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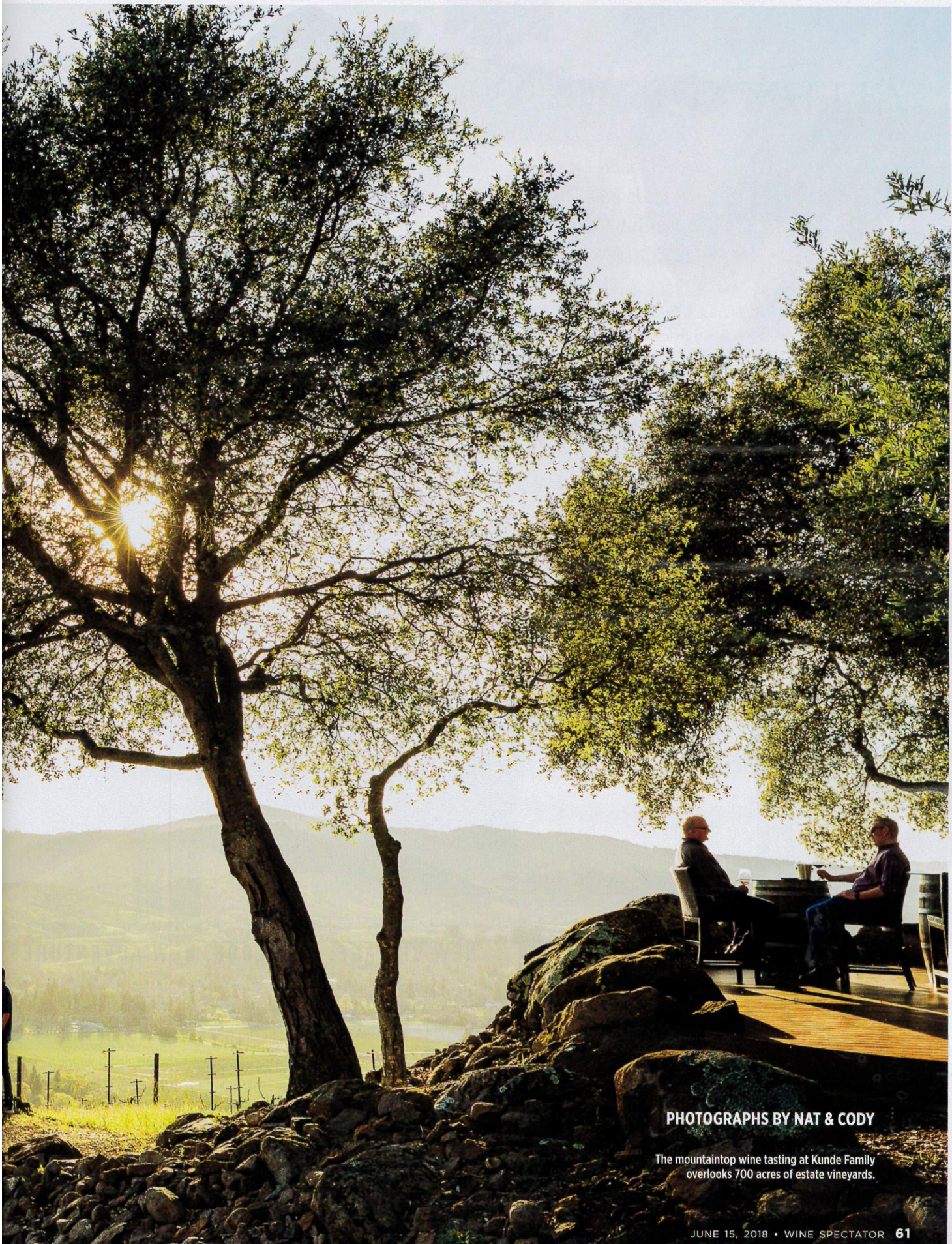




SONOMA'S HEARTLAND

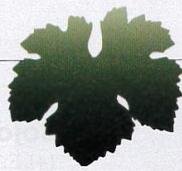
Top places to eat, drink and stay in Sonoma Valley

By Aaron Romano and Augustus Weed



PHOTOGRAPHS BY NAT & CODY

The mountaintop wine tasting at Kunde Family overlooks 700 acres of estate vineyards.



STEEPED IN HISTORY, SONOMA VALLEY

is an intimate wine country destination, less developed than Napa Valley, its neighbor to the east, but appealing to many for that very reason. • At its heart lies the city of Sonoma, arguably the birthplace of California. The surrounding oak-studded countryside is home to the state's oldest vineyards (1824), the oldest commercial winery in California (Buena Vista, 1857) and California's oldest still-family-owned winery (Gundlach Bundschu, 1858). Roots run deep here,

and farming is the lifeblood for many. The Bundschus, Benzigers, Kundes, Sangiacomos and others have kept their family winegrowing businesses thriving for several generations.

Touring the area, it's easy to imagine how it looked 100 years ago, with many historical structures—some dating to the Mission period—well-preserved. And while wine tourism has increased the hustle-bustle of late, there are few luxury resort-style lodgings and lavish, châteauxlike wineries. Instead, the pace of life in Sonoma is slower and more down to earth.

"It's kind of the place that time forgot," muses Chris Benziger, Benziger Family Winery vice president of trade relations, who was a teenager when his family moved to the hamlet of Glen Ellen in the northern part of the valley in 1980.

The landscape is remarkably diverse and beautiful. Flanked by the steep Mayacamas mountain range to the east and the bumpy

you can find his new place tucked behind a pizzeria in downtown Sonoma. Just off the plaza, Katie Bundschu blends wine tasting with retail, offering apparel, home decor and other novelties at her recently opened Abbot's Passage.

