

Russian River Wine Country

Rich in natural beauty and full of charming retreats and hidden enchants, the Russian River Valley is a unique and well-defined appellation where there is a passion for life!

The Russian River Valley marks its arrival to the senses slowly. There is a kind of murmuring tranquility that is at first not seen so much as felt. Driving along Highway 12 from Santa Rosa to the tiny town of Freestone, visitors pass through a rolling landscape of gentle hills and valleys scattered alternately with sloping vineyards and open farmland with pockets of dense forest pushing along their cleanly-fenced edges. Dairy cows roam the hillsides and songbirds fill the air with chatter.

This is a land of grapevines and dairy farms, towering redwoods shrouded in mist and long, tender twilights stretching luxuriously to the Pacific Ocean. It is a land of rolling green-gold hills and intimate outbuildings, prompting my companion towards reminiscences about his home in the verdant hills of New England.

Despite its humble exterior, the Russian River Valley produces as impressive a number of outstanding wines as do their Napa Valley counterparts. Sonoma County, of which the Russian River Valley is an appellation, is larger, more diverse and also closer to San Francisco than is Napa Valley. Yet somehow, Napa continues to upstage Sonoma County—and as far as many Sonoma residents are concerned: that is just fine with them.

Nowhere does that hold truer than for the Russian River Valley. Life moves more slowly here. It is more indulgent, less of a proclamation of space and more of an inclusion of it. Residents live in the Russian River Valley because they choose to live here. People carry a deep passion for what they do. People like Jack Bullard from the Inn at Occidental, Jeffrey House from the Ace Cider Company in Sebastopol, or Gregory Michael Hallihan at Stella's Cafe.

Wineries in the Russian River Valley tend to be smaller producers whose families have grown grapes for generations; such as Iron Horse, Foppiano, Sebastopol Vineyards, Rodney Strong or Taft Street. These are producers and winemakers who have a strong commitment to the business, many of whom still make wine in older rustic buildings tucked along the edges of vineyards tended by hand. There is a passion for craft here that seems to have escaped the larger, more commercial valleys. It is a pristine landscape, beautiful in its simplicity.

Fall is a marvelous time to visit the Russian River Valley. A long, warm Indian summer creates brilliant days filled with vivid fall color. The excitement of the wine grape crush is catching, and the lack of crowds feels like coming home. Any visit to the Russian River Valley should begin with an overnight at the Vintner's Inn, just four miles north of the Santa Rosa airport. It's close. It's easy, and it is the site of the nationally-acclaimed John Ash & Company restaurant. Be sure to book a table to experience artistically inspired wine-country cuisine and exceptional service in an elegant, yet comfortable setting. The attention to detail in saucing and the incredible melding of flavors—East and West—is simply indescribable. Go experience it for yourself. And watch next year for the new spa facilities and upgrades at the Vintner's Inn.

When you awake the next morning, head out the Bodega Highway (Hwy 12) for a scenic drive through the lower portion of the Russian River Valley. Steer towards the

westernmost edge where the Bohemian Highway meets the tiny hamlet of Freestone, where you will find the aptly-named Wild Flour Bakery, a hidden jewel that is indicative of much that the valley has to offer. Here, three friends, Michelle, Jed and Mia, hand knead and bake some of the most sumptuous and savory breads you will ever experience. These breads arrive, piping hot from the brick-fired oven in back, as fantastic and delicious concoctions that are more of a meal than a snack. Offerings change daily and include a savory ginger, pear and fig concoction; a deliciously decadent sticky bun loaf; and a Fougasse with olives, gouda, garlic and rosemary (at least, that was the menu the day that I sampled, and then purchased, three loaves).

Another Russian River Valley original absolutely not to be missed, is Jack Bullard and his heart's desire, the Inn at Occidental (which, at the time that he bought it in 1993, was actually named the "Heart's Desire"). Occidental is a fairy-tale village set romantically into the hills of towering redwoods and the Inn is the perfect accompaniment. In each of the wonderfully cozy and gracious rooms, you will find elements of Jack, which boils down to the most inspired and eclectic collection of antiques and family heirlooms that you will probably ever find in one place—Tiffany silver, Venetian glass, fly fishing reels, old marbles, hand-painted bowling pins, antique corkscrews.

