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Uncorking the Perfect Long Weekend in California's Anderson Valley

The wineries, restaurants and unspoiled landscapes of the pocket-size valley are a sip away from San Francisco

By

MATT VILLANO

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ASK LOCALS IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S Anderson Valley what sets their sliver of a wine region apart from the more expansive and more popular haunts in the surrounding area, and they'll tell you that it's what Napa and Sonoma were 20 or 30 years ago. This 15-mile stretch of Mendocino County between Boonville and Navarro is quiet and unassuming—a place where children abound and many tasting-room employees bring their dogs to work.

In other words: wine country, in its purest form. And it's about three hours from [San Francisco](#).

At other local attractions—breweries, state parks and family-owned farms—you can feel like you've got the entire Valley all to yourself. Even during major events (the Anderson Valley Pinot Noir Festival takes place May 15-17) the region feels unhurried, uncrowded and unpretentious.

This complete lack of affectation can give a visitor as much of a buzz as the wine. Flip-flops are acceptable attire at any restaurant and you'll rarely have to wait for a table at even the busiest spots. Most tasting-room samples are free, unlike in Napa and Sonoma. And you'll probably get to quiz the winemaker directly about what you're drinking.

It does have some quirks. First, most local wineries grow Alsatian varieties, unusual for Northern California, where Bordeaux predominates. Second, the Anderson Valley stretch of Mendocino County vies with Humboldt County for the distinction of having more artists per capita than anywhere else in the state.

The area even developed its own language, called Boontling, which borrows from English, Gaelic and Spanish. Some folks still speak it today, and many of the words have been incorporated into local marketing (“bahl hornin, ’ ” a slogan you’ll hear at the local brewery, means “good drinking” in Boontling).

Though small, the Anderson Valley isn’t a region to speed through. Rather, it’s a place to savor, like one of its wines. Pack a pair of hiking boots and get out of the tasting rooms to explore. Three days is plenty of time to sample the best of Anderson Valley, but chances are you’ll leave wishing you had just a little bit more.

Day One // Friday

1 p.m. Arrive at San Francisco International Airport. Rent a car and beat the weekend traffic over the Golden Gate Bridge, north on Highway 101. You’ll know you’ve arrived in wine country (about an hour into your drive) when hillsides covered with houses give way to hillsides covered with vineyards. In Cloverdale, about two hours past the bridge, turn west on the two-lane California State Route 128 and head to the **Madrones** (*doubles from \$175 a night; themadrones.com*). Once the estate of owner Jim Roberts, this 2-acre Mediterranean-style enclave at the center of the Anderson Valley has nine extremely comfortable guest rooms, including four in what once was Roberts’s private home.

4:30 p.m. There are four tasting rooms at the Madrones: one each for the local wineries Signal Ridge, Knez, Drew and Bink. Purchase a bottle of Bubbles sparkling wine (\$25) from the Signal Ridge tasting room or the 2013 Anderson Valley Pinot Noir (\$34) from Knez. (All of the tasting rooms at the Madrones close at 5 p.m.) Then unpack and unwind in your room. When you’re feeling hungry, call Libby’s (8651 Highway 128; 707-895-2646), a five-minute drive west on Highway 128, for a takeout order of traditional Mexican food. Chef and co-owner Libertad Favela is deservedly famous in these parts for her juicy carnitas enchiladas in red sauce (\$15), but the guacamole (\$7), with whole chunks of fresh avocado, is memorable also. Bring your feast back to the hotel and enjoy it with the wine at a table in the garden or on your patio or balcony (six rooms have them). Finish the night stargazing: Out here, there’s no light pollution to ruin your view.



ENLARGE

The sitting area at the Madrones estate, which takes overnight guests, in Philo PHOTO: CHLOE AFTEL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Day Two // Saturday

10 a.m. Enjoy a lazy morning in your room. The Madrones doesn't serve hot breakfasts, but after a starter of complimentary cereal and yogurt in your room, hop in the car and drive west on Highway 128 back to near where you picked up dinner last night. Stop in at the old-fashioned **Lemons Philo Market** (8651 Highway 128), fill out an order slip for deli sandwiches (*starting at \$6*), and stash them in the car for a picnic lunch later in the day.

