

# Bloomberg

## The Top 8 Places to Taste Wine in California Right Now

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Garden lounges for sipping, \$950 cabernet flights, even barrel rolls in a biplane: The newest oenophile experiences are deluxe—and cost a pretty penny.

By Elin McCoy August 23, 2021, 7:30 AM PDT



Four Immortal estate wines are lined up for a tasting.  
Photographer: Mariana Calderon



The 4,000 square foot hospitality center at Aperture Cellars, which is inspired by the aperture of a camera, opens out to a terrace with a vineyard in Healdsburg, California.  
Source: Aperture Cellars

Did you spend last year fantasizing about vineyards you'd visit in person as soon as we could all travel again? Most of us are still locked out of some places we love (thinking of you, New Zealand). Happily, California wine country is back, after a disaster year of Covid-19, destructive wild fires, smoke-filled air, repeated tasting room shutdowns, and Zoom events that made us long to hike those vineyards we could view only on a computer screen.

Pent-up demand is boosting the kind of frenzied wine travel interest that Rob McMillan, executive vice president and founder of Silicon Valley Bank's wine division, predicted to me earlier this year. Linsey Gallagher, president and chief executive officer of Visit Napa Valley, said in an e-mail that hotel occupancy is back to pre-pandemic levels and visitors are staying longer and spending more. And Timothy Martin, general manager of Immortal Estate, reports that interest in the winery's \$500 "experience" (below) has drawn hedge-fund owners, Bay Area tech CEOs, as well as people from as far away as New York.

Adding to the draw are two luxury resorts opening in the Napa Valley later this year. One, the Four Seasons in Calistoga, will be steps from renowned winemaker Thomas Rivers Brown's new Elusa Winery, so expect grape-to-glass experiences. (The other is Stanly Ranch from Auberge Resorts.) Sonoma's getting a similar boost; the basic Forest King room with a private terrace at the Montage Healdsburg hotel starts at \$1,435 a night.

Many wineries took last year's downtime to rethink what they should offer. The result is more emphasis on outdoor spaces, bespoke personal tastings, and new winery hospitality centers designed by famous architects that offer plenty of private spaces.

Although the delta variant has brought back mask requirements, California wine country is open—at least for now. And what better time to go than just as harvest is beginning?

Here are my eight picks of the best new tasting experiences, from Napa to Sonoma to Santa Barbara. All prices are per person.



Aperture Cellars' modern winery buildings in Healdsburg were designed by Signum Architecture to feature dramatic angles and natural light.

Source: Aperture Cellars

**For photographers: Aperture Cellars Soil or Site Series Experiences (\$50 to \$75; more for privatelounges)**

Go for this Sonoma winery's innovative, sleekly designed tasting room, which pays homage to analog camera technology, as well as deliciously savory Bordeaux-style red wines. The centerpiece is an aperture- like skylight that allows the ambiance to change with the weather throughout the day. Movable walls act like shutters of a camera's to create different size private lounges and views of vineyards. Walls display compelling images by photographer Andy Katz, who co-owns the winery with his star winemaker son, Jesse, whose custom wine for Justin Timberlake and Jessica Biel's wedding generated quite the buzz.





Faust Haus features an elegant outdoor tasting space.  
Photographer: Marion Brenner for Surfacedesign

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### **For gardeners: Faust Haus Act 1 Outside (\$75)**

This Napa winery is named after the legendary German character Faust, who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for unlimited knowledge and pleasure. Goethe wrote a play about him, so it's fitting that Goethe's book *Theory of Colours* influenced the themes in the indoor and outdoor tasting spaces at this historic St.

Helena winery. Faust Wines, acclaimed for its cabernets from Napa's Coombsville AVA, or official American Viticultural Area, took over the 19th century Victorian mansion in 2017, and opened this winery during the pandemic. While the tasting areas bounce between dark and moody to bright and airy, the outdoor gardens and multilevel private terraces with their grand views are the best spots.



The Barn at Hilt Estate tasting room was designed by architects HowardBacken and Silvia Nobili of Backen & Gillam.

Photographer: Cary Wilton

**For architecture and pinot lovers: The Barn at the Hilt Estate (Four experiences, \$50 to \$85)**

A soaring reclaimed barn, the Hilt's new hospitality center was designed by famous winery architects HowardBacken and Silvia Nobili of Backen & Gillam and debuted at the end of July. If you don't know the estate's tangy, elegant pinot noirs and chardonnays, you should. This huge property in Santa Barbara's chilly Santa Rita Hills AVA a few miles from the Pacific is owned by billionaire Stan Kroenke, the money man behind two other celebrated wineries—nearby Jonata and Napa's Screaming Eagle—and, oh, the Los Angeles Rams.

