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CALIFORNIA ON THE WINE ROAD



CALIFORNIA

SUN, SCENERY AND WINERIES

Along with an array of wineries just waiting to be explored, Napa and Sonoma offer visitors a relaxed pace and stunning scenery.

By Catherine Elie

The road twists and turns along the coast, rising and falling, tossing up spectacular scenery around every curve, the Pacific undulating below. This is California as you always pictured it—except it's purely the untamed version, not the California of Malibu and the Beach Boys. We're taking the coastal road rather than the highway north from San Francisco to the Sonoma and Napa wine regions, drinking in the seaside sights before we get down to the serious business of winery touring and wine tasting.

On the road

Just crossing the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco was a dazzling experience. On the other side of the bay we stopped to check out **Sausalito**, where 1960s-era hippies have given way to bobos (bourgeois-bohemians). Sausalito is worth a visit for its waterfront promenade and stunning views of San Francisco alone.

Now we're on Highway 1, heading for Bodega Bay and the Sonoma Coast region. This is the slowest route for two reasons: There's no way you can drive fast on this narrow, tortuously twisty road. And you constantly want to pull over because the views are so sublime.

In a verdant valley, a sign for **Muir Woods** sends us inland from the main road. I've long dreamed of seeing California's giant 1,000-year-old

redwoods. But today I get only a glimpse because the park is so thronged with visitors that cars are parked all along the roadside leading up to the entrance for more than a kilometre. If you go, my advice is to get there very early in the morning.

We retrace our steps and are back on the coast within 15 minutes. Our next stop is **Stinson Beach**, very popular with San Franciscans on weekends. The beach is superb and there's a vaguely hippie look to the scene. Several inexperienced surfers are struggling clumsily to stay upright on their boards in today's gentle swells. A sign warns about the dangers of earthquake-generated tsunamis, a reminder that the San Andreas Fault is nearby.

From Stinson the road swings away from the steep coast to the little town of **Point Reyes Station**. The route is shaded by big trees, in complete contrast to the rocky, wind-beaten, rather barren coastal scenery. In Point Reyes Station, the delights at the quirkily named Bovine Bakery prove irresistible. I limit myself to a delicious fresh-blueberry muffin so as not to spoil my appetite, since we'll be lunching a little further on in the village of **Marshall** overlooking Tomales Bay. There isn't much to see in Marshall except The Marshall Store, an oyster shack on stilts, straight out of another era. We eat there, perched on stools facing ➤



Napa and Sonoma, California's flagship wine regions, share a laid-back lifestyle: nothing too formal or stuffy here. You don't need an appointment to visit most wineries, and can taste fine wines without ever feeling self-conscious.

(At right)

It makes sense to begin the Napa leg at the Robert Mondavi vineyard, namesake of the pioneering vintner who founded it in 1966. You'll instantly recognize the brand's iconic white archway and tower.



Photo: Jean Lessard



the bay: fabulous! The menu features crab, chowders and pulled-pork sandwiches as well as oysters.

After Marshall the road again veers away from the coast, taking us 36 kilometres north, through rolling fields dotted with a few grazing cows, and back to the ocean at **Bodega Bay**. It's the perfect place to stop for the night. We check in at the Bodega Bay Lodge, a CAA/AAA four-diamond property offering large, comfy rooms with balconies, plus a spa, a pool and a good restaurant, the Duck Club. Who could ask for anything more?

Hitch's feathered friends

Fishermen are busy on the Bodega Bay dock, for this is a working fishing village as well as a resort town. As the sun sets, rows of birds appear on the rooftops, harmless seagulls you see everywhere. Except in Bodega Bay, you see them in a different light, thanks to Alfred Hitchcock's horror/fantasy *The Birds*, filmed here 50 years ago. The bay looks the same as it did in the movie, but not the waterfront buildings. For that, you have to go a little inland to the village of Bodega, where Michael

Fahmie, a devoted fan of the legendary director, owns the Bodega Country Store. Part *dépanneur*, part bric-a-brac emporium, the one-time general store offers a mix of provisions and memorabilia related to the film shoot: photos, accessories and videos. "Tippi herself comes here twice a year," Fahmie says, referring to Tippi Hedren, the blonde actress who starred in the movie and is now 83. She has obligingly autographed photos for Fahmie despite the fact that her experience with Hitchcock was akin to torture (the subject of the 2012 film *The Girl*). Fahmie shows us the nearby church and school that were featured in *The Birds*. We recognize the sloping road and can almost see the schoolchildren running down it, pursued by a swarm of crows.

Sonoma à la française

From Bodega Bay we set out for Santa Rosa, 30 kilometres to the east, for our 10:00 a.m. appointment to tour the **DeLoach** winery. Though as DeLoach hospitality manager Lisa Vasse tells us, "you can actually come by any time, without a reservation, to taste the wines. And you can picnic on the grounds too," she adds as we marvel at the beauty of ➤

1 The Marshall Store overlooking Tomales Bay: on the menu, oysters and crab, chowder, and pulled-pork sandwiches.

2 and 3 Hitchcock shot part of *The Birds* in the village of Bodega which he "relocated" along the shore of Bodega Bay. The general store and school are still there, 50 years on. All that's missing are the terrified children fleeing the swarm of crows.



the property. "We sell picnic hampers, or you can bring your own lunch." A nice touch!

Founded in 1975, DeLoach was the first winery in the Russian River Valley, and the first to grow Pinot Noir here. In 2003, it was purchased by leading Burgundy producer Boisset Family Estates, which brought its expertise and viticulture techniques to the operation. Part of the vineyard is tended biodynamically—as in, they plant according to the phases of the moon and bury cow horns full of manure in the vineyards, the way farmers in France have done for centuries. I find myself thinking that California is always at the cutting edge of new technologies, yet at the same time, these kinds of ancient rituals are in perfect sync with the state's New Age and ecological leanings.

A chateau beckons

We lunch at **Willi's Wine Bar** in Santa Rosa. It's popular with locals, Vasse has told us. It's a friendly place with good food. We're seated on the terrace and share a selection of small, tapas-style dishes—sweet pea mac-n-cheese, fried ravioli stuffed with pork belly and

shiitake, lamb chops on preserved-lemon couscous, and the like—accompanied by our picks from a good selection of wines by the glass (Californian, naturally, but others too).

Next stop: **Chateau St. Jean**, less than 20 kilometres away. Built in 1920, the winery building sits amid magnificent gardens, with the mountains of Sugarloaf Ridge State Park rising in the background. Tables are dotted here and there in the shade. This is a great place to try the sandwiches, salads and charcuteries that, as at many wineries, are sold on the premises. It's very laid-back in Sonoma, the winery guide remarks. You can drop in at any time, taste the wines and explore the property on your own, or you can join one of the two daily "promenade tours." "On some days," he adds, "there are so many Quebecers you hear nothing but French." Indeed, Chateau St. Jean is well known in Quebec. Soon after I get back to work, a colleague tells me it was her favourite place when she visited Sonoma. "I dream of having my wedding there," she exclaims. And that would be doable, since the estate can host wedding receptions for 30, 150 or as many as 900 guests. ➤➤

4 Bodega Bay's walkway along the headland offers a stunning outlook over the Pacific and the sandy inlets far below. The Sonoma coastline, wild and rocky, buffeted by waves and wind, is markedly different from the valley of wine, a mere 30 kilometres eastward.

5 Chateau St. Jean is located in a superb setting amid flowering gardens. You can picnic in the shade of tall trees, enjoying the estate wines; or join the daily tours, without reservations.