HELLO, WINE COUNTRY

» THE CENTRAL COAST IS RIPE WITH GREAT EXCUSES FOR A WEEKEND GETAWAY, FROM THE SMALL GRAPE-CENTRIC TOWNS OF THE SANTA YNEZ VALLEY TO THE VAST PASO ROBLES REGION. AND NOW YOU’VE GOT THE GUIDE TO TAKE YOU THROUGH IT

BY MATT JAFFE
The heart of Santa Barbara County's wine country, the valley is stitched with little pockets that you can slip into for a weekend of sipping and swirling.

The Santa Barbara County wine country goes against the grain. While virtually all North American mountain ranges run north to south, this is the Western Hemisphere's only major wine region with east-west trending ranges. This orientation—some might call it sideways—creates a production of microclimates suited to a diverse assortment of grapes. Long valleys open directly to the Pacific's influence. And for every mile traveled inland, fog both becomes less frequent and lingers for a shorter time, as temperatures rise by a degree. It can be fit in the Santa Ynez Valley, near Lompoc, and push over 100 in the Happy Canyon AVA, the easternmost growing area. / The center of the region is the Santa Ynez Valley, less than two hours from Los Angeles via San Marcos Pass. The drive's 20 minutes longer if you stick to the 101 for the coastal views, which include Santa Cruz Island. Where one of Southern California's earliest wineries began in the 1860s. / The Santa Ynez Valley's winemaking tradition is considerably younger, not even 40 years old. Once better known for the apple, peach, and olive orchards that still grow here, the valley remained a viticultural hinterland for decades. The isolation nurtured winemakers with an independent streak, and even now the majority of producers qualify as boutique wineries.

Wine Trail: Foxen Canyon

- Connecting Los Olivos to the vineyards of the Santa Maria Valley, the Foxen Canyon Wine Trail is the definitive Santa Barbara County wine country drive. It's named for British sailormaster-vintner Benjamin Foxen, who, as legend goes, helped turn the tide of the Mexican-American War when he guided Bear Flag Republic troops around an ambush in the Gaviota Pass. The canyon is home to grazing cattle and scouring quail as well as such leading wineries as Andrew Murray Vineyards, where you can sample Rhône varieties in a decked-out rustic tasting room. One of the county's oldest wineries, Zaca Mesa offers sommelier-led tastings and tours that explore its 750 acres. Further up the trail, Foxen Vineyard & Winery honors its winemaking days with labels emblazoned with a ship's anchor. Built in a contemporary ranch design, Foxen's newer tasting room is the place to try its Burgundian and Rhône-style wines. But the Shack, a seemingly rickety blacksmith shop from the 1860s where Foxen grew its Bordeaux and Italian varietals, is the trail's classic stop.

Photography by Lisa Dutton
WORLDS APART

THE EASTERN EDGE: SANTA YNEZ

THE FIRE BRAND

THE GRILL
- Charkey's is the key. Chefs use theanko (a
low-salt grade) to season the steak and grill in
slices, then serve it for slow cooking
slices; also on order.

THE CUT
- Charkey's used six bottles of
truffle oil to season the steak.
Also the confit of
carrots and the sauce
of crispy almonds.

THE BURGERS
- The burger is a
house-specialty. The
meat is ground with
a secret blend of
seasonings.

MATERIALS
- The best bar-
becue meat is
meat from
sustainably
raised cows,
chickens, and
ducks.

ILLUSTRATIONS: DARBY FALLS
**SANTA RITA HILLS**

While it's still part of the Santa Ynez Valley AVA, this region stands on its own, with top-tier wines and the unlikely pleasures of little-old Lompoc.

As the Sta. Rita Hills AVA's reputation for world-class pinot noir and chardonnay grows, Lompoc has emerged as California's most unlikely wine country town. Best known for its proximity to Vandenberg Air Force Base and a federal penitentiary (where the ilk of rock-and-roll and Chuck Berry and fallen Watergate figure H.R. Haldeman did their time), Lompoc has only scattered vineyards on its outskirts back in the 1980s. Nobody paid them much mind, even though the Lompoc Valley's longitudinal identity as the self-proclaimed "raspberry capital of the world" was slipping away as growers moved to cheaper locations in places like Chile and Zimbabwe. Local farmers never thought that grapes would thrive in the cool, windswept valleys near town, but in 2000, a 380,000-acre area from Lompoc east to Buellton earned designation as what is now the Sta. Rita Hills AVA (the odd spelling is a compromise to avoid confusion with a region in Chile). Now Lompoc's endlessly mispronounced name (Lom-Peck, for the record) appears on the labels of coveted bottlings produced in the surging wine region on the edge of town. A roughly 34-mile loop from Buellton to Lompoc and back again easily covers the Santa Rita Hills region. Outside Lompoc along Highway 346, 'Spanish-style Meville Vineyards & Winery (left) wouldn't be out of place in Napa or Sonoma, while Bobcrok Winery & Vineyards' vintage include not only wines but also classic vinyl in its Soundsalc Lounge. Mostly unspared as it parallels the Santa Ynez River southeast of Lompoc, Santa Rosa Road leads to several wineries in a classic California farming valley. If the curves don't slow you down, a tractor probably will.