11 a.m. Start your morning of wine-tasting across the road from the market in the uber-modern tasting room at **Baxter Winery** (8660 Highway 128, baxterwinery.com). Here, 30-something winemaker Phillip Baxter uses old-world methods such as all-natural fermentation to produce limited numbers of single-vineyard Pinot Noirs from the Anderson Valley and the Mendocino Ridge appellation. Move on to **Husch** (4400 Highway 128, huschvineyards.com) which was granted a license to make wine in 1971 and remains the oldest winery in the Valley. Tastings are conducted in a closet-size, refurbished 100-year-old pony shed. After trying the wine at **Phillips Hill** (5101 Highway 128, phillipshill.com) in the old apple drying building, break out the sandwiches

Pinot Noir at **Lula Cellars** (2800 Guntley Rd., lulacellars.com). If 28-year veteran winemaker Jeff Hansen isn't there to greet you, the friendly winery dog, a Golden Labrador/Rhodesian Ridgeback mix named Honey, will. Allow about 45 minutes at each winery. (And remember, you'll be driving.)

2:30 p.m. Continue west on Highway 128 out of Anderson Valley. Just beyond the hamlet of Navarro, the road winds through **Navarro River Redwoods State Park**, an 11-mile stretch of dense redwood forest. The park has several campgrounds and hiking trails and is a great place to admire the variety—and immensity—of the natural beauty in this area. Some of the redwoods are so wide it would take four people to wrap around them.

3 p.m. Turn north at Highway 1 and bee-line for the Big River, a tidal estuary best explored on a hand-hewn redwood outrigger canoe from **Catch a Canoe & Bicycles, Too** (44850 Comptche-Ukiah Rd., catchacanoe.com). The rental shed is on the southern bank of the river, just before a majestically arching concrete bridge; three-hour rentals start at \$28 for adults, \$14 for kids. Look for seals, bobcats, herons and egrets foraging for food.

5:30 p.m. Cross the Big River Bridge and head into Mendocino, a sleepy village set atop bluffs that tower over the churning Pacific. The city flourished as a logging town until the 1930s and was reborn in the 1960s as a haven for artists. The artistic vibe remains today. Two local stores worth visiting are the **Highlight Gallery** (45094 Main St., thehighlightgallery.com), which sells ceramics, glass and turned bowls and boxes; and the **Sulis Blue Boutique** (45040 Main St.), which stocks trendy apparel and handbags. Be sure to walk the trails on the headlands: The area is one of the best spots in California to spot migrating gray whales through late May.

7 p.m. Cap the night with dinner at the **Trillium Café** (10390 Kasten St., trilliummendocino.com), a 20-table restaurant and three-room inn that occupies the ground floor of an old Victorian (*doubles from \$135 per night; trilliummendocino.com*). Chef Daniel Martin-Dzul prides himself on sourcing produce, meats and seafood from the Mendocino County coast. Standout dishes include the local ling cod with white beans and kale (\$25), and a house-made Cajun-spiced shellfish fettuccine (\$28). The real star here, however, is dessert: If the baked Alaska special isn't an option, try the salted caramel chocolate ganache tart (\$9). Pair it with a local Port or sweet wine before the hourlong drive back to the hotel.



ENLARGE

Farmhouse Mercantile in Boonville PHOTO: CHLOE AFTEL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Day Three // Sunday

9 a.m. After a light breakfast in your room at the Madrones, drive west again on 128—toward the ocean and the “Deep End” of the Valley. On most mornings, the landscape is blanketed in fog, a bright haze that prompts squinting, even with sunglasses. Just past Gowan Orchards, turn left onto Philo-Greenwood Road, cross a rickety bridge over the narrow Navarro River, and drive into **Hendy Woods State Park** (\$8 day-use fee per car). The park is home to two virgin groves of Coast Redwoods; trees in the larger grove, dubbed “Big Hendy,” stand more than 300 feet tall and may be close to 1,000 years old. Stop in at the ranger station and pick up a brochure for the self-guided hike along Discovery Trail. This flat, mile-long loop is a quick, easy and relaxing introduction to local flora and fauna. If you’re lucky, you might see an acorn woodpecker working beak to bark; if not, you’ll see the bird’s handiwork in the form of acorns stuffed into holes in trees.

