



A Tasting to Remember

Eighteen of the best venues for exciting visits and flavorful wines

BY MARYANN WOROBIEC

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALANNA HALE

Tasting rooms were once places for guests simply to sample a winery's latest releases and purchase a few bottles as souvenirs. But times have changed. As Napa Valley tourism has evolved, many tasting rooms are offering something beyond wine: memorable experiences.

The best of these increasingly personalized visits tell the story of the winery in compelling details, often in beautiful settings that showcase impressive artwork and architecture. Tours are in-depth and custom-designed. Tastings typically last an hour or more, and they are often guided, seated and relaxed.

Don't be intimidated by the fact that most wineries require appointments: As Napa Valley's popularity has grown, so have the crowds, and reservations help wineries maintain a comfortable ebb and flow of customers.

Set appointments also give the visitors the chance to make the most of their time. When you call to book a visit, you may get quizzed on what kinds of wines you like or what your expectations are, all in an effort to further personalize your visit. Even if a winery doesn't require reservations, it's always best to phone ahead. Hours of operation can change with the season, and wineries are always adjusting their offerings to improve customers' experiences.

The listings below describe 18 of the most exceptional wineries to visit in Napa Valley today. Some are new destinations we're excited about, others original pioneers that have been refreshed or reimaged. But all go deep on education and hospitality.

Far Niente

1350 Acacia Drive, Oakville Telephone (707) 944-2861

Website www.farniente.com **Cost** Tours and tasting by appointment, \$75

Far Niente is one of Napa Valley's oldest and most romantic estates, a stone winery originally built in 1885 that today is surrounded by meticulously maintained gardens. It's a fairytale setting for a story about how Oklahoma nurseryman Gil Nickel purchased the property in 1979 and spent years restoring it, ultimately building a loyal following for its Chardonnay and Cabernet. A visit includes a tour, a look at the 40,000 square feet of caves, and a sit-down tasting of both current-release and library wines, paired with cheese and capped off with a taste of the estate's sweet white wine, Dolce.

When you walk by the carriage house, take a peek at the Nickel family collection of vintage automobiles. Call ahead to book reserved seating in the gazebo by the estate's small lake. —M.W.