**TIPS FROM A VINTNER:**

**RICHARD SANFORD**

- Wine his advocacy in Santa Barbara County since the early 1990s, either Richard Sanford at Alma Rosa Winery & Vineyards shares some tasting tips:

  - *"Don't be intimidated by wine. Speak about wine through your experiences in taste and flavor and smell. That's what it's all about. I think the wine will recognize different elements that are familiar to you and be more relatable to your palate."*

  - *"The task of wine tasting is to fully enjoy your brain. Because you're using all of these different sensory parts and trying to put it together in some kind of explanation of taste and flavor. Sometimes people become too pedantic about wine. There is a certain snobbery that some people have more or less knowledge. But you can learn it all. And wine is such a beautiful beverage. If you can keep it at that, wine is a great experience, it's a remarkable elixir from a natural product."*

- **TOWN CENTER:**

  **LOMPOC WINE GHETTO**

  - Not all of the area's wineries stay within the 1,500-case-a-year production threshold that defines the pinot noir movement, the loose assemblage of small-batch producers who follow their own wine-making vision. But the Lompoc Wine Ghetto, a collection of vintners squeezed into an industrial park between a Home Depot and a mini-storage facility, is the place to find wines from the region's many innovative, independent makers.

  **Sta. Rita Hills by the Numbers**

  **TOWN CENTER:**

  **LOMPOC WINE GHETTO**

  - Not all of the area's wineries stay within the 1,500-case-a-year production threshold that defines the pinot noir movement, the loose assemblage of small-batch producers who follow their own wine-making vision. But the Lompoc Wine Ghetto, a collection of vintners squeezed into an industrial park between a Home Depot and a mini-storage facility, is the place to find wines from the region's many innovative, independent makers.

  **Sta. Rita Hills by the Numbers**

  **TOWN CENTER:**

  **LOMPOC WINE GHETTO**

  - Not all of the area's wineries stay within the 1,500-case-a-year production threshold that defines the pinot noir movement, the loose assemblage of small-batch producers who follow their own wine-making vision. But the Lompoc Wine Ghetto, a collection of vintners squeezed into an industrial park between a Home Depot and a mini-storage facility, is the place to find wines from the region's many innovative, independent makers.
SAN LUIS OBISPO

IN THE EDNA VALLEY AND THE ARROYO GRANDE VALLEY.
OCEAN BREEZES MINGLE WITH AN AGRARIAN PAST.

> YOU COULD DRIVE THE 101 for years and never realize they were here. The Edna Valley and the contiguous Arroyo Grande Valley to the south qualify as the Central Coast's stretch wine region. To find the Edna Valley, look for Price Canyon Road, which leaves the freeway and winds into the coastal hills, following Pismo Creek. A few miles past the pumkin patch at an oil production facility, the road leads into the valley, where farms, ranches, and vineyards stretch to the base of the Santa Lucia Range.

With the open terrain working as a conduit for the ocean air, Edna Valley is considered California’s coolest region—and prime country for pinot noir and chardonnay. For some perspective, head over to Edna Valley Vineyard. You may hear grumbling around the county about Gallo’s 2013 purchase of the winery, but the tasting room, renovated last year with floor-to-ceiling windows, opens to a panorama of the wide, flat valley, with one-shaped tập Hill and Bishop Peak in the distance. They’re two of the Nine-Sisters, the volcanic chain that includes Morro Rock over the coast. The Arroyo Grande Valley has its own marine influences but also areas with higher daily temperature swings suited to oceanic sauvignon, zinfandels, and syrahs. At Santa Cruz Canyon Vineyard in the Arroyo Grande Valley, unfinned vines were planted in the 1880s, surviving Prohibition and then decades of neglect. In the 1970s, Santa Cruz Canyon’s Bill Groover restored the vine, which had been overgrown by dense chaparral. Nearly 140 years since heating their first grapes, these vines continue to produce, starring in the winery’s estate wine.

TIPS FROM A VINTNER: MIKE SINOR

> As a Cal Poly San Luis Obispo student, Mike Sinor planned to teach high school shop. He hadn’t even tasted wine until the right night before interviewing for a job in an Edna Valley tasting room. Now Sinor makes acclaimed estate zinfandel at his Sinor-Lucente winery. He offers some wisdom:

Go for albariño
> "The Edna Valley might have the most albariño in California. It’s very oceanic in its heritage, so it was the Allen family— they own Bailey’s and Target in town—who went over to Spain and Portugal and identified albariño as a unique, aromatica white. They brought quite a lot of it back.”

