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The New Wine Highway

Forget Napa's State Route 29 or the Valley of the Moon's Route 12. The new destination for great wine, food, and scenery is West Sonoma's Route 116.

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COURTESY OF SONOMA COUNTY TOURISM

In the 1880s, famed plant breeder Luther Burbank realized he wouldn't have room for his expanding laboratory of plant experiments at his gardens in Santa Rosa. So, he looked to Sebastopol, about seven miles to the west in Sonoma County.

Burbank called Sonoma County "the chosen spot of all this earth as far as nature is concerned." He established his 15-acre farm in an area that definitely speaks to this singular beauty.

Here, from a ridge rising above downtown Sebastopol, a rolling landscape of farms and vineyards stretches to the redwoods, the coast range, and a valley that carries the Russian River to the Pacific Ocean. As Burbank discovered, the area's varied topography—hills, valleys, dry inlands, moist coast—creates conditions where people can grow anything, including the Gravenstein apples that brought Sebastopol prosperity and renown.

These days, many of the apple orchards have given way to vineyards, as western Sonoma County (simply "West County" in local parlance) becomes a new Wine Country hot spot, known for stunning wines and a fervent farm-to-table dining ethos. The attention focuses on a 15-mile stretch of State Route 116, also known as the Gravenstein Highway, which spans Sebastopol, Graton, and Forestville.

Bay Area residents have long passed through this area for day or weekend trips while heading through to the coast or to visit the redwoods and the Russian River. Now, they are discovering food, wine, and culture that rival more tony destinations like Healdsburg or towns in the Napa Valley. But unlike those more popular destinations, with their weekend traffic jams and tasting-room gluts, West Sonoma retains its remote, laid-back feel.

"There is a seclusion and quaintness to the region," says renowned winemaker Paul Hobbs. While he works all over the world as a wine consultant, he has made Sebastopol the home base for his eponymous winery.

Hobbs discovered West Sonoma in the 1990s while cycling around its picturesque back roads. He decided to buy land along SR116 between Sebastopol and Forestville after learning the proximity to the coast made it one of the "top places on the planet"

for making Pinot Noirs.

When he first moved to Sonoma County, he settled in Healdsburg, but relocated to his property alongside Route 116 in 2003. He adores the area's "nooks and crannies" which give it an aura of mystery, and praises "quirky" Sebastopol for a free-thinking community that nurtures creative, entrepreneurial types who are hyper-committed to quality, alternative-farming techniques. "It's really a hotbed in the United States for food, culture, and wine," he says.

Artisan Amusement Park

Any day or weekend tour of the area could easily begin at The Barlow, the new 220,000-square-foot art and culinary center, just east of downtown Sebastopol. Built around a former apple processing plant, the Barlow is designed to showcase the region's best winemakers, food producers, and artisans. Star tenants include winery Kosta Browne and Zazu Kitchen + Farm, owned by chef Duskie Estes, who attained celebrity food status by vying as the Food Network's Next Iron Chef.

Estes is an enthusiastic cheerleader for Sonoma County's unique culinary potential. "What I love about Sonoma County is there's diversity of agriculture here, and all of my ingredients I can get from within a 50-mile-radius," she says. "What excites me about the food is the story behind it all. We get to do that here with all the ingredients in a really authentic way."

The Bay Area native and her husband and partner John Stewart moved to the area 12 years ago to be closer to family and to raise their two daughters. They opened their first Zazu as a roadside-style eatery just west in Santa Rosa, while setting up house on three acres in Forestville, where they now raise pigs, rabbits, and fruit.

Their shiny new warehouse-style Barlow space offers enough square footage for Estes and Stewart to make their signature products on site, including bacon, salumi, and gelato. In raised beds around a west-facing patio, and in a future mini-farm behind the restaurant, they plan to grow many of the herbs, vegetables, and fruits that will make it onto the daily lunch, dinner, and cocktail menus.

