



Summer Wine

Getting *Sideways* among the award-winning wineries of California's Central Coast

■ RICHARD & ELLEN THANE

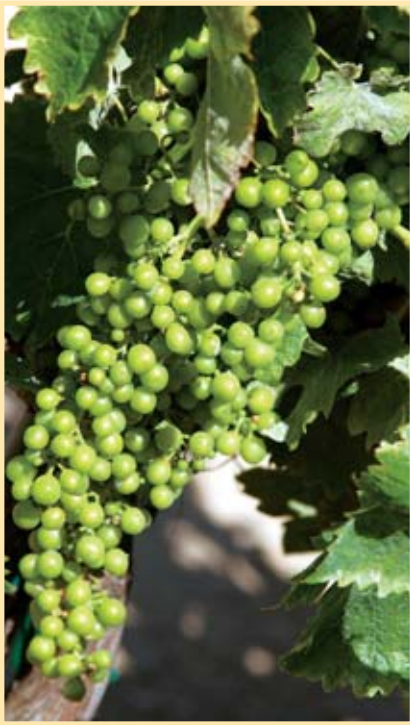


Sung by Nancy Sinatra in 1967, the lyrics from *Summer Wine* spun through our heads as we traveled north on U.S. Highway 101, meandering through emerald hills of lacy vineyards, enjoying the golden sunshine and tasting the wines of California's spectacular Central Coast.

This area between Monterey and Santa Barbara is seeing explosive growth in the premium wine industry; today, around 100 wineries are located in the region, most of them relatively small family operations where much of the winemaking process

Laetitia Vineyard and Winery in Arroyo Grande is known for its world-class pinot noir (top, left). Melville Vineyards' Mediterranean-style winery and tasting room is set in the western Santa Ynez Valley (top, right). You'll find Tolosa Vineyard in San Luis Obispo's Edna Valley, an area known as the "Burgundy of the Pacific" (above). The authors enjoy wine and cheese along California's Central Coast (left).

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Sixty percent of the grapes grown at the 834-acre Edna Valley Vineyard are used for its estate-grown chardonnay (top). Chelsea Rustrum (left) and Ashley Rains (right) pour wine at the Baileyana tasting room (top, right). Tolosa Vineyard's self-guided wine tour begins on the patio, which overlooks the vineyards and crush pad, and finishes inside the tasting room overlooking the tank room (above). The Talley Vineyards is a small family-owned-and-operated winery producing estate-bottled wines (opposite page).

is done by hand and by people with a passion for making fine wine. Often the person pouring the wine in the tasting room is also the winemaker — and is eager to teach the finer points of wine appreciation.

The wineries range from elegant state-of-the-art buildings and tasting rooms, to little more than a corner in a family garage. Many of the wines are very good — and, as we discovered, bigger and better facilities don't necessarily mean better wine. Some of the best wines we tasted were poured in very simple tasting rooms.

Funny how the wine-bug nips people. As we travel the nation in our "Gypsy Wagon," we meet many highly intelligent, well-educated people, like these California grape growers, who make the decision to leave stressful, fast-paced, highly paid jobs in exchange for financial uncertainty and the long hours of toiling in the vineyards and experimenting to produce that "perfect wine." We didn't find anyone who said they regretted the change. Instead, all of the wine-making families seem not only very happy with their choice, but passionate about making good wine and living the lifestyle that goes with winemaking. These small family wineries are giving California's long-time best-known grape-growing region, Napa Valley, some stiff competition.

We began our wine tour from a campsite at the Flying Flags RV Resort

and Campground in Buellton, just across from the Days Inn where "Miles" and "Jack," the two emotionally challenged guys in the movie *Sideways*, stayed during their wine tour. For each day of our tours we packed a picnic lunch, as most of the wineries are located miles from any restaurant.

Melville Vineyards and Winery was first on our list. Set in the beautiful Santa Rita Hills just off State Highway 246, west of Buellton, well-tended grapevines spill down the rolling hills surrounding the winery where the Melville family and winemaker, Greg Brewer, make their wonderful chardonnays and pinot noirs. A winding drive lined with fragrant lavender leads to a romantic Mediterranean-style villa, where a luxurious tasting room allows you to sample the vintages.

Also sharing the driveway is Babcock Winery and Vineyards, where we met a friendly couple from Michigan who were touring the Central Coast wineries as a result of seeing *Sideways*. They obviously knew wines and were enthusiastic about the cabernet they tasted. Babcock has been producing wine since 1984, and winemaker Bryan Babcock was honored in 1995 as one of the "top ten small production winemakers in the world" by the James Beard Foundation.