Go easy
> "Road up on a region and a region and you’ll end up three wineries. This means on a right now lower and to your winemaking isn’t so easy, so you could figure out who has the lower-sodium and pinot noirs. Wineries are trained to sell as much as they can. But it’s OK to say no and focus on one thing.”

Go Grande
> "Arroyo Grande has two new tasting rooms. One is quaint, quirky, and light— good for a part of town. And Tantalus is a new brand from sommelier-turned-winemaker, Julio Klapow, who just opened a quaint spot. He’s got an impish style—corks are definitely on the loose."

WHERE TO STAY:

TOWNS ON THE EDGE

SAN LUIS OBISPO
> An easy side trip from the vineyards, Taste it all you pair items like both milk strudels with hazelnut-topped feta marinated and cheese and from its comfort-stepped menu. In town, the Mission hosts special events with leading small-production winemakers in a beautifully converted Art Deco gas station, while SLO’s most stylish lodgings are at the Grandada Hotel & Bistro ($279-$849), where the square footage is tight but the brick walls and Euro atmosphere make up for it.

PISMO BEACH
> There’s plenty of action in this vineyard beach town, especially around the pier, which is the midpoint of a hike. Just opened, the 104-room Inn at the Pier ($159-$469) brings a contemporary beach-chic vibe and touch of luxury to the heart of Pismo. Three blocks away, Arlitt and Lisa Hallberg can walk you through the encyclopedic collection of Central Coast produce at their wine bar. Tours of the Valley’s five minutes up the road, Shell Beach’s gourmet doll DePolo & Sons has what you need for winery or beach picnics.

AVILA BEACH
> If coastal towns tend to be more about views than syrahs, Avila Beach (above) is the exception, with no fewer than five tasting rooms a block from the sand. You can kayak among the sea otters and sea lions on an outing with Avila Beach Paddleports, and for some history, book a trolley or hiking tour that visits the 1868 Point San Luis Lighthouse. Then pair the day views of Men’s on Harford with some crab cakes before calling it a day at Avila La Ponda ($125-$325).
A few years ago, William and Katherine Bisson-Carter began a search. He had served for nearly 30 years as executive chef at the Playboy Mansion, while she worked in the fashion industry. Wanting to begin a new stage of their lives and open their own wine country ten, the couple looked at regions all over the state, from Guadalupe on the Mendocino Coast to Lodi in the Central Valley and up to the Sierra foothills. They eventually found a hilltop Tuscan-style villa on 1,500 acres with panoramic views just outside downtown Paso Robles that they now operate as the Canton Hill Villa ($355-$825). The property itself was a big draw for the two, but so was the region. “A lot came into play,” William says. “But the world-class wine being made in Paso Robles was a big factor.” Paso Robles’ rise as a wine region is startling for anyone who can remember the days, not that long ago really, when a root beer at the late, great 21st Street Drive-In was a highlight of the culinary scene. More than 50 percent bigger in area than the Napa Valley AVA, Paso Robles rapidly went from emerging to emerged, and the industry’s growth only continuous. If not literally exponential, the increase of bonded wineries in Paso Robles is nevertheless remarkable—from 26 in 1995 to 200 today. More perhaps than other Central Coast regions, Paso Robles is a range of California and European flavors. The many farm-to-table restaurants can count on the farms and ranches that continue to operate nearby. Bisson-Carter set his alarm for three different farmers’ markets, and a rock-treed trail that drops from the villa into a cave leads to Killer Ridge Olive Farm, which makes premium Tuscan-style olive oils. “There’s definitely a Tuscan and Italian feel but also the French as well,” he says. “This area could be taken for Burgundy, if certain senses, given that we have bountiful varieties growing in some incredibly talented French winemakers. In fact, now we have winemakers coming from all around the world and setting up shop here.”
The region is vast. You’re not going to drink it all up in a day, so aim for a few highlights.

**EAST OF THE 101: TEMPLETON TO TIN CITY**

- Even at more development cues in Templeton, the grain and feed tower qualifies as a skyline, the old ranching and farming town feels far apart from Paso Robles in a re- stored 1868 build-

- Pao’s acclaimed Arti-
son, run Kitchenette, a latter-day, subve-

ted diner with dishes like mushroom and Parmesan penne-

ta at breakfast and a lamb-dip server with pinot noir goat cheese for lunch. Two miles east, the industrial-

tle Tin City, with its cluster of steel-clad buildings set amid the oaks, is kind of a pol-

- **WEST OF THE WEST SIDE: THE YORK MOUNTAIN AVA**

- **HEART OF THE WEST SIDE: DRIVING AMONG THE VINES**

- **BEYOND WINE: YOU DIDN’T REALLY THINK PASO’S POURING ONLY WINE, DID YOU?**

- **HARD Ciders**

- **CRAFT BEER**

- **SPIRITS**

- **The testing room at Epoch estate wines**