

Explore California's Other Wine Country

BY SMART MEETINGS ON OCTOBER 02, 2015



Vineyard in Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Barbara, Photo Courtesy of Visit Santa Barbara and Jay Sinclair

Uncork new vintages in Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo and Monterey counties

Local convention and visitors bureaus and vintner associations team up to promote their destinations and wines to leisure travelers and meeting planners alike. Here, we've jumped on their bandwagon and created our own unofficial "wine trails" in Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo and Monterey counties, with options for meetings, wine tasting and festivals, as well as transportation/touring tips (without benefit of a convertible).

Santa Barbara County Wine Trail

Wine has been an integral part of Santa Barbara County since the 1780s, when Father Junipero Serra brought grapevine cuttings from Mexico for his newly established Mission. (If this sounds like a familiar scenario, it's the history of the wine industry in California.) Today, the majority of grapes grown here are cool-weather grapes such as chardonnay, pinot noir and syrah.



Andrew Murray wine barrels, Foxen Canyon

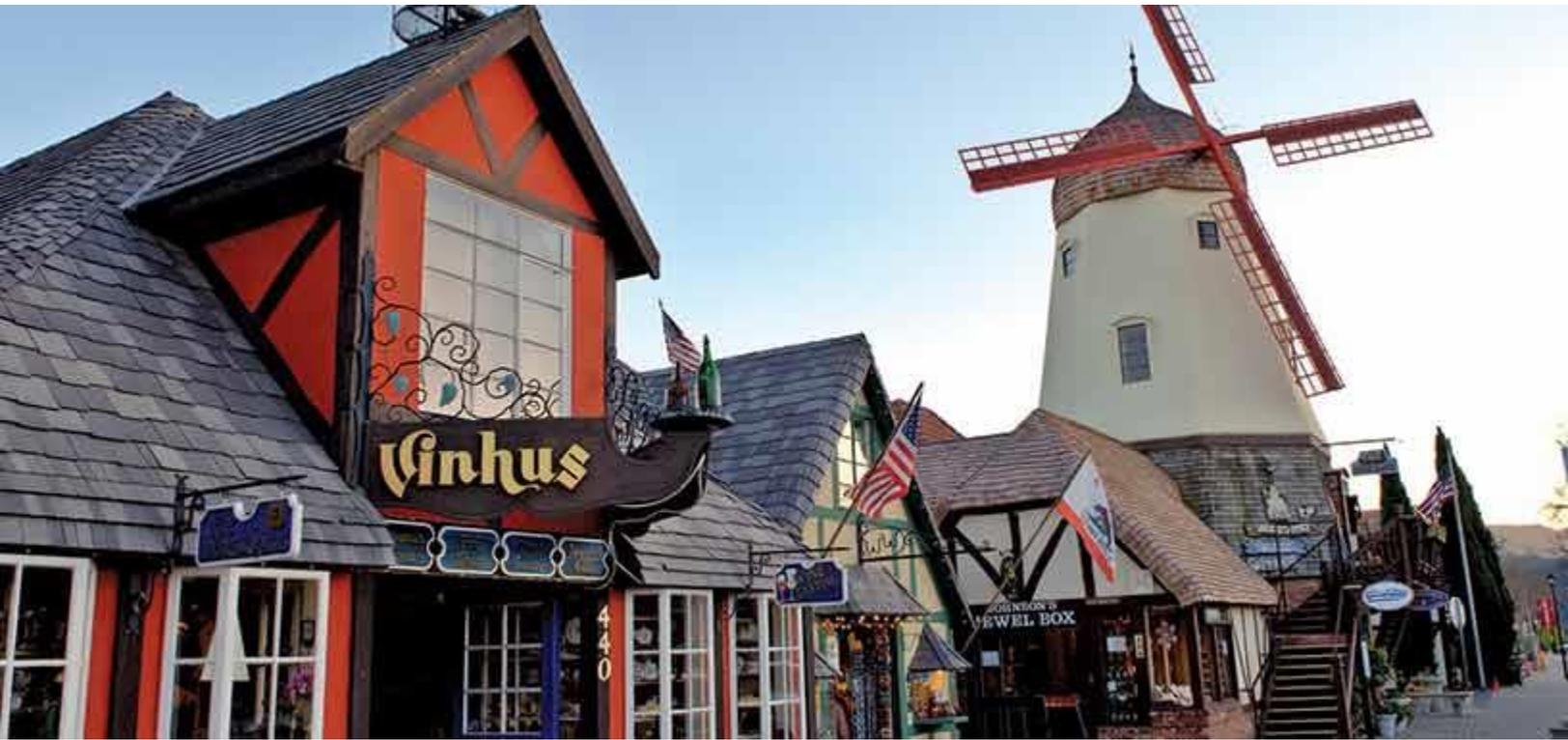
With five AVAs of its own, Santa Barbara's wine country features nine designated tasting trails that wind along country roads. These include Foxen Canyon, Santa Rita Hills and Santa Ynez Valley, heart of the Santa Barbara wine country and home to the historic Danish town of Solvang. (It was one of the filming locations for the movie *Sideways*, which celebrated its 10th anniversary last year.)



