



8 Reasons for Food Lovers to Visit Wine Country

Travelers from all over the world flock to Napa and Sonoma counties in northern California for the sun-splashed, vine-ribbed scenery, the world-famous spas, and, above all, the wine. But the region is also the place to be if you love food as much as you adore the fruit of the vine. Why? Here are eight reasons you should pack up your appetite and treat your taste buds to Wine Country.

1 COPIA At the top of the list is the American Center for Wine, Food, and the Arts in Napa. Known as COPIA, it's the country's first food and wine museum. The product of an idea hatched by Robert Mondavi, it sits on the bank of the Napa River like a magnet for cooks and food lovers. Here, you can watch films, explore extraordinary exhibits, wander the edible gardens, observe culinary demonstrations, and sample the fare at the exquisite Julia's Kitchen, named in honor of Julia Child, and the more down-to-earth American Market Café.

2 CULINARY INSTITUTE OF AMERICA (CIA) The western branch of the CIA, north of St. Helena, is housed in a magnificent building constructed in 1890 that once was home to the Christian Brothers Winery. Remodeled at a cost of fifteen million dollars by the institute, "Greystone" offers professional training and holds cooking demonstrations for visitors that include tastings of the finished dishes.

3 COOKING CLASSES If you want to learn about cooking, don't stop at COPIA and the CIA. The region has more than its fair share of food experts and star chefs willing to share their wealth of knowledge. Ramekins Sonoma Valley Culinary School has classes for all levels and interests in its two teaching kitchens. With its own bed & breakfast (B&B), it offers lodging/class packages. Casa Lana, a B&B in Calistoga, holds gourmet retreats—from three hours

to five days—for home cooks and food enthusiasts. Relish Culinary School is a roving cooking class that sets up in spots throughout Sonoma to give demonstrations and hands-on instruction that highlight local and organic ingredients. And what could be better than food camp? Cooking teacher and James Beard Award-nominated cookbook author Hugh Carpenter leads weeklong cooking classes and special event packages at Camp Napa Culinary.

4 OLIVE OIL While grapes are the region's bumper crop, these fertile valleys give rise to olive orchards that feed a boutique oil industry. You can take a break from wine tasting to sample the olives and the oils at a number of wineries, including Long Meadow Ranch in St. Helena or Round Pond in Rutherford. And there's no end of shops and producers that offer tastings and sell their goods. Among the favorites are Napa Valley Olive Oil Manufacturing Company in St. Helena, where you'll find jugs of house-made organic oils, stuffed and marinated olives, and a range of Italian imports, including pastas and cheeses; the St. Helena Olive Oil Company, with an extensive selection of oils, vinegars, and condiments; Olivier Napa Valley in St. Helena, with a great variety of oils, delectables, and accessories; or the Olive Press in Glen Ellen, a cooperative olive press where you can sample members' oils and purchase cured olives, tempting tapenades, and any number of olive delicacies.

You can even get an education in olive production and olive oil tasting with Great Olive Tours in St. Helena. Its olive connoisseur leaders will escort you to some of the best olive orchards and private olive estates such as Poplar Hill, Round Pond, and Villa Mille Rose. And if you're a true olive aficionado, don't miss the Sonoma County Olive Festival, which begins with the blessing of the olive at the Sonoma Mission and continues with three months of tastings and special events. Keep in mind: many olive groves aren't open to the public during the harvest season November through January.

5 PICNICS Wine Country is a picnic lover's paradise, with sun-dappled parks and charming winery lawns that are perfect spots at which to enjoy the bounty of the valleys. Many wineries permit the public to bring picnic lunches (although it's customary to drink their wines with your repast), while others sell deli and gourmet foods to be enjoyed on their premises. Best bets are the V. Sattui Winery, Rutherford Hill, and Clos du Val in Napa Valley and Chateau St. Jean or Ledson Winery in Sonoma Valley. But don't miss picnic sites beyond the wineries. The area has a wealth of beautiful parks where you can toss a blanket and set down a basket of the region's best culinary treats. Try the Robert Louis Stevenson State Park, the Bothe-Napa Valley State Park, or the Bale Grist Mill State Historic Park north of St. Helena, with its picture-postcard perfect water-wheel mill.

There's no shortage of delis and gourmet shops at which to gather your movable feast. A spectacle in itself is Dean & DeLuca, the only western outpost of the famed New York shop. If you go, go early because you may be enticed to spend hours there. Equally tempting is the old-fashioned Oakville Grocery in Oakville, or the larger store in Healdsburg. You can pick up beautiful breads and sweet treats at the Basque Boulangerie Café in Sonoma or the Bouchon Bakery in Yountville, and delicious cheeses at the Vella Cheese Company or Cheesemaker's Daughter in Sonoma.

You can also get gourmet takeout perfect for a lazy picnic at COPIA's American Café or the nearby Café Society, a French bistro next to the Napa Opera.

6 FESTIVALS AND EVENTS There may be no other region that celebrates its food and drink like California's wine country. Among the most popular gatherings are the Napa Valley Mustard Festival from January to early April, the three-day Sonoma County Showcase of Wine & Food, the Kendall-Jackson Heirloom Tomato Festival, the Sonoma Valley Olive Festival from December through February, the Wine Country Film Festival (where food is also a star!), Cinema Epicuria in Sonoma, and the Robert Mondavi Summer Music Festival.

7 SHOPPING In addition to the winery stores that sell food and wine accessories, the area is peppered with shops and boutiques to enthrall food enthusiasts. You'll never be able to see them all, but do stop for spices at Parsley, Sage, Rosemary & Bob; a dazzling selection of cookware and kitchen gadgets at Shackford's; palate pleasers at the Sonoma Cheese Factory; high-end cooking gadgetry at the Sign of the Bear; everything and anything for the kitchen, including an extensive selection of cookbooks at Spice Islands Marketplace in the CIA; and at the end of the day, reward yourself and linger to drink in the heavenly aroma at Woodhouse Chocolate.

