

# Forbes



## SANTA BARBARA IS THE MOST EXCITING WINE DESTINATION IN THE U.S.

BY KIM WESTERMAN, OCT 28, 2021

The major viticultural areas in the United States offer wine lovers a range of sensory experiences and aesthetic styles – from the lush Pinot Noirs of the Sonoma Coast to the crisp Rieslings of New York’s Finger Lakes, and all the Cabernets and Chardonnays in between, not to mention urban wines and naturals. But there’s something about Santa Barbara right now that is really occupying its moment, staking claim to a confident space where good

farming intersects with careful vinification as it taps into the oenological and cultural zeitgeist. Santa Barbara is geographically diverse, culinarily astute, and gorgeous in all directions – the perfect formula for the wine country we all need right now.

One of the reasons I make this rather bold assertion has to do with climate change. The geographical feature that figures most prominently in this analysis is the east-to-west valley that is the largest on the Western Pacific Coast – not just the California Pacific, but the entire span, from Alaska to the north down to Chile in the south. This large traverse, and its direction – which you can actually see from high coastal ridges, here and there – ensure the cool climate that so many of our favorite wine grapes love, especially the Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs that Santa Barbara is known for. And even inland where the temperatures are much warmer, it’s not too hot to grow Cabernet Sauvignon. The Bordeaux varietal that made Napa famous is becoming increasingly hard to grow there, and Santa Barbara may just end up being one of its new favorite terroirs. Syrah is also especially promising in this area, given its need for warm days and long, slow growing seasons, so you’ll find both southern Rhône-style blends that include Syrah and 100% Syrah bottlings that capture the very best of this grape’s expression. The chief white grapes of the Côtes du Rhône – Viognier, Marsanne and Rousanne – all fare well in this climate, and Santa Barbara winemakers are carving out their own niche with them.

Santa Barbara has seven AVAs (American Viticultural Areas), and I visited five of them last Spring in hopes of getting a better sense of this region that I’ve dipped into piecemeal for many years running. My initial impressions – that Santa Barbara is the most compelling wine destination in the U.S. right now – were borne out by three days of walking the vineyards, tasting the wines, and talking with the winemakers who call this place home. And the tasting room experiences are not formulaic, as in other popular wine destinations. Here, creativity rules, both in winemaking and hospitality.

Here are nine highly recommended wineries to visit on your next foray into the wide world of Santa Barbara wines, representing five of the seven AVAs and offering a range of tasting room styles, from super-casual to quite formal.

### RUSACK VINEYARDS

Rusack Winery has the only tasting room in the Ballard Canyon AVA, so you’ll have this pastoral, oak-punctuated landscape all to yourself. Owners Geoff and Alison Rusack are committed to producing wines of regional character, and doing justice to those values is Steven Gerbac, who knew in the 8th grade that he would be a winemaker.

The heart of the Rusack portfolio is equal parts classic Rhône and Burgundy. They are studied without being stuffy – wines you can as easily lay down for a decade or more or crack open for an impromptu picnic with friends.

The center of the tasting experience is the redwood deck, built around and under the estate’s gorgeous oak trees, where you can hang out on comfortable couches and taste through the menu with a charcuterie and cheese plate – and you can even bring along your dog!

Gerbac also oversees the fun, and more experimental, wines being made at the Rusack’s Santa Catalina Island vineyard overlooking the ocean. (A visit there has become a bucket-list item for me.)