Described by Sunset magazine as an "artisan amusement park," the Barlow seems on its way to raising Sebastopol's profile among well-heeled travelers. This past summer, the city council adopted zoning changes that would allow the Barlow to build a new 60-room boutique hotel. It would be the town's first high-end accommodations, as much of a luxury game changer for Sebastopol that the Hotel Healdsburg was for that town.

A New Wine Highway

Along Route 116, a group of winemakers are doing their part to raise the area's profile. Their Taste Route 116 is an association of nine family-owned wineries located in Sebastopol, Graton, and Forestville.

Sue Bonzell, general manager of Graton Ridge Cellars, tells a familiar story of a longtime local farm family successfully transitioning into winemaking. Her parents, Art and Barbara Paul, sweethearts at Sebastopol's Analy High School, had been raising apples on their farm off Route 116 since 1945. Harvest time saw Bonzell as a girl selling fresh apples and apple juice from a farm stand out front.

The family made the choice 13 years ago to start growing grapes. "It's like what you do in farming," she says. "If you're not making money in one crop, you switch crops." After planting grapes, the family had to wait five years until the crop was ready to produce wine, but the family was confident it had good soil and climate on its side. "It's such a great growing region," she says.

As with other area wineries, Graton Ridge Cellars has come home with awards, including Double Golds from the San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition for its 2009 Estate Pinot Noir. In a nod to its farming heritage, Graton Ridge also makes a dessert apple wine.

This past summer the Route 116 community welcomed its own farmers market, the new year-round Forestville Farmers Market, held 3 to 7 p.m. Tuesdays at Russian River Vineyards. The market is small, but its vendors sell top-quality produce, dairy, meat, and baked goods. The market also boasts a scenic location, with stalls set up on terraces below the winery overlooking vineyards.

Dining Along Route 116

Russian River Vineyards is also home to the magnificent Corks Restaurant, the only winery-based restaurant in the Russian River Valley. On a farmers market evening, you can taste wine or dine on the restaurant's patio and listen to live music from a local blues

or jazz group. The restaurant menu features both casual “wine snack” fare, such as samplers with charcuterie made by local artisans, or more elegant dinners, such as lamb shank, steak, or roasted salmon, which on a recent August visit was sweetened with garden peas that tasted like they had been picked minutes earlier.

There is no shortage of other great dining options along Route 116. In the block of storefronts that make up tiny Graton’s commercial district are two restaurants facing each other across Graton Road. Both Willow Wood Market Cafe and the Underwood Bar and Bistro in Graton are popular with local foodies. At the Willow Wood Market Cafe, diners enter a bright, friendly space that resembles a general store. The diner boasts comfort food with a sophisticated twist, such as savory-and-sweet smoked trout salad with apples, walnuts, and blue cheeses, and a vegetarian roasted vegetable ragout, served on a bed of creamy polenta.

Forestville’s small downtown, consisting of a gas station, a couple of grocery stores, and a post office, is also home to three new restaurants that are becoming homes away from home for locals who want good, simple food. Backyard features rustic California cuisine with a Mediterranean flair while Twist Eatery is a picturesque hole-in-the-wall with just nine stools at a counter indoors, and several tables on a cozy, covered patio. Twist makes up for its diminutive size with generous portions of lunch and brunch selections, including hearty tri-tip steak sandwiches, fresh and flavorful salads, and platters of delicious egg scrambles, including one special loaded with chorizo, spinach, mushrooms, and English farmhouse cheddar. Italian-born Chef Francesco Torre opened Canetti Roadhouse Italiana in March 2012, naming it for a road he traveled every day to school in his native Tuscany. Everything about the space, with its sandblasted brick walls and wood tables, says rustic and simple. Graton Ridge’s Sue Bonzell talks rapturously about Torre’s dish of duck-stuffed ravioli, topped with a reduction of broth, porcini mushrooms, and leeks. “I get it with a Pinot,” she says.

