

## A passage to wineries

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Everybody loves that Eureka moment when they happen upon a special getaway – a “find” that they hadn’t totally expected. With all the hype you read in travel brochures and all the creative writing that finds its way to the internet, it’s satisfying when you come across someplace that is actually as good as – or better than – advertised.

Such is the case with these three accommodations in California Wine Country – a variety of special getaways stretching from Santa Barbara to the Napa Valley.

### Paso Robles

Imagine a trip to the vineyards of Tuscany where you will drive through a sun-drenched region with vine-clad hillsides, stopping off to visit wineries where fascinating local craftsmen toil at their labor of love. Paso Robles wineries are fast becoming a rewarding alternative for sophisticated travelers who are often surprised to find such an exquisite getaway so close to home.

Perched on a hill near Highway 101, La Bellasera Hotel and Suites might look from the freeway like it’s just a nice, modern hotel at an easy exit point – a place on the way to someplace else. But get a little closer and you realize somebody has spent a lot of money creating a true luxury hotel. Using a blend of Mediterranean and Italian architecture, this hotel truly stands out.

It’s one of those hotels that almost overwhelms the senses as you enter the lobby with its rich marble floors and Roman columns supporting a pseudo balcony with ornate iron railings against a backdrop of ultra high ceilings. The feeling is classic, yet contemporary with special attention given to spot lighting and the hotel’s stylish but comfortable couches. Along one side of the room, wrought iron doors open to the elaborate wine Wine Cellar while nearby is the entrance to the hotel’s locally acclaimed Enoteca Restaurant & Bar which, in just a short time, has become known as the place for a gourmet dining experience in the immediate area.

Our two-room suite expanded on the theme of local luxury by including in one room a three-person Jacuzzi tub that had been built into a foundation of bricks and set in a corner where colorful wall paintings added the illusion that our tub was looking out on a Mediterranean coastal village. Again, Roman pillars were used to complete the illusion. Across the room was a cabinet-style wet bar and glass-doored refrigerator and, on the wall, a full-sized high-definition plasma

television. There was also a smaller flat-screen television in the bedroom, as well as two king beds, a desk and a desk-top computer.

We could go on and on about things like the signature bedding, high thread count linens, the luxury bath products, the availability of spa services either in-room or in their special treatment room – but we think you get the idea. The quiet town of Paso Robles now has a luxury option for even the most pampered of guests.

For more information on La Bellasera Hotel and Suites, please phone 866-STAY-NOW or visit [www.labellasera.com](http://www.labellasera.com).

### Napa Valley

A visit to Napa is not just a chance to see where wine is made, or to explore the upscale shops and stores that now have found their way into the tiniest of Napa Valley communities. Rather, a trip to the valley is an almost spiritual journey that presents you at once with the beauty of 63,000 acres of vineyards and the industry that has brought a European elegance to the Valley lifestyle.

With 75,000 residents, the town of Napa has become a small city in its own right and a name synonymous with California wineries. If you want to be based in Napa during your stay, there are many options for an unforgettable experience. The most recent we sampled – and a place we would consider a “find” because of its incredible restaurant – is the Westin Verasa Napa. The resort hugs the banks of the Napa River, and is within three blocks of the plentiful shopping, arts activities, music, wine bars and other attractions located in downtown Napa. The location is also prime because of the river walk that runs along the Napa River shores and, in this case, right by our first floor suite.

As the name Westin implies, the Westin Versa Napa is all about a high-quality experience. Our suite was like a small condo unit with a complete kitchen – with all the latest colorful stylings, by the way – as well as an open room with contemporary dining and living room furniture, and a bedroom with a king-size bed. Plasma wall-mounted TV's were in both the “great room” and the bedroom. The bathroom with its generous use of marble was small but elegant.

While the river beckoned just outside our suite – and we loved sitting in our deck area, gazing at the calm waters and people-watching as runners and walkers used the trail – the highlight of our stay had to be the dinner we had at La Toque, the renowned French restaurant right on property. It's been named one of the best restaurants in America and has won numerous culinary awards, and we were certainly curious to see what all the fuss was about.

It didn't take long to figure it out. We were seated at a table that felt private, yet had a good view of the restaurant's “show kitchen” where cooks and waiters were scurrying about doing all the things you see in those cooking shows that are so popular these days. The maitre d' explained how this restaurant is a little different – you can choose two, three or four courses and they'll give you portions to match. So if you choose two, you get big portions; choose four and each one is smaller.

The menu is subdivided into four sections and many diners choose one from each – but it's not mandatory. You can choose all meat dishes if that's what you want. The choices were amazing and included such items as Seared Artisan Foie Gras with Bacon-Wrapped Medjool Dates and Toasted Brioche (the best foie gras we've ever had) or West Texas "Nilgai" Antelope with Leek and Black Trumpet Potato Terrine and Roasted Root Vegetable Red Wine Reduction, or Florida Frog Legs with Sweet Garlic Puree, Sauce Verte and Tomato Confit.

Since this is Wine Country there is another important element to be considered – what wine you will drink with these delectable entrées. This is where the experience totally transcended any we've had before – if you want something extra special, ask for wine pairings for each of your courses.

With wine pairings they don't just bring you a different wine for each course – you also get an education. The sommelier at La Toque is quite knowledgeable about wines from all regions, not just Napa. With each pouring you get a detailed explanation of where the wine came from and why it is being paired with the entrée you have chosen.

For more information on the Westin Verasa Napa, phone (707) 257-1800 or visit [www.westinnapa.com](http://www.westinnapa.com).

#### Santa Barbara

Dubbed Santa Barbara Wine Country by local tourism promoters, Santa Ynez Valley is an idyllic and pastoral region of small towns, ranches and, of course, a few dozen wineries that are scattered over an incredibly picturesque countryside.

During one recent visit we wanted to experience a lodging we had heard about -- the Santa Ynez Inn. Located in Santa Ynez, this is an unusual Victorian bed-and-breakfast because it is not a historic building at all -- the inn was built from scratch in 2001. That offers the advantage of everything being new - floors, carpeting, plumbing - which will appeal to travelers less interested in the historic aspect of their accommodations.

The Santa Ynez Inn is certainly among the most luxurious inns we've enjoyed. Entering the lobby, one notices the carved wood stairway regally reminiscent of the grand staircase in the movie Titanic. The hallways are decorated with portraits of former presidents. In our second-floor over-sized room we found a sanctuary filled with antique-inspired furniture and such luxurious accents as crystal chandeliers and crystal-based lamps. The floral curtains parted to reveal a view of the countryside and small balcony with table and chairs. Another sitting area, made of travertine, was adjacent to the fireplace and marble was used extensively in the larger-than-usual bathroom area. A jetted tub and separate shower area were just as you would find in the most expensive hotels.

We added the Santa Ynez Inn to our list of "finds" because it has a unique combination of impeccable new furnishings, classic design and a location in the same California Wine Country that made so many people fall in love with this region when it was used as the backdrop for the hit movie "Sideways."

For more information on Santa Ynez Inn, phone 800-643-4774 or visit [www.santaynezinn.com](http://www.santaynezinn.com).

For more information on travel in California, please visit [www.californiaweekend.com](http://www.californiaweekend.com).



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