

How—and Where—to Pair Wine and Business in California

BY JT LONG ON JANUARY 03, 2019

The Golden State is home to an abundance of wine countries, with immersive experiences around every corner. From goat yoga to ziplining, the liquid in the glass is just the beginning. The creative spaces and productive vibes flow just as freely. Meetings held in these laid-back locales pair well with team building. *Smart Meetings* checked in with Nancy Light, vice president of [Wine Institute](#), for some of the best group programs up and down the state.

North Coast

Often referred to as *the* wine country, Napa and Sonoma counties were made famous by besting the French in a 1976 blind tasting. The region has since become synonymous with world-class vintages, and an entire lifestyle—and associated meeting spaces—have grown to support the \$57.6 billion statewide industry. Here are some award-winning ways to enjoy all that bounty.

Winemaker for a Day: [Buena Vista Winery](#) in Sonoma County offers a “Be the Count” experience where guests can play the role of self-proclaimed Count of Buena Vista, Agoston Haraszthy, a vivacious and eccentric pioneer of California wine dating back to the founding of the winery in 1857. Wine educators guide attendees through the art of blending in the winery’s Cave of Curiosity. The result is a personalized bottle of red wine with a customized label.

Other Northern California wineries offering blending sessions include: Conn Creek Winery, Raymond Vineyards and Joseph Phelps Vineyards in St. Helena; Ravenswood Winery in Sonoma (famous for “unwimpy” wine); Rutherford Hill in Rutherford; and Shramsberg in Calistoga.

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In the emerging wine region of Livermore Valley in San Francisco's East Bay Area, [Wente Vineyards](#) offers black-glass blind tasting, where teams are challenged to guess a wine's color without seeing it. Guests are also led (without the blindfold) on a vineyard tour that features the family history of the property, more tastings and pairings in historic sandstone caves.

Bocce Tournaments: Another Sonoma County group favorite spot is [Francis Ford Coppola Winery](#). The Geyserville property owned by the legendary The Godfather movies director offers a parklike setting for up to 300 guests with family-style dining and serious bocce ball tournaments on four regulation-size courts.

Harvest Grape Stomp: If the company that crushes grapes together works better together, then [Trefethen Family Vineyards](#) in Napa Valley in the fall may be the ticket to better results that will pay rewards for years to come.

The visitor center dates to 1886, when the three-story gravity-flow building was still experimental. The Villa next door, which formerly served as the home of the Trefethen family and still serves as a model for the Arts and Crafts style architecture, is the backdrop for private tastings for groups of up to 10.

If you time it right, other wine country grape-picking and stomping opportunities are available at [Alexander Valley Vineyards](#) in Healdsburg, and [Benessere Vineyards](#) (home of competitive grape stomping) and [Grgich Hills Estate](#) in St. Helena.



Francis Ford Coppola Winery

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Culinary Masters: Food and wine go together like business and pleasure, so it is logical that world-class wineries offer masterclasses in the culinary arts for groups large and small. [Cakebread Cellars](#) in Rutherford holds cooking classes in The Winery House kitchen with the results of all that labor enjoyed on Pecan Patio. Wine pairings are served by the Cakebread team.

Another Livermore Valley favorite, [Concannon Vineyard](#), offers 90-minute lessons on the philosophy of pairing cabernet sauvignon with food, and then challenges participants to apply what they have learned in team-based competitions.



Trefethen Family Vineyards

Central Coast

From Santa Cruz to Paso Robles and the hills of Santa Barbara County, the middle of the state is producing wines and experiences that take top honors. Here are some of the varietals to explore along Highway 1—practically in Silicon Valley’s backyard—for your next best meeting adventure.

Goat Yoga: At [Bargetto Winery](#) in Santa Cruz Mountains, an all-levels yoga class surrounded by mini-goats is part yoga, part animal-assisted therapy. An hour of stretching is followed by 60 minutes of Goat Happy Hour (a flight of award-winning wines to sample). A special souvenir Goat Yoga wine glass is included.