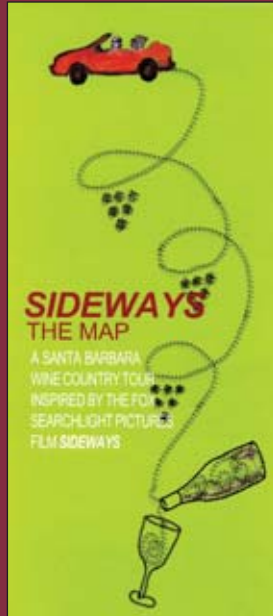
We continued west on State Highway 246, stopping in Lompoc for the farmers market (held every Friday) to stock up on fresh fruit

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More Side(ways) Tours

We hadn't seen the award-winning movie *Sideways* before making this wine tour, but it was definitely the buzz throughout our trip so we made a point of seeing it upon our return home. Our camping spot in Buellton was kitty corner from the Days Inn, where the two main characters, Miles and Jack, stayed while touring wineries in the area. Miles, who thought he knew a lot about wine, took it upon himself to try to teach Jack the finer points. Jack, on the other hand, felt qualified to give Miles advice on his love life — or lack of. Their trip was supposed to be a final fun fling before Jack tied the knot the following week, but of course their bumbling antics kept them in constant trouble.

We didn't happen to eat at any of the



restaurants these guys frequented, but we saw *The Hitching Post* along the road from Buellton to Solvang and remember the parking lot was always filled with cars (which should testify to an eatery's quality). Solvang is an interesting tourist town,

with its Danish architecture and wonderful shops and restaurants; be sure to include it in your itinerary.

Many of the wineries we visited had run out of pinot noir — not coincidentally, that was Miles' favorite in the movie and everyone seemed to want to try it. Some wine-makers were wondering if they should increase production of their pinots and cut back on others, but the general consensus seemed to be that the preference for pinot is probably just a passing fad and will be forgotten as memories of the movie fade. Many of the other wines made in this region are very good and will continue to sell well.

Though both trips rambled through an incredibly beautiful countryside, our journey differed in that ours

took us north into San Luis Obispo County, while Miles and Jack toured the wineries around Buellton, in Santa Barbara County (you can get a free map of the locations they visited by calling the Santa Barbara Conference & Visitors Bureau at 800-676-1266, or logging onto santabarbaraCA.com).

Our trip also differed in another significant way — we had a wonderful time, while Jack and Miles were miserable most of the time, trying to work out their own complex problems.

Whether you liked the movie or not, it certainly focused world-wide attention on the wineries of California's Central Coast. Let's hope the notoriety doesn't change the focus on making good wine!



and vegetables to go with the wines we planned for dinner the next few evenings. You may recognize scenes from the movie here as Jack and Miles were filmed strolling through this market. Then we took the long way back to Buellton, by way of Santa Rosa Road (as did Miles and Jack), and wound our way through quiet hillsides blanketed with vineyards. Sanford Winery, where Miles gave Jack a lesson on wine-tasting, is along this road, just a few miles outside Buellton. We, too, received an excellent lesson on wine from Sanford's knowledgeable tasting guide.

Early the next morning, moving north on U.S. Highway 101, we entered San Luis Obispo County, where thousands of acres of vineyards cover the hillsides. Campgrounds here are plentiful, and staying at

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Pismo Beach or San Luis Obispo will put you within easy driving distance for a number of wineries, as well as other great activities.

Since it was Saturday and the area's renowned fisherman's market is held every Saturday in nearby Morro Bay, we spent the evening shopping for fresh seafood to go with our wine purchases. We also stopped at the visitor center and picked up an excellent map and a list of wineries produced by the San Luis Obispo Vintners Association.

People come from around the world to sample the vintages being produced by the 40 or so wineries in south San Luis Obispo County, making it the region's largest agricultural industry. With its valleys running in an east-west orientation, moist marine air funnels in from the Pacific Ocean and creates one of the longest growing seasons in California. Fourteen volcanic cones, running from Morro Bay to the Edna Valley, southeast of San Luis Obispo, fill the soils with volcanic remnants of granite and tufa. Add rich marine deposits of sand and seashells to the recipe and you have an area ideally suited for growing excellent wine grapes.

The winemaking history here goes back 200 years, when the first grapevines were planted at the missions built along the California coast during the 18th century. However, it's only been during the last decade that winemaking has flourished.

Though the wineries are plentiful and fairly close together, you probably won't want to visit more than three or four of them on the same day. Even if you don't swallow the wine you taste, any more than that will muddle your taste buds.

