



Photograph: Michael Cervin. Maps: Maggie Neilson

## My perfect day in Santa Barbara

### Morning

Drive to your first stop at the new Pali Tasting Room in Santa Barbara's Funk Zone, close to the ocean. Pali offers a good exploration of New World Pinot with its wines from Oregon and California. The Santa Rita Hills Pinot is impressive ([www.paliwineco.com](http://www.paliwineco.com)).



### Lunch

Enjoy the oceanfront patio at the Four Seasons (pictured below), a few miles away, and look out for whales. Order a bottle of Gavin Chanin's exquisite Lutum Santa Barbara Pinot Noir.



showing best at the moment – not the current release – and you are likely to get some quality time with someone on the winemaking team. Appointments are a must ([www.jonata.com](http://www.jonata.com)).

### Evening and overnight

A five-minute drive brings you to Los Olivos where you can leave the car as everything is within walking distance. Stop by the Qupé tasting room for a stellar selection of Rhône varietals, especially the Sawyer Lindquist Grenache and Rousanne wines. Then, cross the street to Mattei's Tavern, where you can settle in for dinner after a glass at The Watering Hole there for a tasting of Sandhi wines. These are beautiful expressions of the Santa Rita Hills: Chardonnays with mineral backbones and Pinot Noirs with an enviable blend of fruit, spice and earth. Finally, it's just a short stroll to the Fess Parker Inn (pictured above), a boutique hotel where all rooms and suites have a fireplace.



### Afternoon

Continue the scenic drive north deeper into Santa Barbara county. Next stop is Buellton for a private tasting at Jonata's winery. The wines easily outshine the warehouse setting, and you'll enjoy a rare opportunity to taste a range of terroirs from its award-winning and diverse portfolio (think sunny-climate Syrah and Sangiovese, and cool-climate Pinot Noir and Chardonnay). They'll pour what's

**Above: Cold Spring Canyon Arch Bridge over Santa Ynez Valley, one of the four AVAs of Santa Barbara County. The valley is a popular film location, including for the 2004 film *Sideways* – many movie fans make the pilgrimage to the nearby Hitching Post restaurant**

characterise. Here, steep oceanside cliffs yield to softer rolling hills dotted with olive trees, wild lavender and bent, gnarled oaks. Cowboys and pick-up trucks mingle with BMWs and sedans, just as ranchers and winemakers mingle with tourists and farmers.

What some view as an identity problem, others view as an exciting opportunity to make wines without rules or expectations. Paul Warson, the winemaker for Firestone Vineyards, notes that 'because there are no rules, there aren't any to break'. Sashi Moorman, the winemaker for Sandhi Wines ([www.sandhiwines.com](http://www.sandhiwines.com)), relishes the environment, making some of his wines as they did in antiquity (stuffing berries directly into the barrel bung hole and allowing them to ferment for a year or longer); using unsealed concrete tanks for >



The *Decanter* travel guide to

# Santa Barbara California

**FACT FILE**  
**Number of licensed wineries** More than 200  
**Total vineyard hectares** 8,095ha-10,526ha  
**AVAs** Santa Maria Valley, Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Rita Hills and Happy Canyon  
**Main grape varieties** 55 are grown. Most wineries focus on Syrah, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Grenache

Individuality is the watchword in this still-emerging region, says Katie Kelly Bell. Visit soon for a taste of California's frontier spirit

WHEN THE CRITICALLY acclaimed Jonata winery was exploring initial vineyard sites in Santa Barbara's Santa Ynez Valley back in 2000, it invited select experts from across the globe to advise on everything from vineyard placement to density. The winemaker, Matt Dees, remembers one specific visit from a French winemaker from Bordeaux: 'He walked around, saying little. After digging the soil a bit with his pocket knife, he snapped it shut and, with a pronounced sniff, told us to plant asparagus.'

Thankfully, Jonata ignored his advice (even naming a wine Defiance in honour of the snub) and proceeded to cultivate world-class wines, garnering high praise for its Bordeaux varietals, Syrah and Sangiovese wines.

Indeed, defiance is the watchword in Santa Barbara County. This still-emerging wine frontier resists stereotyping and simplification, due in large part to the region's astonishing density of microclimates and intrepid winemakers who value individuality over rules.

