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# Sonoma County wants culinary travelers to know this one thing

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· BY SANDY  
BORNSTEIN



With more than 62,000 acres of vineyards in Sonoma County, it's easy to become overwhelmed when planning a weekend itinerary. When I glanced at a color-coded Sonoma County map outlining the regions with their corresponding vineyards, I panicked. I secretly wished I were a wine connoisseur. But, I had to be honest. I was a novice who needed assistance. The Sonoma County Visitor Center, the Wine Road and the Kenwood Inn & Spa concierge came to the rescue.

I followed their suggestions and selected places a reasonable distance away and limited my visits to a handful of locations. I also had to keep in mind that the winding roads would add time to my journey. After looking over the locals' recommendations, I chose a variety of experiences—a vineyard hike with numerous wine tastings and lunch, a tasting at a corporate vineyard, a family owned winery, a paired wine and olive oil experience, a tour of an olive oil company and a store tasting in Healdsburg. I learned a lot about wine, but I learned even more about olive oil, as you will see.

[Alexander Valley Vineyards](#)



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Alexander Valley Vineyards in Sonoma County, California  
Photo Caption: The Traveling Bornsteins

My vineyard hike included a picnic lunch and a cave tour at the Alexander Valley Vineyards, one of only 14 wineries in Sonoma County to be certified as an official Green Business. As our small group trekked along the rolling countryside, our guide John Koetzner periodically stopped to describe the vines. While sunshine beat down on our sweaty bodies, we sipped the finished product. Along the way, we passed the historic homestead built by Cyrus Alexander in 1841 and the relocated Alexander School established in 1868.



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The wine cave at the Alexander Valley Winery in Sonoma, County  
Photo Caption: The Traveling Bornsteins

Alexander started the ball rolling by planting the region's first grapes. However, the Alexander Valley Vineyards didn't officially begin operation until 1975 when the Wetzel family started to produce handcrafted wines. After lunch, we took a respite from the heat by going inside the 25,000-square-foot wine cave to view stacked barrels of aging wine.

### **Foley Sonoma Winery**



The modern Foley Sonoma Winery tasting room is at the top of a hill. I stepped onto an outdoor deck to appreciate the panoramic views. This winery is part of the Foley Food & Wine Society, a conglomerate of vineyards in Sonoma, Napa, Lake County, the Pacific Northwest and the Central Coast.

During our private wine tasting, our pourer shared his observation. "Female winemakers create delicate wines with lighter complexities, while male winemakers produce stronger wines with higher tannins." Unlike our Alexander Valley Vineyards experience where we only tasted wines harvested on site, we also sipped wines produced elsewhere.

### **Pedroncelli Winery**



At the Pedroncelli Winery, we experienced another family run business, which also values the environment. This vineyard is certified sustainable. Last year, the family celebrated its 90th anniversary and is recognized as one of the oldest wineries in the area. Unlike most vineyards, Pedroncelli was not adversely affected by Prohibition. The winery was able to grow and sell grapes to the neighboring Italian families who could consume wine for sacramental use. Only a handful of pre-Prohibition vineyards are still operating today in Sonoma County.

Once I learned about their female winemaker, I asked our host Ed St. John if gender made a difference. While he avoided responding to this specific question, he did agree that a winemaker's approach dramatically impacts the taste of the wine.

### B.R. Cohn Winery & Olive Oil Company



B.R. Cohn Vineyards in Sonoma County, California  
Photo Credit: The Traveling Bornsteins

This tasting room was unique. It was filled with paraphernalia from the 45 years Bruce Cohn managed the Doobie Brothers. Decades ago, Bruce purchased a Glen Ellen dairy with olive trees and vineyards. He eventually founded B. R. Cohn Winery and later produced California's first single-estate olive oil. I couldn't leave without an expensive bottle of Picholine extra virgin olive oil. The Picholine trees came from France and were imported in the mid-19th century.

The highlight of my day was the tasting experience. It included four specially prepared foods from the nearby Fig Café & Winebar prepared with locally sourced olive oil and balsamic vinegar paired with B. R. Cohn's cabernet, malbec, cabernet sauvignon and cabernet sauvignon port wines. The food flavors were balanced and complemented the selected wines.

### The Olive Press



Tasting Room at The Olive Press in Sonoma County, California  
Photo Credit: The Traveling Bornsteins

Scientific studies repeatedly indicate the importance of consuming antioxidant rich olive oil on a regular basis. I was eager to tour The Olive Press, a company that boasts that it is "the most highly awarded olive oil producer in the nation." The company also receives accolades for its natural and sustainable farming methods and the implementation of traditional pressing and milling methods.

For most of the year, the pressing machinery lies idle. From October to December, the milling process is in full production with millers working non-stop every day. Because I visited in June, I stared at the empty machinery as the tour guide described the detailed process.

In the tasting room, I became keenly aware of the variance in antioxidant levels and the differences between delicate, medium and robust oils. Olive oil has a maximum shelf life of two years. I will no longer purchase mega bottles without a stamped date.

## Spicy Vines



Wine poured at the Spicy Vines Winery in Sonoma County, California  
Photo Credit: The Traveling Bornsteins

After several hours in the countryside, I visited Healdsburg. While I only stopped inside one boutique wine shop, I could have easily popped in and out of numerous stores to try dozens of wines.

I was curious to taste Spicy Vines' award-winning wines. Winemakers have been crafting spiced wines for centuries. Crystalyn Hoffman fell in love with Glühwein, a German mulled wine, while living abroad. Today, Hoffman, her partner Toni Andrews and artisan, award-winning winemaker, Doug Hackett, produce a lighter and less sweet version in California using traditional winemaking methods that respect the integrity of the grapes.

When Spicy Vines introduced their innovative spicy wine into the California marketplace, it was the first to be offered in the U.S. I was hooked on this unique alcoholic beverage. It reminded me of a gingerbread cookie.

At the end of the weekend, I had collected an assortment of wines and oils. Fortunately, one of the wineries offered a sturdy wine box to check aboard my flight. Not only did I return home with a better understanding about wine and olive oil, I also had the added bonus of savoring delicious wine and high-quality oil for weeks to come.

Disclosure: All of the places mentioned in this story provided complimentary tastings and tours.

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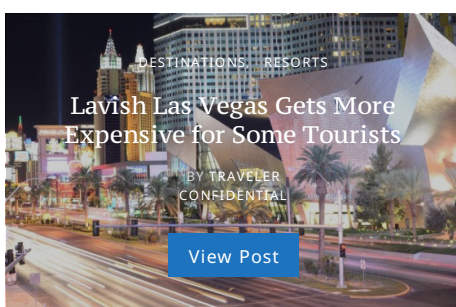
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