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No whining on hiking, biking tours along Sonoma County vineyards



Daylong bike tours of the wine country around Healdsburg, Calif., pass vineyards and make stops at three wineries for tastings.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



Jordan's Winery Chateau is the ending point of a hike through its wine estate.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



Cookies and fruit make the perfect ending to a catered lunch for bike tours stopping at Martorana Family Winery.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



A three-mile hike leads past vineyards at Jordan Vineyard & Winery near Healdsburg, Calif.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

By Katherine Rodeghier
Daily Herald Correspondent

The breeze rushes over my shoulders and the sun kisses my face as I pedal along a country road winding through vineyards an hour north of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. A hill poses a bit of a challenge for those of us who are not avid bicyclists, but no one complains. The promise of wine lies just ahead.

Tasting the fruit of the vine need not be a passive experience in the wine country around Healdsburg, Calif., where hiking and biking tours allow you to get a workout and some fresh air between tastings. Smack dab in the middle of three major wine appellations, Healdsburg makes a convenient base for exploring the wine country on the north end of Sonoma County. You'll find more than 100 wineries and tasting rooms, about 30 of them within walking distance of the charming downtown plaza.

Riches in the soil

The Gold Rush brought Harmon Heald here in 1857, but he soon turned from panning for his fortune to cultivating crops. After the railroad came through in 1871, farming flourished on soil so fertile it could grow almost any crop. Italian immigrants planted vineyards, but when Prohibition came along, farmers ripped up vines and planted prunes, a cash crop so successful it took more than a half century for winemaking to make a strong comeback.

"This truly is one of the great spots of the world where everything grows," said John Jordan, second-generation proprietor of Jordan Vineyard & Winery. Standing at a glass pavilion at Vista Point, the highest spot on the 1,200-acre ranch, Jordan pointed out Mount Saint Helena and Geyser Peak to hikers who'd gathered for the start of a three-mile hiking tour the winery began offering last year.

Three wine appellations can be seen from this spot: Alexander Valley below, Dry Creek Valley to the west and the Russian River Valley southwest. The Pacific Ocean, just over the horizon, often brings cool breezes and morning fog to the county lending Sonoma wine some of its character. Busy Napa Valley to the east may be better known, but it's smaller and more compact than Sonoma County's quiet, rural expansiveness.

Jordan's father founded the vineyard and winery in 1972, inspired by the great wine estates of France. Our hiking guide leads us past neat rows of vines in sustainably farmed vineyards, lush olive orchards, pastures where cattle raise their heads as we pass and lakes stocked with fish. We spot wild turkeys, deer and the estate's miniature donkeys along the way. Two rest stops for water break up our moderately strenuous hike, but the real relaxation comes after we pass the chef's garden and plop down on the patio of Jordan's Winery Chateau. We make a picnic lunch of a charcuterie spread paired with Jordan chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon.



From the Vista Point at Jordan Vineyard & Winery hikers have a view of mountains and three valleys designated as wine appellations in California's northern Sonoma County. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Pedal, sip, picnic

For those who would rather explore the wine country around Healdsburg on two wheels, guides for Wine Country Bikes lead a daylong tour through Dry Creek Valley giving a rolling narration of history and local lore between stops at three wineries.

You'll be fitted on a Trek Verve Hybrid bike with helmet at the bike shop in Healdsburg before setting off on a casual ride covering 15 to 20 miles of rolling hills and country roads. A support van picks up anyone who poops out. Perhaps more importantly, it stands ready to transport any wine purchases you make along the way.



Bikers enjoy a tasting at Quivira Vineyards, known for its biodynamic farming practices. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Winery stops vary. Our first tasting at Quivira Vineyards, quivirawine.com, comes with an explanation of the winery's commitment to labor-intensive biodynamic farming, closely monitoring the soil to ensure it contains healthy microbiotic life. As opposed to methods used in big agriculture, this 110-acre property has a self-sustaining system that limits production but improves the quality of the wine.

After sampling a few vintages, paired with local cheese, we stroll past the winery's coops of free-range chickens, garden of heirloom varietals and a pig pen where we're delighted by little squealers darting about. Wine Creek flows along the property. We see the silver backs of salmon flashing in the current.

At Martorana Family Winery, martoranafamilywinery.com, we're entertained by a playful Portuguese water dog named Sauvignon Blanc as we sip chardonnay, zinfandel and, yes, sauvignon blanc. The tasting room is tucked beneath a hillside with an energy-saving living roof above us so we take our glasses up top to drink in the view.

Martorana wines are certified organic by the state of California and our guide carries a few bottles to picnic tables where we sit down for a gourmet lunch of sandwiches, sides and platters of big, freshly baked cookies.



In the spring, hikers who take the guided hike at Jordan Vineyard & Winery may see buds on the vines just starting to open. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

Bikers pedal back toward town, making a final stop at Longboard Vineyards where they relax in the casual Surflounge reflecting the owner's twin passions: wine and surfing. Israel-born Oded Shakked collects and restores vintage longboards, so it's no surprise that surfboards hang on the tasting room's ceiling and walls. After surfing on four continents, he settled in Sonoma County, founding the winery in 1998. He named his estate vineyard Dakine, Hawaiian for "The Best."

Sip and see if you agree.

• *Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored by the Healdsburg Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Bureau.*

Healdsburg, Calif.

Visitor information:

- Healdsburg Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Bureau: 217 Healdsburg Ave., (707) 433-6935, healdsburg.com/

Hiking:

- Jordan Vineyard & Winery: guided hike in spring, summer and fall for \$95, estate tours in a comfy coach also available for \$120, jordanwinery.com/

Biking:

- Wine Country Bikes: one-day tours cost \$139 per person, multiday tours and bike rentals, including tandems and baby trailers, also available, winecountrybikes.com/

Lodging:

- Calderwood Inn: guests of the bed-and-breakfast receive complimentary tastings at eight wineries, calderwoodinn.com/
- Haydon Street Inn: Bed-and-breakfast in a 1912 Victorian-style house with a three-course breakfast, haydon.com/
- Honor Mansion: AAA four-diamond bed-and-breakfast, honormansion.com/

Dining:

- Valette: two brothers created this upscale restaurant specializing in California cuisine with a French style, valettehealdsburg.com/
- Campo Fina: Casual Italian restaurant showcasing some of grandma's home cooking, campofina.com/
- Parish Café: Cajun cookin' in wine country, theparishcafe.com/

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