

Relaxed Yorkville Highlands welcomes wine visitors

Remote Anderson Valley offers a getaway for wine lovers, fall or spring.

Just a few miles from Interstate 101 – but a world away from the bustling highways of Napa and Sonoma – Mendocino County’s Yorkville Highlands winemaking district welcomes visitors to the remote Anderson Valley.

Family wineries and rustic farmsteads nestle peacefully among vineyards and apple orchards; and upland pastures dotted with sheep and lambs are sheltered by steep mountains on both the coastal and inland sides. Majestic pines and redwoods climb the slopes. On a clear day, you can look north to snow-capped peaks.

Its natural ramparts have helped to protect the Anderson Valley from most commercial development, despite the fact that it’s only 20 miles from the hot spots of the Mendocino coast. Local businesses tend to stay locally owned; there’s not a fast-food restaurant or chain store to be found. You’ll seldom see a limousine or tour bus, and tasting is still free at the wineries along Highway 128.



“You can breathe”

Most visitors hurtle through the Anderson Valley on their way to or from the coast, taking just an hour or two to taste some of its celebrated wines before rushing on to their next destination. But those who spend more time inside the valley walls soon find themselves easing into a slower pace – especially after harvest in the fall.

“It’s beautiful, and it’s very relaxing,” says Karen Meyer, an Australian vintner who moved to Yorkville Highlands in 2004 to make wine with her husband Matt at Meyer Family Cellars. The couple’s easy-going winery offers a comfortable picnic ground, kitchen gardens and a bocce court where visitors can linger and play a game.

“Nobody’s going to move here for the conveniences, but as far as day-to-day living, it’s very nice,” adds Meyer, who lives over the winery with her husband and their 1-year-old daughter Sidney. The nearest store, a deli, is 6 miles away.

“For people who remember the Napa Valley of the 1960s – when there were still sheep-grazing and apple orchards there – it may be a nice recollection of what they remember fondly about Napa,” says Mary Elke, who makes both wine and organic apple juice a few miles from the Meyers’ place. In general I like to say that the Anderson Valley is like the Anderson Valley 50 years ago, rather than compare it to Napa. However, I think that because the quote is coming from Mary I am comfortable with it.

“You can breathe. You can feel like there’s space and time to do things.”

The valley’s orchards and sheep farms evoke not just an earlier decade, but another century. When the fog is in, the entire landscape takes on the spirit of a place out of time – a Brigadoon of apple trees, grapevines and misty hills, with a whiff of woodsmoke in the air.

The Anderson Valley’s sunny days, cool nights and frequent doses of that fog – drawn in from the valley’s coastal northern end – are the recipe for some extraordinary cool-weather wines that have earned a growing reputation. But for the most part, the valley has stoutly resisted the romance of its hype. Wineries take pride in offering visitors not only a relaxed, fee-free tasting experience, but a chance to taste the true nature of the land expressed in wine.

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A winemaking family bets on syrah

Syrah – which must have low nighttime temperatures, or it will lose the acid needed for a well-balanced wine – is a grape perfectly suited to the upland vineyards of Yorkville Highlands, which bask in sun by day but cool down quickly after sundown.

At Meyer Family Cellars (19750 Highway 128), co-winemakers Matt and Karen Meyer are actively pursuing the dream of creating a truly great syrah from local fruit. Over the past few years, the couple has worked with more than half a dozen of their grape-growing neighbors who have planted the grape known Down Under as shiraz.

In their tasting room, the Meyers pour a 2003 Mendocino County syrah that's drinking beautifully now, though Matt believes it will show even greater character after a couple more years in the bottle. In 2006, the Meyers made their first syrah with grapes sourced strictly from the Yorkville Highlands appellation.

Before long, the Meyer Family tawny port – a legacy of patriarch Justin Meyer, Matt's father and co-founder of Silver Oak Cellars in Napa – will also become a local product made from Mendocino County zinfandel.

Unlike vintage ports, Meyer Family is made in the solera style more commonly associated with sherry: New zinfandel from old vines is blended in each year for the five to six years it spends in barrels. Once the port is bottled, another three years will pass before it is released for sale; each year, the percentage of local zinfandel increases in the Meyer Family barrels.

One of the few solera ports being produced in North America, Meyer Family Port was originally available only at Silver Oak; today it has a growing base of fans who, having polished off or gifted a bottle, find themselves compelled to order more of this silky, fragrant elixir.

Planning your trip

Autumn, with its warm days and woodsmoke nights, is the perfect time for a day or weekend trip to the Anderson Valley – unless you're looking for wildflowers, which carpet the ground in spring. One local botanist has tallied more than 100 blossoms, bulbs and ferns, including the dainty baby blue eyes (nemophila), wild carnation and the aptly-named winecup (clarkia).

To get into the easygoing Anderson Valley spirit, stay off the freeways as much as possible. The simplest route from the Napa Valley is to take 128 all the way from Calistoga, through the Knights and Alexander Valleys and on to Mendocino County, driving with care on the scenic, often narrow and winding road. 128 joins 101 from Geyserville to Cloverdale before heading west into the hills. With nearly half a dozen tasting rooms in Yorkville Highlands alone, and over a dozen in the Anderson Valley, visitors can plan their tasting itinerary in advance or simply wing it; to learn more about the vintners and their offerings, visit <http://www.yorkvillehighlands.org/intro.html> online.

Valley wineries don't offer food, but there are several markets where wine tasters can find sustaining snacks. Boonville, just north of Yorkville Estates, has dining choices that range from the upscale Boonville Hotel to Lauren's, a comfortable spot that caters to locals with a well-priced, versatile menu, a pool table and a children's play area.

The valley has one hotel, one motel and an assortment of B&Bs; they usually fill up on weekends, so make your reservations in advance. Top-flight lodgings include the Other Place and the Boonville Hotel; there's also several bed and breakfasts and camping among the redwoods at Hendy Woods State Park and other sites. Most rooms require a two-night stay on weekends. See www.andersonvalley.org for listings.