AVA Santa Barbara tasting room, Photo Courtesy of Visit Santa Barbara

Santa Barbara markets itself as America’s Riviera—and rightly so, given the oceanside setting, abundance of luxury resorts, fine-dining options and fabulous wine country on its doorstep, almost literally. If you’re meeting by the beach in Santa Barbara, say at the Four Seasons The Biltmore Santa Barbara or Bacara Resort & Spa, you’re not far from the new and very popular Urban Wine Trail. This walkable area features a cluster of 25 tasting rooms just blocks from downtown and near an eclectic beachside neighborhood called Funk Zone.

It’s also possible to hold an event right in the middle of the area’s abundant vineyards, where wineries such as Firestone Vineyard in the Santa Ynez Valley town of Los Olivos offer planners a barrel room for receptions, plus other locations with scenic views. Visit Santa Barbara’s sales team can help planners locate venues best suited to their group.



Danish town of Solvang, Photo Courtesy of Visit Santa Barbara

Solvang is the jumping-off point for exploring the Santa Ynez Valley wine trail, and meeting at Hotel Corque gives you a convenient home base. Downtown, the Solvang Wine Walk allows you to sample vintages in more than 15 tasting rooms located in uniquely Danish buildings. (The stork on the roof fends off lightning and brings good luck.) Or you can always set your group free for breakfast or a breather on the town’s other trail—the Sweet Treats Trail, which features five authentic Danish bakeries within a five-block radius.



Hotel Corque lobby

Visit Santa Barbara works very closely with Santa Barbara Vintners (SBV) to promote the region’s wines, according to Jamie Shaw, the CVB’s communications manager. “SBV takes the lead at festivals within our region, and we partner very closely with them for out-of-area festivals and events,” she says. The vintners association hosts four local signature weekends each year, including Santa Barbara Vintners Spring Weekend in April, Key to Wine Country in June and December, and Celebration of Harvest Weekend in October. The bureau also makes wine a significant part of many client events, FAM tours and trade shows such as the recent IPW in Orlando, Shaw says.

Santa Barbara vineyard tour, Photo Courtesy of Santa Barbara Vinters

Speaking of cooperation, Santa Barbara County Association of Governments worked with its partners, including several area CVBs, to launch the new, Saturday-only Clean Air Express, connecting Santa Barbara and Santa Ynez Valley. The service, operating on a trial basis for 12–18 months, utilizes comfortable, charter-style motor coaches with free Wi-Fi (a better deal than some hotels). Planners or guests can purchase a packet of 10 tickets in advance for \$50—perfect for attendees who arrive early or extend their visit as part of a vacation.

Other options for exploring the region are plentiful. Among these are Santa Barbara Adventure Company, Breakaway Tours & Event Planning and Solvang Taxi and Wine Tours.

San Luis Obispo County Wine Trail

San Luis Obispo County covers a wide swath of geography, grapevines and agriculture, anchored by its namesake city on the coast (Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa) and inland, Paso Robles, known as “Paso” to locals.

“Meeting planners who choose San Luis Obispo County will be greatly impressed by the array of culinary, cultural and coastal experiences of the region,” says Kylee Jepsen, senior communications coordinator for Visit San Luis Obispo County. “The county offers the ability to unplug and unwind, allowing meeting attendees the opportunity to focus on the work at hand and reconnect with other participants.”