Each room has its own theme and each is tastefully decorated in a style that can almost be described as immoderate, but finishes as perfectly delightful and soothing. The rooms are so unique that they are best remembered by name rather than by number. My favorite is the Wild West Room, with antique fishing reels and rods, a fireplace, spa tub and the feel of a tiny, private cabin with a lovely morning deck. Don't miss the Marbles Suite, the Carnival Room and the Safari Room. All of this delightful indulgence (including the full gourmet breakfast) can be attributed to Jack, who is a master of coordination, with a quick intellect and a gentle smile. Simply put: no visit to the Russian River Valley is complete without a stay at the Inn at Occidental.

Another must do activity (on Jack's recommendation) is to pack a picnic lunch and head up into Armstrong Woods, just past the turn where Pocket Canyon Road winds down into deep forests and crosses the Russian River at Guerneville. Armstrong Woods State Reserve encompasses 752-acres of majestic redwoods that tower skyward 300 feet or more. Many of these trees are more than two thousand years old and a number of easy trails lead through the groves. Follow the hairpin-turn, one-way road to the top for spectacular views across the Russian River Valley towards the mists gathering in pockets from the coast.

Armstrong Woods is also dangerously close to Korbel Champagne cellars, where there is an informative and interesting historical tour and a museum of collected memorabilia and period pieces. The tour is well worth booking in advance and the Korbel gardens are absolutely breathtaking! Walking garden tours are offered Tuesday through Sunday and should not be missed (Call Korbel at 707.824.7000). If you tire of wine tasting, step inside the award-winning Russian River Brewing Company at Korbel for one of the many ales or seasonal brews.

Just around the corner, visitors may spend yet another delightful night dining at the Applewood Inn & Restaurant. The Inn was originally built in the 1920s as a private home in the redwoods and features 16 European-style rooms and suites. The restaurant

serves California Provençal specialties in a rough timbered apple barn with huge stone hearths, and offers a wonderful marriage of sophisticated tastes and casual décor.

There are so many hidden gems and family-owned and operated wineries in the Russian River Valley, it is difficult to know where to begin to explore. Some of my favorites include De Loach Vineyards, Hanna Winery, Joseph Swan, Korbel (for the gardens), Mark-West Vineyards, Martini & Prati Winery, Rodney Strong, Sebastopol Vineyards/Dutton Ranch, Taft Street Winery and Topolos at Russian River Vineyards (which also has a lovely restaurant). Call ahead, as many of the smaller vineyards and wineries are open by appointment only. Also, be sure to check out Blackstone Winery in Graton, which presses all of their wines at the community wine press across the street (designed to provide a wine press and bottling facility for small bottlings and valley residents).

You could spend weeks exploring this lovely valley. But, if you have only a long weekend, not to worry. Step out along the narrow winding country roads and discover the unique character of the Russian River Valley, where residents carry a passion for living and where a quality experience is a way of life.

The girl & the fig

Odd name, the girl & the fig. And that is where the fun begins. True, technically speaking, the girl & the fig is not within the boundaries of the Russian River Valley. But, this delightfully eclectic, wonderfully spontaneous, bright and sunny restaurant is too much of a Sonoma County original to not be included in any visit to the area.

Located in the enchanting little hamlet of Glen Ellen, the girl & the fig echoes the rustic romanticism and quaint charm of this historic town. Here, the bubbling creativity and alacrity of proprietor Sondra Bernstein shines with brilliance. She is an enchantress; a sorceress with a passionate love of Provence, Tuscany, and the Sonoma Valley. The girl & the fig offers up all these charms in a beautiful little restaurant with terra cotta floors, mix-matched tableware, hand-tossed earthenware and collected glassware. Flavors burst off the menu—a fig salad with arugula, dried figs, pecans, chevre and a fig & port vinaigrette; prosciutto-wrapped sea scallops with truffle oil. Combinations are decadent, delectable, dangerously delirious, like the fig hazelnut chocolate sauce (which you simply must purchase across the street at figment). Don't miss the cheese course, or one of the "wine flights," a tasting menu of voigner or Rhone-style wines served in assorted glasses. All in all, it is an ethereal dining experience—a figment of imagination, not to be missed. 13690 Arnold Drive, Glen Ellen. Open for dinner daily. 707.938.3634. Current menu posted on www.thegirlandthefig.com.

Tucked off Highway 12, Glen Ellen is widely considered the heart and soul of Sonoma Valley. Just west of town is Jack London State Historic Park. 707.938.5216. Worth a visit in itself, the author's home turned museum offers over 800 acres of vineyards, orchards and redwoods. Main Street is only two blocks long and if you need a place to stay (within walking distance of the girl & the fig), the Gaige House Inn presents a soothing and luxurious escape where time slows and spirits exhale a sigh of relief. This small luxury inn features beautiful grounds with a gurgling creek, artfully-decorated rooms, an abundance of amenities, in-room and poolside spa services and (my favorite)

an open pantry with 24-hour cookie supply. 13540 Arnold Drive, Glen Ellen.
800.935.0237; www.gaige.com.

