



Bill Zacharkiw: Savouring Sonoma County



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While California's Napa Valley gets much of the press, there's something special about Sonoma County.

Sandwiched between Napa and the Pacific Ocean, it's my favourite place to visit in North America's largest wine-producing region. I like it so much that I went twice in the first six months of 2015.

I'm seduced by the region's diversity – in both wine styles and geography. There truly is something for everyone. On a pure wine level, while the region is best known for its refined pinot noir and chardonnay, especially from the cooler coastal growing areas, in the hotter interior fans of big, powerful reds can taste some of the state's best zinfandels and cabernets. This is the birthplace of California's wine industry, and these old, gnarly 100-plus-year-old zinfandel and carignan vines, planted by Italian immigrants, are living testament to its history.



But the diversity is more than just in wine styles. I love flying into San Francisco and staying a night or two in one of America's premier cities. My base is Healdsburg, a beautiful town of 11,000 people in the centre of Sonoma County, about an hour and a half's drive from San Francisco. It's classic small-town America, replete with winery-run tasting rooms and good restaurants.

But as much as I love the cities and eating at great restaurants, I go to wine country for the country setting. In an hour's drive through winding roads from Healdsburg, you reach the village of Jenner, which sits on one of the rougher coastlines of the Pacific Ocean.

Framed by the Sonoma Mountains, which seem to rise directly out of the Pacific and where a daily fog covers them each morning, walk along the beach and you have a better chance of running into dozens of sea lions basking in the sun than people. It's the relative isolation, the rough landscape, the feeling of being where few people travel that keeps drawing me back.



Yes, there is plenty of hiking, biking, eating and other things to do, but Sonoma County is wine country. Most of the wineries have very good infrastructure for visitors, with qualified sommeliers to guide you through tastings.

Chateau St. Jean has one of the best visitor sites I have seen, and you can choose various tasting packages, including the "Cinq Rêves Tasting" where you can go deep into their flagship wine. A short drive from Healdsburg are two of Sonoma's most key zinfandel producers – Seghesio Family Vineyards and Ridge Vineyards Geyserville. Their gamut of wines goes far beyond "zin," but any visit to Sonoma should include these two.

Other notable wineries to visit near Healdsburg include MacRostie Winery & Vineyards and Twomey Cellars. Both the quality of the wines and the views are well worth the short detour. Many wineries along the coast are by appointment only. If you are a fan of pinot noir and chardonnay, Littorai is a must and, in my view, one of California's top wineries.

Tasting Sonoma County wines

Chardonnay 2013, Chateau St. Jean, California white, \$20, [SAQ #897215](#). With its pineapple and sweet stone fruit notes you can sense the ripeness in this wine as well as the mineral, but with not too much of the caramel. I like this: Tight, ripe and easy drinking.



Chardonnay 81 2011, Jean-Charles Boisset, California white, \$36.75, [SAQ # 12497801](#). One can almost taste the Sonoma coast with notes of stone fruits, white peach and a touch of sage leaf and resin note. Clean and focused with a nice finish. Serve at 10-14 C. Drink now-2018. Food pairing idea: Aperitif, lobster and garlic butter.



Cabernet Sauvignon 2012, Sonoma, Rodney Strong, \$22.55, [SAQ # 11770537](#). Remarkable freshness considering that much of the grapes come from Alexander Valley. Still dark and bordering on jammy, but the tannins have good pop and the fruit is juicy.



Zinfandel 2013, Seghesio, California red, \$35.75, [SAQ # 12297446](#). It's a high-voltage zin with jammy fruit and lots of alcohol that won't win awards for finesse. It shows intensity and the wonderful rusticity of the grape. It mellows with age so give this a year or two and it will reward.



Geyserville 2012, Sonoma, Ridge, California red, \$57, [SAQ # 862318](#). A blend with zinfandel leading the way. Compared to Lytton Springs, Ridge's other zinfandel-based field blend, this has a richer texture with cherry and raspberry alongside ripe, cuddly tannins. This will age for at least a decade and improve.

