, making Sutro Wine Co. a rate business, yet with ties that bind.

The guided hikes (45 minutes, \$45) continue today and conclude with a tasting of the three wines at neighboring Medlock Ames, where Sutro makes them. The hike terrain is packed dirt and gravel, with one steep incline. Wear comfortable shoes and sun protection, and bring your dog — leashed — to accompany the Sutros’ pooch, Hatch.

“I always talk about the intersection of art, agriculture and wine while I’m hiking,” Alice Sutro said. “It’s the foundation and motivation of what I do.”

For a detailed story on Warnecke Ranch, visit sonomamag.com/maintaining-vision.

13301 Chalk Hill Road, Healdsburg, 707-509-9695, sutrowine.com

Editor’s Note: Travel, dining and wine tasting can be complicated right now. Use our inspirational ideas to plan ahead for your next outing, be it this week or next year. If you visit restaurants, wineries, and other businesses during the pandemic, remember to call ahead, make reservations, wear a mask and social distance.

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