Russian River Travel Tips

A Little History

The Coastal Miwok, Southern Pomo and Wappo Indians first populated Sonoma's beaches and valleys, and gave Sonoma County its name, which translates to "Valley of the Moon." Russian fur traders first explored the area on foot in the early 1800s, giving the area its current name. Russian colonists built Fort Ross on the coast just north of the Russian River in 1811. Under Mexican rule, Padre Jose Altimira selected Sonoma and founded Mission San Francisco Solano de Sonoma, bringing Mission grapes with him to plant in the fertile valley in 1834. In 1846, during the Bear Flag Revolt, an independent California Republic was proclaimed; 25 days later, an American naval ship landed in Northern California and the stars and stripes was raised over Sonoma. California became a state in 1850.

When To Go

Fall is a great time of year to visit the Russian River Valley. The harvest and crush of the wine grapes typically starts in early September and lasts six to eight weeks. The winemaking process begins at harvest, making it a very exciting time to tour a winery, when you can always find special events and festivals. The climate, influenced by the ocean, is cooled by breezes and fogs—so that it is warm in the summer, but not hot; cool in the winter, but not cold. Pack an umbrella as there is plenty of rain, but the area is sunny for most of the year.

Not To Be Missed

Don't miss a refreshing glass of pear or apple cider at the "Ace in the Hole" pub in Sebastopol, or a home-baked pie from Mom's Apple Pie (next door to Stella's in Sebastopol). Be sure to visit the gardens at Korbel and experience the great hands-on tour at Rodney Strong Vineyards. Tastings are informal at both Taft Street Winery and outside atop the vineyards at Iron Horse. If the weather is nice, try kayaking or canoeing the Russian River or book a sunset or Sunday brunch hot air balloon flight over the vineyards. Be sure to stop by Kozlowski Farms (family-owned and operated since 1947) for an assortment of jams, dressings, butters, sauces and spreads—all Sonoma County classics. After wine tasting at Blackstone in Graton, enjoy a filling lunch up the street at the Cape Fear Café. Don't miss an opportunity to visit Osmosis Spa in Freestone to experience one of the Japanese cedar enzyme baths (the only spa of its kind anywhere else in the country) and outdoor massages in a creek-side pagoda. The Japanese gardens are exquisite and the cedar Enzyme Bath heat treatment will ease all aches and pains, stress and fatigue. Osmosis Enzyme Bath & Massage, 209 Bohemian Hwy, Freestone, CA. 707.874.110.

Did You Know

Did you know that the Russian River Valley actually used to be a large apple-growing area. Many orchards have now been replaced by vineyards and the Russian

River Valley actually has several sub-appellations, including Chalk Hill and Green Valley. The Bohemian Highway, which runs through Occidental and Freestone, actually follows the route of the old Northwest Pacific Coast Railroad. Did you know that when making sparkling wine in the “methode champenoise” each of the 750 ml bottles—not barrels or vats—is its own winemaking vessel.

Names & Numbers

Applewood Inn and Restaurant 13555 Highway 116, Guerneville, CA. 707.869.9093.
www.stayatapplewoodinn.com.

Armstrong Woods State Reserve 707.869.2015.

Greater Santa Rosa Conference & Visitors Bureau 9 Fourth Street, Santa Rosa;
707.577.8674/800.404.ROSE (7673). www.visitsantarosa.com.

Inn at Occidental 3657 Church Street, Occidental, CA. 800.522.6324 (reservations)
707.874.1047. www.innatoccidental.com.

John Ash & Co. 4330 Barnes Road, Santa Rosa, CA. Restaurant attached to Vintner’s
Inn. 707.527.7687. www.johnashco.com.

Russian River Region Visitors Bureau 13250 River Rd., Guerneville, CA. 800.253.8800.
www.russianriver.org.

Sonoma Valley Visitors Bureau 453 1st St. East (Sonoma Plaza), 707.996.1090.
www.sonomavalley.com

Sonoma County Tourism Program 707.565.1361/800.5-SONOMA (800.576.6662).
www.sonomacounty.com.

Sonoma County Wineries Association 5000 Roberts Lake Road, Rohnert Park, CA.
800.939.7666 / 707.586.3795.

Vintner’s Inn 4350 Barnes Rd. Santa Rosa, CA 800.421.2584 / 707.575.7350.
www.vintnersinn.com.