10:30 a.m. On the north side of the bridge, the biodynamic Philo Apple Farm (philoapplefarm.com) operates a self-service farm stand that sells everything from hard cider (\$12 for 750 ml) to chutneys (\$15 a jar) and dried apple rings (\$5 a bag). When no one is around, the farm operates on an honor system outlined on the barn wall: Be sure to record your transaction in the ledger on the counter. Co-owner Karen Bates also keeps three

spacious-but-simple guest cottages distinguished by different-colored doors (*from \$225 a night, philoapplefarm.com*). Each has a fireplace and a ceiling fan; none has a television. Foodie trivia: Ms. Bates's parents—Don and Sally Schmitt—are co-owners of the farm and were the original founders of Napa Valley's French Laundry, before selling it to current owner Thomas Keller in 1994.

11 a.m. Follow 128 back past the Madrones to **Lichen Estate** (*11001 County Road 151, lichenestate.com*), an organic winery garnering attention for something only a handful of other local wine producers make: white Pinot Noir. Lichen's take on this innovative wine is a blend of 60% Pinot Noir and 40% Pinot Gris; it stays white because owner Doug Stewart picks the Pinot Noir grapes early, presses them gently and limits contact with the skins (which is what produces a red complexion). The end result is a sweet elixir with hints of pink grapefruit and peach—like sparkling wine without the bubbles. Tastings are held at a dark wood table in the former dining room of a restored 100-year-old farmhouse; on most days, assistant winemaker Dan Rivin (who lives upstairs) hosts them himself.

12:30 p.m. You don't want to drink too much on an empty stomach, which means it's time to double back past the Madrones. Continue 10 more minutes for lunch in **Boonville**, a handful of shops and buildings along a short stretch of 128. In the middle of town, on the north side, the eight-table **Mosswood Market & Café** (*14111 Highway 128*) serves soups, salads and sandwiches, but locals swear by the house-made basil-potato and chorizo-goat cheese empanadas (*\$3 each*), which usually sell out by 1 p.m. In summer, **Lauren's** (*laurensgoodfood.com*), a pub with an eclectic menu featuring California cuisine, is another reliable option for midday meals, as long as you've got time to wait for unhurried (read: slow) servers.

2 p.m. After lunch, check out the operation at **Pennyroyal Farm** (*14930 Highway 128, pennyroyalfarm.com*), an artisanal cheese manufacturer on the south side of 128 near the eastern outskirts of town. The 100-acre farmstead is expected to open a solar-powered barn and tasting center in late summer, but for now, cheese maker Casey Sanderson leads tours (*\$15 adults; \$10 kids*) at this time every day. These 45-minute walks are windows into life on the farm. Ms. Sanderson will lead you through the goat barn, where you'll meet some of the 150 goats and sheep that provide milk for the cheese. She'll also walk you through the meticulously clean small-batch cheesemaking facility. Afterward, you can sit at picnic tables out back to taste soft and hard cheeses made on-site.

2:45 p.m. Check in early for the 3 p.m. tour at **Anderson Valley Brewing Company** (*17700 Highway 253; avbc.com*), a craft brewery just around the corner. While you're waiting in a cavernous taproom that reeks of malty hops, sample some of the 20 beers on tap—a lineup that includes the sweet-and-sour Gose, a beer brewed with saltwater and 50% malted wheat. The tour takes you into the brewhouse, where you get a close look at the all-copper, 100-barrel brewing system. Afterward, grab a small Frisbee and try out the on-site, professional-grade disc golf course, just to say you did.

4:30 p.m. Take a quick break for retail therapy at **Boonville's Farmhouse Mercantile** (*14111 Highway 128, farmhouse128.com*), which specializes in high-end modern items with a country flair, and sells everything from tablecloths to teapots, jewelry, paintings and furniture. For antiques and vintage items—especially old glassware and jewelry—peek into **Fish Rock Farm Girls**, a lively shop next door.