In Los Gatos, [Burrell School Vineyards & Winery](#) offers sunset yoga and wine taught by a local instructor and followed by a five-course wine tasting featuring some of the wineries favorite reds and whites.



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Wine Concerts: Start the meeting off with a concert in the vineyard at [Clos LaChance Vineyards](#) in San Marin. Guests can enjoy the sights, sounds and tastes of their favorite place, with food prepared by an in-house chef and paired with Fintage 408 blends created to honor the local San Jose Sharks NHL team.

Wine and Chocolate Pairing: [Cooper-Garrod Estate Vineyards](#) in Saratoga offers winemaker-guided tours, followed by wine and chocolate pairings that are both educational and competitive. Groups break into teams to debate which vintages best enhance the artisanal sweets in a team-building activity where everyone wins.

More pairing experiences are on the menu at [Ridge Vineyards](#) in Cupertino, where the stunning vistas from Monte Bello Ridge pair perfectly with Private Estate tastings in a storied viticultural destination.

Cask Tasting: On the scenic campus of [Regale Winery and Vineyards](#) in Los Gatos, visitors can book tastings with the winemaker of premium selections drawn directly from magnificent French Oak casks, custom-made and shipped from the French Bordeaux region. At 11 feet tall and nearly 1,000 gallons, the casks honor the tradition of gracefully aging fine wines with the same centuries-old techniques used in France and Italy. A gathering that includes Pinot Pong Trivia tournaments and a cork engineering challenge in the Tuscan-inspired gardens will get any event off to a creative start.

Ziplining: For more perspective on the winery experience in the region made famous by the movie *Sideways*, [Ancient Peaks Winery](#) in Paso Robles hosts groups in Oyster Ridge Barn and buckles them up on a wire that ziplines over the vineyards.



Cooper-Garrod Estate Vineyards; photo credit: Ralph Andrea

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Horseback Meetings: At [Halter Ranch](#) in Paso Robles, the best way to see the 2,000-acre property, vineyards and caves is on horseback with a catered lunch for up to 50 people. Bonus: The tour includes details on the ultra-green building features of this innovative winery.

All-Terrain Vineyard Experience: In beautiful Lompoc, [Stanford Winery](#) offers Polaris ATV-driven tours of the rolling Sta. Rita Hills and tastings of pinot noir and chardonnay offered while guests stand next to the vines where the grapes were grown.

Private Pond Escape: At [Pence Vineyards and Winery](#) in Buellton, the view from the octagon-shaped Pond House is the perfect pastoral setting to enjoy the property and the small-production Penny Label Collection wines.



Stanford Winery

Progressive Tasting: The Coastline Tour at [Presqu'île](#) in Santa Maria spotlights eight limited-production wines paired with seasonally inspired food as part of a walking tour, which includes stops in the tasting room, a wine cave and the story of the Murphy family—which is ultimately one of connection, romance and dreams—and concludes in a private dining room, with an ocean view and acclaimed Presqu'île Vineyard pinot noir.

In nearby Los Olivos, [Stolpman Vineyards](#) also believes in taking guests into the hills for educational vineyard hikes. A guided traverse helps visitors discover for themselves why biodiversity and sustainable farming is key to world-class winemaking.

Southern California

Temecula Valley has grown into a leading wine region with easy access from all of Southern California. There are as many ways to borrow the wine country vibe here as there are varietals up for grabs. Here are a few ways to work the vino into the agenda.

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Family Style: Winemaking has been a tradition at [Robert Renzoni Vineyards](#) in Temecula since 1886. Borrow some of that heritage with a VIP tour and tasting experience. Wines are paired with imported Italian meats and cheeses for up to 12 guests.

Winemaker Competition: All the skills required to run a business—marketing, branding, sales, collaboration—are required to win the blending challenge at [Cougar Vineyard & Winery](#) in Temecula. Teams work together to create a blend of wines, design and create a label, name the blend, and then put together a marketing pitch that is presented to everyone. Winners are chosen by ballot.