The city of San Luis Obispo, dubbed SLO and proud of it, is actually a small college town housing California Polytechnic State University. But SLO Wine Country (essentially nearby Edna Valley and Arroyo Grande Valley) is putting the region on the map for its 30-some artisan and family-owned wineries. Typical of the Central Coast, its main grapes are chardonnay, pinot noir and syrah.

Encompassing the two small adjoining AVAs, most of the wine country can be covered within a 15- to 20-minute drive in any direction. SLO Wine Country recently introduced six themed trails to promote their wines and locations. Among them are Avila Valley, offering a full day of wine tasting at and near the beach; Backroads, showing off the rolling vineyards, distinctive morro peaks and varied terrain of Edna Valley; Urban Wine Trail, featuring SLO’s tasting scene close to downtown; and Arroyo Grande Valley, offering ocean views at one end and rustic hills at the other.

Meeting in downtown San Luis Obispo, say, at the Embassy Suites Hotel, has the advantage of being a nearby wine country that’s easily accessible for offsites and team-building possibilities. (Hotel San Luis Obispo, with 78 guest rooms, is anticipated to open in early 2017.) The town’s Thursday night Downtown SLO Farmers’ Market, a five-block festival of food, wine, live music and entertainment, was the model for similar markets around the country and is a don’t-miss event for meeting attendees. For something really different, only 10 minutes up the coast is a famously ornate property, The Madonna Inn, where a 20,000-square-foot expo center can host large conferences and trade shows.

But Edna Valley and Arroyo Grande Valley are not the only “glasses of wine” in the county. Paso Robles, about 30 minutes inland from downtown SLO, is California’s largest geographic appellation, with 32,000 vineyard acres and more than 200 wineries. To put this into perspective, only Napa, Sonoma and Monterey counties have more planted acreage.



horseback riding, San Luis Obispo

Warmer and drier than the coast, Paso Robles Wine Country also encompasses more than 200 wineries and 40 wine grape varieties, ranging from cabernet sauvignon and merlot to syrah, viognier and zinfandel, the area's heritage wine varietal. Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance has put together 10 wine trails that organize this huge territory of gently sloping hills and foothill peaks into manageable chunks for touring and tasting. Several outdoor activities in the area combine wine with other offsite adventures. For instance, Outback Trail Rides offers horseback riding through the wine country, and at Calcareous Vineyard guests can go on a guided vineyard trail ride or vineyard wagon ride within its 442-acre estate. Tasting follows, of course.

"Smaller to midsize [up to 100] meetings can be held at various winery event centers tucked away throughout the county, while both large and small meetings can be hosted at nearby hotel meeting space in the various city corridors," Jepsen says. Keeping pace with the growing Paso Robles Wine Country, several new hotels are either newly opened (Allegretto Vineyard Resort) or in the planning stages (Hilton Paso Robles, Residence Inn by Marriott).

Sunset Savor the Central Coast festival

The county's CVBs are pros when it comes to festivals that promote its vineyard bounty as well as its agricultural riches, making farm-to-fork eateries possible. Each year the much-heralded Sunset Savor the Central Coast festival heads to SLO, drawing thousands of food and wine lovers to Santa Margarita Ranch (shuttles available) in the small town of Santa Margarita. Additionally, Paso Robles holds its own Paso Robles Wine Festival. SLO also has support from local companies such as Breakaway Tours and Wine Wrangler to provide tours and transportation for tastings throughout the entire county.

Monterey County Wine Trail

Too cold...too dry...too windy to grow grapes in Monterey County? By now, everyone knows that the prevailing wisdom in the 1930s wasn't so wise after all. By the 1960s, the county's pioneer grape growers and winemakers staked claim to a wine country that has grown to 175 wineries, more than 40,000 acres of wine grapes and 42 varietals. Cool climate-loving pinot noir and chardonnay do well in the north county, while cabernet sauvignon, zinfandel and many Rhone grape types flourish in the warmer southern end.

The county encompasses eight smaller AVAs in addition to the larger Monterey appellation. Its tasting rooms can be mapped into three distinct areas, which can be GPS'd like trails. The coastal region encompasses 13 tasting rooms, while Carmel Valley has 23 and the River Road trail has 10.

"Monterey County Wine Country offers planners a unique opportunity to discover a bounty of world-renowned vineyards and tasting rooms, wine-related activities and one-of-a-kind experiences," says Scott Wilson, vice president of sales for Monterey County Convention & Visitors Bureau.