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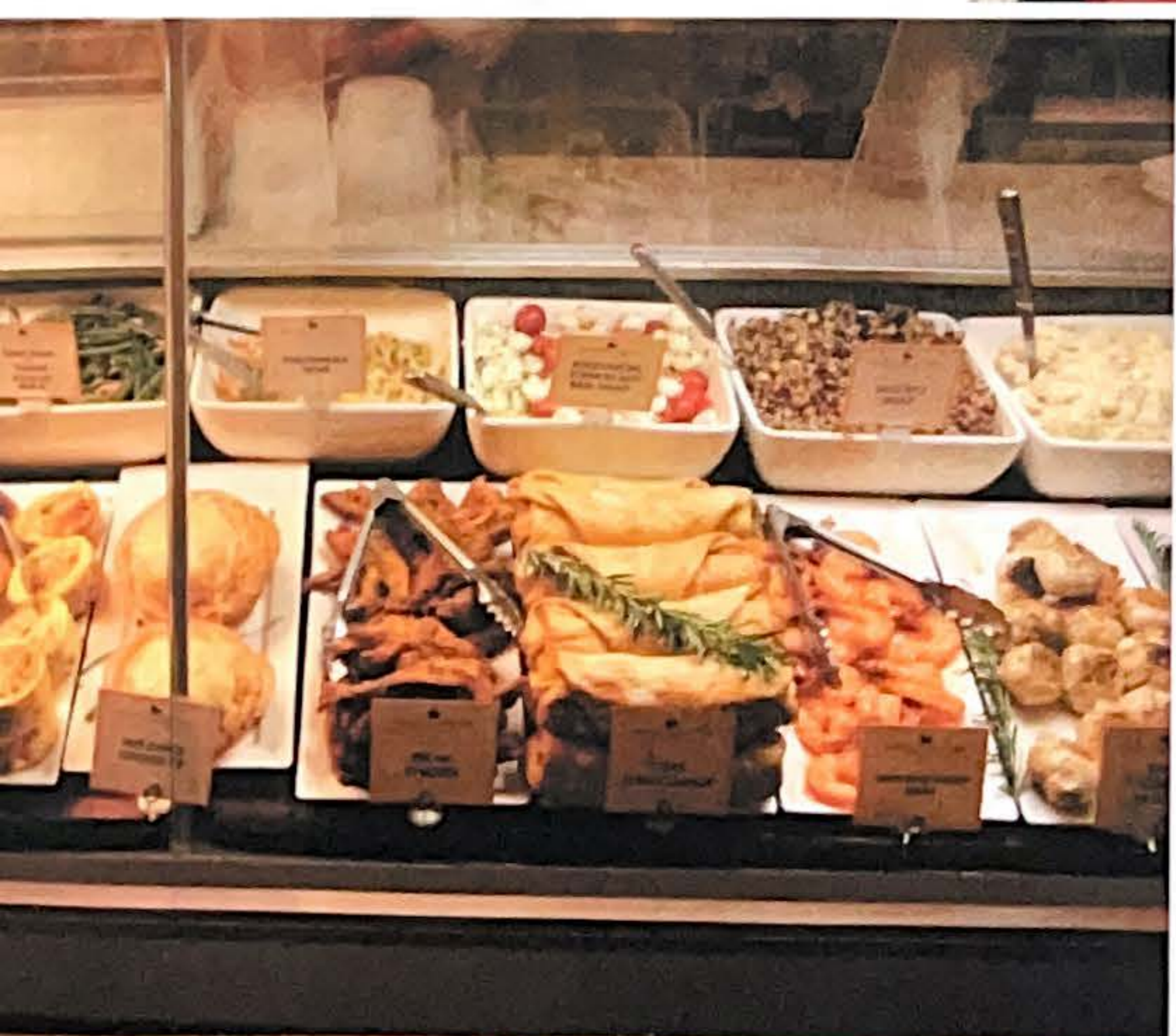
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8 THE RESTAURANTS This is where the riches of the region—the food, the wine, and the culinary wizardry—come together in settings that range from down-home to out of this world. At one end of the scale is an ever-popular roadside burger joint called Taylor's Refresher, and at the other is the ever-so *à la mode* French Laundry in Yountville, where you'll need a reservation two months in advance, and the rustic yet luxurious Auberge du Soleil in Rutherford. And there are scores of great choices from the center of the spectrum that deserve their reputations. Bouchon (a stepsister of sorts to The French Laundry), an inviting bistro, has an impressive seafood bar. Hurley's is an unpretentious, comfortable spot with an appealing Mediterranean-style menu. Especially romantic is Terra, in a turn-of-the-century field stone farmhouse with impressive interior stone walls and stunningly minimal decor. Inspired by two Spago-trained chefs, the menu, the food, and presentation are every bit equal to the ambience. Mustards Grill, which grows much of its own produce on site, is a perennial favorite thanks as much to its comfortable atmosphere as to the creative dishes coming off its wood-burning grill. Its cousin, Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen, set in a comfortable white house, has one of the most original menus in town. And you can't do better than the girl & the fig, in the historic Sonoma Hotel on the town plaza, with its charming antique bar and French country menu so popular that it inspired a cookbook.

— KJ



For More Information

For more information, visit the California Office of Tourism (www.visitcalifornia.org), the Napa Valley Conference & Visitors Bureau (www.napavalley.org), and the Sonoma Valley Visitors Bureau (www.sonomavalley.com; www.sonomawineandfood.com).