Just south of the little town of Arroyo Grande, Laetitia Vineyard and Winery is located on the east side of U.S. Highway 101. French viticulturists chose this location back in 1982 as one of only a few sites on Earth where they could grow the world-class Burgundian-style grapes needed for their wines. Built on a lovely hilltop overlooking the vineyard and the Pacific Ocean, an impressive tasting room offers the wonderful

sparkling wines and pinot noirs Laetitia is famous for.

In Arroyo Grande, we turned east and drove out Lopez Drive to explore the wineries along the northern edge of the Arroyo Grande Valley. Talley Vineyards was our first stop. Each bottle of wine sold under the Talley label is grown, produced and bottled by the Talley family. From its humble beginnings, with a production of 450 cases in 1986, Talley now has four vineyards covering 160 acres and produces 14,000 cases a year, specializing in chardonnays and pinot noir. We enjoyed sipping a glass of the golden liquid as we sat on the patio beside a lovely Spanish fountain.

We continued east on Lopez Drive to Saucelito Canyon Vineyard, tucked deep into a secluded valley of the Santa Lucia Mountains. Known for its excellent zinfandel, this winery is rich in history with much of its vines growing on rootstock brought over from France and Spain and planted in 1880 by the Henry Ditmas family. Deserted since the 1940s, Bill and Nancy Greenough purchased the vineyard in 1974 and began the enormous task of clearing away decades of overgrowth. Finding some of the original grapevine root stock intact, the Greenoughs are raising zinfandel grapes from these old roots that make a wine with subtle hints of blackberry and black cherry, while their newer vines produce flavors of strawberry and raspberry. This small family operation bottles about 2,500 cases of zinfandel a year.

After a most enjoyable afternoon rambling through the backroads of the Arroyo Grande Valley, we returned to our campsite along the ocean, where several camping friends joined us for a delicious dinner of charbroiled halibut, an assortment of fresh vegetables and a sampling of wines from our day's tour. Can life get any better than this?

Fog hung heavy over the waterfront as we started out on our next day's adventure, but thinned a bit as we drove inland. Crisscrossing the country roads between State Highway 227 and Orcutt Road, we stopped at several of the wineries in the beautiful

Edna Valley, considered by some "The Burgundy of the Pacific." It took awhile to find Cerro Caliente Cellars and we couldn't quite believe we were in the right spot as we entered an industrial area of San Luis Obispo, but there it was — the colorful Cerro Caliente Cellars label combined with a Don Peters Automotive sign.

The tiny space was crammed with enthusiastic folks sampling wine. Combining his love of working on old cars with that of making fine wine, Don is what's known as a *garagiste* — a vintner who makes a very small amount of high-quality wine in his home garage or, in this case, his commercial garage. Successfully, too, as he has had a number of award-winning vintages.

Next, we stopped at Tolosa Winery, where the focus is on chardonnay, pinot noir and syrah varieties. A couple of stretch limos pulled up about the same time we did and disgorged a

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group of people laughing and chattering happily about the wines they were tasting. We joined them in the modernistically designed tasting room, where large windows overlook the winery's tank room. Eavesdropping as they discussed the wines they'd encountered, we couldn't help but notice the accolades they were giving Domaine Alfred Winery, located a few miles to the south.

Continuing south on Orcutt Road, we next encountered Baileyana Winery, established 20 years ago by Catherine Niven, one of the first women owners of a California wine brand. Today, her grandsons run the winery and continue her dream of making the very best wines possible. Surrounded by Baileyana's Firepeak Vineyard, which grows along a chain of ancient volcanic cones known as the Seven Sisters, the tasting room was a cheerful, inviting place. Our favorite wine was the 2002 Grand Firepeak Cuvee Pinot Noir.

Our next stop was the Edna Valley Vineyard, just to the south of Baileyana. A demonstration vineyard here shows the different ways grapes are grown, and a tour of the winery gives an interesting lesson about the current activities in the winemaking process. Tasting is a pleasure in the tasting room overlooking the vineyards and volcanic peaks in the distance. Many events, such as cooking classes, concerts, and food-and-wine-pairing classes make this winery a popular spot.

Finally, the last winery on our tour was Domaine Alfred Winery, owned by Terry Speizer. After all the favorable comments we had heard about the wines here, we were looking forward to tasting a few. Domaine Alfred features pinot noir and chardonnay along with some recently added wines, including syrah and pinot gris. Though only a young winery (their first vintage was in 1998), our amateur palates found these wines the best we had tasted on this tour, especially the chardonnays.

Most of the wineries charge a modest tasting fee, but it's often credited toward any wine you purchase. Wine clubs, available through

many of the wineries, offer discounted prices for regular orders. Special events are held throughout the year at the wineries and in surrounding towns, so check the Web sites below before planning your trip. Then get a map, chart your course — and have a wonderful time. ■

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