InterContinental The Clement Monterey

Right out of the gate, if the city of Monterey is your meeting destination, you needn't look further than A Taste of Monterey on Cannery Row to sample the best of the county. Its large, flexible space is ideal for meetings and events. You're also within easy walking distance to InterContinental The Clement Monterey and Monterey Plaza Hotel & Spa, plus the convention center and its headquarters hotels.

The village of Carmel-by-the-Sea has introduced a unique Wine Walk Passport (\$65) that offers visitors a wine flight of their choice at nine of 14 tasting rooms, all within a few blocks of each other. Meandering into the nearby hills, Carmel Valley has an option of a different type: Grapevine Express, run by Monterey Salinas Transit (MST), which offers scenic rides from downtown Monterey through Carmel Valley's wine corridor (\$10 for an all-day pass) and on to Carmel Valley Village, where several tasting rooms make comparing a Bernardus cabernet to a Joullian cabernet an easier task.

There's lots to promote about Monterey County's wine country, and the CVB is on the forefront. First, Monterey lays claim to the splashiest festival of its type on the West Coast: world-renowned Pebble Beach Food and Wine Festival. This four-day epicurean extravaganza matches 250 wineries and 100 celebrity chefs for wine tastings, cooking demos and exclusive dining opportunities at the luxury resort. Another annual foodie event is Relais & Chateaux GourmetFest, which features a stellar group of Relais & Chateaux chefs and wine estates; it's based at L'Auberge Carmel in Carmel-by-the-Sea.



Relais & Chateaux FourmetFest, Carmel-by-the-Sea

Along with the Monterey County Vintners and Growers Association, the bureau participates in American Institute of Food & Wine's Savor event. A recent series of pop-ups in Seattle, New York City and Sacramento/East Bay paired the region's wines with culinary stars.

Don't Put a Cork in It—Drink It (in)

Explore the Central Coast first on the Internet, then with the convention and meeting sales team at the area's CVBs. Afterward, book your flight or train reservation to SLO, Monterey or Santa Barbara. Or, in your vacation daydream, change your Highway 1 road map to a Central Coast wine country app and start your engine.

Monterey Bay Aquarium



When Monterey Bay Aquarium debuted on Cannery Row in 1984, it opened with a splash, showcasing the intriguing habitats and varied sea life of this incredibly rich marine region. Its centerpiece, the 28-foot-tall living Kelp Forest, was the first of its type in the world—setting the bar for generations of aquariums to come.

Wildly popular, the aquarium expanded in 1996 to include the Outer Bay, now renamed Open Sea. In 1999—a date that indicates its early commitment and vision—it introduced Seafood Watch, a consumer guide to sustainable seafood that is recognized throughout the country as a top resource for buying and ordering seafood. This guide informs the aquarium’s fine dining restaurant, Cindy’s Waterfront, the passion of renowned chef Cindy Pawlcyn and her executive chef, Matthew Beaudin.

A series of exhibits over the years have added to its reputation. In 2004 a great white shark went on exhibit—the only one on exhibit anywhere in the world (it was later released in 2005). In 2009 a special exhibit revealed the secret lives of seahorses, while the curious lives of octopuses, squid and cuttlefish—and brilliant world of jellies—now are thrilling and amazing visitors.

Thirty-some years after opening, the aquarium is still a leader in its class. More than 35,000 creatures representing more than 550 species fill 34 major galleries. But beyond its nearly 200 exhibits, the aquarium has broadened its outreach to include an annual sustainable foods celebration and extended weekend hours in the summer for live musical performances and corporate events that are catered by Pawlcyn and her team. At the same time, its conservation and science programs continue to educate visitors and influence policy that affects the survival of oceans, the natural progression of its founding mission.

Major Meeting Venues

Monterey County

Asilomar Conference Grounds

Located in Pacific Grove on 107 acres of beachfront land; 313 guest rooms; more than 30,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; indoor and outdoor team-building options.

Bernardus Lodge & Spa

Boutique retreat in Carmel Valley; 57 guest rooms and more than 4,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, including ballroom and boardroom; winery; spa offers wellness programs; fitness center.



Carmel Valley Ranch

Luxe 500-acre property about 15 minutes from the coast; 181 suites; 10,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; 18-hole golf course; 10,500-square-foot spa; new Valley Kitchen farm-to-table restaurant.