Of course, few folks were on the sidewalks in the last three weeks of October 2017, as fires raged in the hills above. Sonoma Mayor Rachel Hundley recalls those tense times, when volunteers packed up artifacts from the Mission barracks, chapel and museum within the Sonoma State Historic Park on the north side of the plaza and covered the buildings in flame retardant.

"The fire came within a half mile outside the northeast corner of the city," says Hundley, noting that it's easy to look back in disbelief now that winter and spring rains have returned the landscape to its seasonal hues of green, and much of the valley has returned to its habitual daily rhythms.



From left: Historic portrayal at Buena Vista winery; Mission San Francisco Solano, part of Sonoma State Historic Park; Sebastiani Theatre, built in 1933

Sonoma Mountains to the west, the valley spans 17 miles from the vine-clad rolling hills of Carneros in the south to its northern tip on the border of the city of Santa Rosa. The Sonoma Valley AVA also includes the four subappellations Sonoma Mountain, Moon Mountain, Bennett Valley and Los Carneros, and their many microclimates allow a variety of grapes to be grown.

When a new restaurant or shop arrives, Sonomans are abuzz. In this story, we highlight one of the recent additions, Salt & Stone in Kenwood; it's hard to get a table at this popular restaurant, so be sure to make a reservation. Winemaker Jeff Cohn recently gave up his urban tasting room in Oakland for a more intimate spot where guests can sample his bold Zinfandel and Rhône blends;

At press time in April, visitors too had returned in droves, wandering the plaza alongside the resident ducks and geese, nibbling samples at the Sonoma Cheese Factory and sipping Glariffée cocktails at the Swiss Hotel. (A drink reminiscent of a chilled Irish coffee, the signature Glariffée was created by proprietor Helen Dunlap, now 92, who has kept the recipe a secret for more than 50 years.)

There are more than 70 tasting rooms around the valley and dozens of restaurants worth trying, as well as other tourist destinations and outdoor activities to enjoy. In the following pages, we offer a few suggestions for places to eat, drink and stay, both old and new, for a quintessential Sonoma experience.

SONOMA PLAZA

The hub of Sonoma Valley is Sonoma Plaza. Once a Spanish Mission village and later a Mexican military outpost, it was also the site of the Bear Flag Revolt that proclaimed California's independence in 1846. Today, it's an 8-acre pedestrian-friendly tableau of restaurants, quaint shops and alleyways that lead to hidden courtyards. On a typical afternoon, tourists and locals fill the streets of Sonoma, strolling, shopping, eating and drinking.

El Dorado Kitchen

405 First St. W., Sonoma Telephone (707) 996-3030 Website www.eldoradokitchen.com Open Breakfast, lunch and dinner, daily; brunch, Sunday Cost Moderate Corkage \$25

The tree-lined patio of this plaza-side restaurant is a great place to grab a cocktail. In the dining room, the vibe is casual, modern wine country, with wood furnishings and exposed beams blending with contemporary touches such as square light fixtures and potted succulents. The California-inspired menu is simple yet sophisticated. Dishes showcase seasonal regional ingredients. Mainstays such as the steamed mussels might be served with fennel, leeks, garlic and lemon in the winter and garbanzo beans and fresh herbs in the spring. Delicious housemade pastas also rotate with the season. The wine list leans heavily toward California—Napa and Sonoma in particular—and counts 200-plus offerings, with many bottles priced at less than \$100. —A.R.

Lodge at Sonoma Renaissance Resort & Spa

1325 Broadway, Sonoma Telephone (707) 343-8091 Website renaissance-hotels.marriott.com Rooms 178 Suites 4 Rates \$224–\$1,079

This stately resort is spread across 14 well-manicured acres. The property features fountains, Japanese maples and rose bushes, with a large pool at its center. Guest rooms, stylishly renovated, are outfitted with sliding barn doors, gas fireplaces and patios or decks; lodgings in the main building include deep soaking tubs. For more space and privacy, choose a room in one of the separate cottages dotting the property. Start the day with a yoga class or indulge in a variety of treatments at the spa. The resort's restaurant, Carneros Bistro, offers a list of 150 domestic and imported wines, or opt for a glass at the Bean & Bottle, a combination coffee shop and wine bar. —A.W.

Sojourn

141 E. Napa St., Sonoma Telephone (707) 938-7212 Website www.sojourncellars.com Open By appointment Cost Tastings \$35

A short stroll from the plaza, this cottage offers an intimate setting in which to taste Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay from some of Sonoma's and Napa's most established vineyards. Sit-down tastings in the cozy living room-like salon are casual and tailored to each group. Pinot lovers can compare three single-vineyard wines side by side, while Cabernets come from cofounder Craig Haserot's estate Home Ranch Vineyard, located 10 minutes northwest of Sonoma, or from Rutherford. Maps and soil samples offer visual references for learning about each vineyard. —A.W.



El Dorado Kitchen

MacArthur Place

29 E. MacArthur St., Sonoma Telephone (707) 938-2929 Website www.macarthurplace.com Rooms 64 Rates \$225–\$850

A few blocks from the plaza, mostly hidden from view by hedges and trees, this inn feels like a country estate, with manicured gardens ensuring peaceful surroundings. Ten rooms are located in the Manor House, the property's original residence, built in the 1850s; nearly half of the accommodations are suites and cottages, which offer various tiers of amenities, such as fireplaces, private patios and outdoor showers. An on-site spa provides an array of pampering treatments. Also on the premises is Saddles Steakhouse, where a *Wine Spectator* Award of Excellence-winning wine list complements the menu of steaks and chops. Beginning this summer, the hotel embarked on a facelift to bring the property to five-star status. The renovation, to be done in stages, is expected to be completed by summer 2019. —A.R.



MacArthur Place