The Barn has the rustic but sophisticated vibe of an elegant hunting lodge with vintage textiles and deep leather chairs. You can taste not just the Hilt's chardonnays, pinot noirs, and never-released experimentalpét-nat, but also Jonata's cult wines.



Burgess Cellars is recovering from devastating fires last year.  
Photographer: Maggie Gallagher/Demeine Estates.

**For would-be farmers: Burgess Cellars Garden Tasting Experience (\$85)**

Last fall, this historic Napa winery on Howell Mountain, known for its long-lived, structured cabernets, was destroyed in the fast-moving Glass Fire. The owner, billionaire Gaylon Lawrence Jr., and CEO Carlton McCoy Jr. acquired another production facility as its new home. Tasting experiences start on Sept. 13. As you walk the edible garden, you'll learn why regenerative farming is the latest wine buzzword—and taste current vintages and library wines paired with freshly picked edible flowers and vegetables.





The Donum Home, redesigned by Danish architect David Thulstrup.  
Photographer: Eric Petschek

**For art aficionados: The Donum Estate “Explore Experience” (\$150)**

Take an all-terrain vehicle tour of the 40-odd major sculptures (*Nuns & Monks* by Ugo Rondinone, Ai Weiwei’s *Circle of Animals*) dotting this 200-acre scenic property nestled between Napa and Sonoma in the Carneros AVA. Then sip lush, generous pinot noirs in the newly transformed, serene Donum Home tasting salon, which was unveiled this year to celebrate the winery’s 20th anniversary. Danish architect David Thulstrup designed it to highlight the connection between hospitality and the aesthetic feel of a minimalist home with custom furniture pieces. The latest additions to the art collection of winery owners Mei and Allan Warburg include British artist Tracey Emin’s painting, *Another 30 Years*, which hangs on a tasting space wall.





Four Immortal estate wines are lined up for a tasting.  
Photographer: Mariana Calderon

**For collectors: Immortal Estate 100-Point Experience (\$500, minimum 4 people)**

A spectacular hidden vineyard and a vertical tasting of a stellar, little known \$300-a-bottle plush, rich cabernet are the draws. The remote property is in a rugged valley in the Mayacamas Range between Sonoma and Napa, and much of the vineyard lies on a steep 55-degree slope. In June, the winery launched this four-vintage (2013 to 2016) sampling of the winery's flagship Impassable Mountain Sonoma cabernet, served with cheese and charcuterie. The drawing on the label is a jellyfish, the only creature on Earth that's said to be able to live forever.



Guests for Aileron Estate's Take Flight wine experience in an open cockpit Boeing Steaman biplane.  
Photographer: Bob McClenahan

**For thrill-seekers: Aileron Estates Take Flight (\$550, 2-to-8 people)**

A pandemic year wasn't the ideal time for Shannon O'Shaughnessy (her family owns O'Shaughnessy winery on Napa's Howell Mountain) to launch her Napa label, Aileron Estates. A thrill-seeker herself, she's turned to her passion for flying to gain attention for her mineral and citrus sauvignon blanc and powerful Howell Mountain cabernet. On offer: a flight over wine country in an open-cockpit vintage World War II biplane. If you're game, expect loop de loops, barrel rolls, and more acrobatics. Luckily the tasting part, with O'Shaughnessy, comes after.



Tor Vine Hill Ranch's Black Magic cab is golfer Phil Mickelson's favorite.

Photographer: Robert (Robb) H McDonough Jr

**For people who have everything: Tor Wines Black Magic Experience (\$950, 4-person minimum)**

Tor Kenward, who founded his eponymous winery two decades ago, offers a behind-the-scenes look at the dirt and vines responsible for his 100-point cult cab, Black Magic. (It's legendary golfer Phil Mickelson's fave. He sipped the 2018 from the Wanamaker Trophy after his PGA championship win.)

Yes, you taste the hard-to-come-by 2018 Black Magic (\$450 a bottle) and the winery's other expensive single-vineyard cabernets, but this experience is also about access. Associate winemaker David Grega tours you around the exclusive vineyards (such as Beckstoffer To Kalon) whose grapes go into this powerful blend of the winery's best barrels. It's made only in top vintages. Hey, the stiff price includes lunch.

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