Just two and a half hours north of Los Angeles, the area's small towns are vestiges of the old stagecoach line from Santa Barbara to San Luis Obispo. You'll find a few historic remnants of that time in some of the restored Old West frontier architecture, but it remains an impossible region to



Photograph: Lisa Thompson Photography



ageing, and forgoing the use of sulphur. Yet, for Moorman, the most dynamic element is the region's dramatic climate: 'The diversity of soil and the dynamic temperatures are a very rare combination; it's uncommon to have both in play.'

As a transverse valley – one of the world's few – a 17°C temperature variation exists from one end of the county to the other. A 21°C day in Santa Rita Hills (where Burgundian varieties thrive) is a 38°C day in Happy Canyon (great for Rhône varieties). The one constant is the Pacific Ocean's cooling influence, with breezes funnelled through the valley, soothing the grapes into gentle ripening, and nurturing acidity. The result is a beautiful marriage of fruit and freshness, variety and complexity. In a single day of wine touring you might come across a juicy cherry-berry Malbec, an Albariño perfumed with peaches and flowers and a dense, smoky Syrah – and you'll only have driven 24km. Given this extraordinary confluence of geography, sun and experimentation, Santa Barbara County is a wine adventurer's paradise.

And the word is out. Ethan Lindquist, national sales director for Qupé Winery ([www.qupe.com](http://www.qupe.com)) and the winemaker/owner of Ethan Wines notes: 'This region isn't a secret anymore.' Indeed, tourists from home and abroad flock here on weekends, which makes weekdays the ideal time to plan your cellar door visits. As for the right time of year to visit? Rain is rare and the weather is welcoming year-round, but spring and autumn are best for the beauty of the landscape and ideal temperatures.

### Tasting trails

The region is best considered as a wheel, with the town of Buellton at the centre and tasting trails as spokes heading in different directions. The towns are small and easily navigable, and distances are negligible – if you're ambitious enough you can manage two or even three spokes of the tasting wheel in a single day.

For a taste of cool-climate, Burgundian-style wines, make tracks for the town of Lompoc in the Santa Rita Hills, about 15 minutes from Buellton. Much like Burgundy, you'll find mostly Pinot Noir and Chardonnay here. Gavin Chanin, the winemaker for Lutum ([www.lutumwines.com](http://www.lutumwines.com)), notes that Santa Barbara 'has an ideal climate for Pinot Noir. Burgundy gets maybe 100 days from flower to harvest; we enjoy 130 days. Our wines ripen on sunshine, not heat'. The Santa Rita Hills Pinot Noirs drink like a prima ballerina with a no-nonsense left hook, delivering elegance, balance and beauty with spices, ripe fruit and serious concentration.

Take in the vineyard scenery and drive down Santa Rosa Road or park the car and sample wines in the Lompoc Wine Ghetto ([www.lompoctrail.com](http://www.lompoctrail.com)), aptly named for the industrial-park ambience of the tasting rooms. What it lacks in architectural charms it makes up for in delicious wines.

Two stops that also merit a visit are Piedrasassi ([www.newvineland.com](http://www.newvineland.com)), with gorgeous, small-batch Chardonnay and Syrah from the winemaker Sashi Moorman, and Palmina ([www.palminawines.com](http://www.palminawines.com)) – beautifully expressed Italian varieties: Arneis,

**Clockwise from top left: Jonata produces world-class reds; the tasting room at Firestone Vineyard has a flight of six wines for \$10; the Hitching Post is famous for its steak, as well as its appearance in the movie Sideways; the picnic area at Zaca Mesa, where there's a focus on Rhône varieties; cowboy boots at western outfitter Jedlicka's**

# Santa Barbara County

## WHERE TO STAY, SHOP, EAT AND RELAX

### Flavours of the old Wild West, and a touch of luxury

#### RESTAURANTS

##### Hitching Post

Relive the best and worst moments from the movie *Sideways* at this classic western steakhouse (where much of the movie was filmed). The menu features smoked duck, Texas quail and some serious steaks. [www.hitchingpost2.com](http://www.hitchingpost2.com)

##### Succulent

A great stop for breakfast, lunch or dinner. Try the poached eggs with braised spinach and buffalo sauce or biscuit with house-cured pancetta. [www.succulentcafe.com](http://www.succulentcafe.com)