Casa Munras Garden Hotel & Spa

Historic, hacienda-style hotel located in the heart of Old Town Monterey; 171 guest rooms; 3,750 sq. ft. of meeting space; full-service spa; outdoor swimming pool.

Embassy Suites Hotel Monterey Bay

Two blocks from the beachfront in Seaside; complimentary cooked-to-order breakfast; nightly manager's reception with free beverages; 225 guest rooms; 12,500 sq. ft. meeting space.

Hyatt Regency Monterey Hotel & Spa

Modern property on championship Del Monte Golf Course; 550 guest rooms; more than 43,000 sq. ft. of event space; two pools; 12,000-square-foot spa; racquet club with lighted tennis courts.

InterContinental The Clement Monterey

Luxury hotel overlooking the ocean on Cannery Row; 208 guest rooms; 16,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; spa; outdoor pool.

La Playa Carmel

Restored boutique hotel in downtown Carmel, two blocks from the beach; 75 guest rooms, with ocean and garden views; 7,229 sq. ft. of meeting space; buffet breakfast served in library.

Monterey Bay Aquarium

World-famous aquarium and research facility on Monterey Bay; more than 35,000 creatures and 200 exhibits; expert event-planning services; 34 galleries, which can host up to 2,500 guests.

Monterey Marriott

High-rise hotel in the heart of downtown; 341 recently renovated guest rooms; pool; more than 56,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; connected by footbridge to Monterey Conference Center.

Monterey Plaza Hotel & Spa

Located directly over Monterey Bay; 290 guest rooms; 17,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; two restaurants; 11,000-square-foot Vista Blue Spa on top floor of hotel has panoramic views.

Portola Hotel & Spa at Monterey Bay

Elegant waterfront property adjacent to Monterey Conference Center; 379 guest rooms; 50,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; spa; outdoor heated pool.

Quail Lodge & Golf Club

Tucked into Carmel Valley, with quiet, country-club atmosphere; 75 guest rooms; 8,500 sq. ft. of meeting space; 18 newly refined holes of championship golf; team-building activities.

Seascape Beach Resort

Situated cliffside in Aptos; 285 suites and beach villas; 17,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, including 15 conference rooms, two executive suites; resort-owned wide, sandy beach for private events.

San Luis Obispo County



Courtyard San Luis Obispo

Close to downtown; 139 guest rooms; 4,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; free wireless Internet; near Avila and Pismo beaches; pool.

Embassy Suites San Luis Obispo

Convenient to Cal Poly and area beaches; 195 suites; 15,000 sq. ft. of indoor and outdoor meeting space; 11 meeting rooms; cooked-to-order breakfast; complimentary evening reception.

Hearst Castle

Opulent seaside palace built by publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst in 1919; located in San Simeon, about 45 minutes north of San Luis Obispo; can host groups of up to 250.

The Cliffs Resort

Oceanfront resort located on a bluff in Pismo Beach, about 10 minutes south of SLO; 160 guest rooms; 10,000 sq. ft. of flexible meeting and event space.

The Madonna Inn

Landmark historic hotel with imaginative interior design and architecture; minutes from downtown SLO; 110 guest rooms; 20,000-square-foot Alex Madonna Expo Center, plus outdoor venues; spa.

Santa Barbara County

Alisal Guest Ranch & Resort

A 10,000-acre, working cattle ranch tucked into the Santa Ynez Valley, 45 minutes northwest of Santa Barbara; 73 guest rooms, with Western decor; 6,000 sq. ft. of meeting space; two 18-hole golf courses.



Bacara Resort & Spa

Forbes Four Star beach resort 20 minutes west of downtown Santa Barbara; 354 guest rooms; 70,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, including Executive Conference Center. q

Belmond El Encanto

Luxurious, restored Santa Barbara resort set among hills overlooking the ocean; 92 guest rooms; 9,820 sq. ft. of event space; 3,000-square-foot ballroom; two restaurants.

Four Seasons Resort The Biltmore Santa Barbara

Santa Barbara's only AAA Five Diamond resort; built in classic Spanish Colonial style; 207 guest rooms; 15,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, including two ballrooms; Coral Casino Beach & Cabana Club.

Hotel Corque

AAA Four Diamond boutique hotel in Solvang, 40 minutes northwest of Santa Barbara; 122 renovated guest rooms; 7,500 sq. ft. of meeting space.