6 p.m. End the night at **Table 128**, the roadhouse-style restaurant at **Hotel Boonville** (*14050 Highway 128, boonvillehotel.com*) downtown. Chefs Brennon Moore, Melinda Ellis and Johnny Schmitt rely on local and seasonal ingredients to create new prix fixe menus (\$38-\$58) from Thursday to Monday every week. Most meals are between three and five courses, and all dishes are served family-style. In spring, one menu featured grilled liberty duck breast with farro, carrot, fennel bulb, roasted radish and fava bean; another spotlighted baked local halibut with yellow-eyed bean ragout, caramelized leek and feta-and-black-olive salsa verde. From here, it's about a 10-minute (pitch-black) drive back to the Madrones.

Day Four // Monday

9 a.m. By now, you've been eating (and drinking) quite a bit. Follow breakfast in your room with a morning stroll in the adjacent Indian Creek County Park or a brief run in the vineyards. When you return, check out and load the car.

11 a.m. Before you leave the Madrones, make time to visit the on-site tasting rooms once more, and this time try them all. Start with the spicy Watchtower Zinfandel from **Signal Ridge** (*signalridge.com*), which grows grapes at more than 2,600 feet, making it one of the highest-elevation vineyards in Mendocino County. Move on to a jammy Syrah from **Knez** (*knezwinery.com*), which sells wine from an estate comprised of two single vineyards. Next, sample the surprisingly light Syrah from **Bink** (*binkwines.com*), an artisan winery that uses sustainably grown grapes from a hillside property in the nearby Yorkville Highlands appellation. Finish up with pinots at **Drew** (*drewwines.com*), many of which boast enough complexity and earthiness to rival some of the more famous labels from the Russian River appellation.

1 p.m. Walk across Highway 128 to the last winery of the trip: **Balo** (*9001 Highway 128; killerpinot.com*). Here, in an ornate tasting room with a lodge-style fireplace, sample a range of wines including dry Riesling, white Pinot Noir and single-vineyard pinots from the 8-acre estate, which owners Tim and Michele Mullins farm with as little irrigation as possible. On busy days the owners offer tasting-room guests free pizza (from the on-site, wood-fired pizza oven) and other homemade hors d'oeuvres. Out front, there are two commercial-grade bocce courts, should you wish to indulge your competitive spirit between sips (or sweat out some of the alcohol).

2 p.m. Stop in Boonville one last time for lunch at the country-style **Boonville General Store** (*14077 Highway 128*). Soups and sandwiches (\$6-\$10) are a mainstay at this counter-service eatery; both come with hearty portions of house-baked bread. If it's not too hot, take your food outside and sit at one of the long picnic tables that look out on Highway 128. Also, be sure to buy extra cookies and scones (\$1-\$3) for the road.

3 p.m. Head out on the drive back to San Francisco International Airport toting a few bottles of Anderson Valley Pinot Noir and a newfound appreciation of this slower alternative to Napa and Sonoma.



























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GREEN ACRES | The 15 miles along State Route 128 between Boonville and Navarro, in northern California's Mendocino County, is an off-the-radar wine region and natural playground less than three hours north of San Francisco. *CHLOE AFTEL*

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A van on Main Street *CHLOE AFTEL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Ready to uncork a bottle in the tasting room at Husch Vineyards winery, in Philo. *CHLOE AFTEL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Bluffs in the Pacific off the coast of Mendocino. *CHLOE AFTEL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

One of the cabins available for overnight guests at Hedy Woods State Park. *CHLOE AFTEL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Handmade cheeses from Pennyroyal Farm, in Boonville. *CHLOE AFTEL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Beers from Anderson Valley Brewing Company. *CHLOE AFTEL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Sampling the wares at Lula Cellars in Mendocino. *CHLOE AFTEL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Boonville's Farmhouse Mercantile specializes in high-end modern items with a country flair. *CHLOE AFTEL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

At Balo, sample a range of wines including dry Riesling and white Pinot Noir. *CHLOE AFTEL FOR THE WALL STREET*

Take a tour at Anderson Valley Brewing Company, where you get a close look at the all-copper, 100-barrel brewing system. *CHLOE AFTEL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

A baby goat at Pennyroyal Farm *CHLOE AFTEL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



MENDOCINO

CALIFORNIA

NAVARRO RIVER
REDWOODS
STATE PARK

NAVARRO

PHILO APPLE FARM

THE MADRONES

HENDY WOODS
STATE PARK

BOONVILLE

PENNY
ROYAL
CHEESE

ANDERSON
VALLEY
BREWING
CO.

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CLOVERDALE

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