##### Mattei's Tavern

Once a historic stagecoach stop, this newly restored destination has creative delights from its chef Robbie Wilson. His Dirty Laundry charcuterie – house-cured goodies hanging on a 'clothes line' over a board of cheeses – and pimento cheeseburger are worth the visit alone. The tavern has newly opened luxury cottages, plus spa, pool and restaurant. [www.matteistavern.com](http://www.matteistavern.com)

##### Full of Life Flatbread Pizza

This is where the locals go for quality pizza, but you'll also find foraged chanterelles, eggplant flatbread or heirloom tomato salad, depending on seasonal pickings. [www.fulloflifefoods.com](http://www.fulloflifefoods.com)

#### HOTELS

##### Koehler Winery

Rent the private home at this charming



winery along the rural Foxen Canyon Road. Perched on a hillside adjacent to the tasting room (pictured above), the home is spacious, with only grapes and goats for neighbours. The fully stocked kitchen makes it ideal for a large group travelling together. [www.koehlerwinery.com](http://www.koehlerwinery.com)

##### Fess Parker Inn

An historic inn, now a boutique hotel, ideal for a romantic escape, with a touch of luxury and an award-winning Champagne spa right in the centre of Los Olivos. Make time for breakfast at the hotel's Petros restaurant – the house-made Greek yoghurt and granola with Greek honey is world-class delicious. [www.fessparkerinn.com](http://www.fessparkerinn.com)

#### SHOP

##### Jedlicka's

Check out this tack shop, western outfitter and supply store in Los Olivos. One of the best cowboy-boot selections I've seen, as well as cowboy hats, shirts, jackets, jewellery, small gifts and belts. This has bags of local

character, showing the western heartbeat of this area – it's still wild country. [www.jedlickas.com](http://www.jedlickas.com)

##### Bin 2860

Located adjacent to the Fess Parker Inn in Los Olivos, this intimate shop (pictured below) is packed with a smart international and local wine selection and the region's best range of craft beers. Daily tastings are informative, and it's a great place to get local tips on dining and touring. [www.bin2860.com](http://www.bin2860.com)



### How to get there ✈

Direct flights into Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) with connections into Santa Barbara's local airport are best to avoid the Los Angeles traffic. From Santa Barbara the wine region is a 45-minute drive (or 2.5 hours from LAX).

Dolcetto and Barbera from the winemaker Steve Clifton. Be sure to pop into Sashi Moorman's bakery, New Vineland Bread, just behind his tasting room, for fresh loaves for your sandwiches later.

Serious Grenache and Syrah can be found on the northern spoke, up Foxen Canyon Road, about 10 minutes from Buellton. Here you'll bump into a bit more of the Wild West spirit of Santa Barbara County, and much higher temperatures. Vintners, such as Koehler ([www.koehlerwinery.com](http://www.koehlerwinery.com)), offer aromatic Rieslings along with the likes of a supple, rich Sangiovese/Cabernet Sauvignon blend (Magia Nera). It's also a peaceful picnic spot.

At Zaca Mesa ([www.zacamesa.com](http://www.zacamesa.com)) go for the samplings of Syrahs from some of the region's oldest vines – and enjoy the life-size chessboard and short winery hiking trail while you're there.

The town of Los Olivos, about five minutes' drive

from Buellton, is a mini-spoke on the wheel, but packed with tasting options. In addition to wine, you'll find olive oil producers and expert restaurateurs. The perfect place for an afternoon stroll, Los Olivos has a concentration of small winery tasting rooms, such as The Los Olivos Tasting Room ([www.thelosolivostastingroom.com](http://www.thelosolivostastingroom.com)), where nine wines are poured and 90 are for sale.

Santa Barbara County is no small region to explore, but that's part of the adventure. Winemakers are experimenting, and producing some knockout wines. But when darkness falls, all is quiet – a sudden contrast to the sunny optimism of a typical Santa Barbara day. Temperatures drop and stars emerge in an unparalleled density, leaving the sky lacy with glittering light. Now is the time to open your bottle of California sunshine, light a fire, and savour the taste of defiance. **D**

*Katie Kelly Bell is a freelance food, wine and travel writer*