Beyond Food and Wine

While the area around Route 116 may be the new destination for food and wine, it still boasts plenty else to see and do. In warmer weather, you can hit the Russian River for swimming and boating. You can also hike year-round in the giant redwoods of Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve, just north of Guerneville. A half-mile stroll along a flat, wheelchair-accessible nature trail takes you to the 1,400-year-old Colonel Armstrong Tree; another more strenuous 3.3-mile hike on the East Ridge Trail winds down to a waterfall from Fife Creek that gushes in winter and spring.

For people wanting to learn more about Sonoma County’s agricultural riches, the Sonoma County Farm Trails, which also hosts August’s annual Gravenstein Apple Fair, publishes a guide to local farms and food producers. These businesses welcome visitors interested in learning about raising bees, chickens, or lavender. Some sell fresh produce, homemade jam, plants, garden supplies, and, at holiday-time, fresh-cut Christmas trees.

Back in Sebastopol, the town’s quirky, independent spirit is on display at The Aubergine Vintage Emporium & Café, a combination cafe, music club, and vintage clothing store—stocked with neatly arranged rows of everything from 1950s cocktail dresses to classic ‘60s and ‘70s shirts. Just south of town off Sebastopol, along Route 116, is California Carnivores, the largest shop in the United States selling Venus flytraps, bladderworts, and other exotic plants that survive on flies, bees, gnats, fungus, and other creatures.

One of Sebastopol’s most revered residents is “junk artist” Patrick Amiot, whose giant Holstein cow, made of vividly painted scrap metal, greets you from the fields as you enter the town from Santa Rosa via Route 12. One of Amiot’s newest works, the head of a giant pink pig, now graces the front of Zazu Kitchen + Farm.

Amiot’s whimsical sculptures of animals and people, made of old car parts and other junkyard-bound items pop up all over Sebastopol, notably in the Florence Avenue neighborhood several blocks west of downtown. More than a decade ago, Amiot placed his first sculpture, a 14-foot-tall fisherman made of recycled metal, in his front yard. He expected neighbors to claim he was degrading their home values. Instead, they invited him to display his works in their front yards. Some two dozens of Amiot’s pieces, including a harried waitress made from pots and pans, decorate yards of old Victorians and Craftsmen bungalows.

Where to Stay

Given that West Sonoma is, like the rest of Wine Country, a little over an hour away from the East Bay, you can pack some of its most scenic locations and best food or wine into a day trip. But the region also offers a great escape for a weekend or longer. You can really feel like you’re getting away.

West Sonoma's best known accommodations are on the north end of Route 116: the Michelin-star rated Applewood Inn in Guerneville and the small luxury Farmhouse Inn in Forestville.

For people traveling with kids and looking for more casual, affordable accommodations, check out what's regarded as something of a North Coast secret, the Flamingo Conference Resort and Spa off Route 12 in Santa Rosa. Just 10 or 15 minutes from Sebastopol, the Flamingo serves as a good base for touring the area. It offers spacious, stylish rooms and a large sports-sized pool for relaxing after a day of hiking or wine tasting.

Whether you come for the day or stay for a week, there is so much to see. As Paul Hobbs says, there are so many nooks and crannies to discover, located on side streets in Sebastopol or off some narrow road, winding off into the redwoods. He adds that West Sonoma's wine highway—Route 116—is still a back-country road, unlike Napa's Route 29 or eastern Sonoma County's Route 12, which serve as those region's main thoroughfares. “[Route] 116 is too up and down and curvy,” he says. “It's never going to become [Route] 29.”

So, if only because of access and geography, West Sonoma will continue to offer many of those qualities that many visitors to Wine Country crave—a quiet, rural backdrop and an easy-going, idiosyncratic vibe. Along with a growing crop of outstanding restaurants and wineries, West Sonoma will continue to possess the physical beauty that captivated Luther Burbank and prompted him to call it a “chosen spot of all this earth.”

West County's Hot List

Visit

Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve, www.parks.ca.gov.

The Barlow, 200 Morris St., Sebastopol, 707-824-5600, www.thebarlow.net.

Taste Route 116, tasteroute116.com.

Graton Ridge Cellars, 3561 Gravenstein Highway North, 707-823-3040, gratonridge.com.

Dine

Corks at Russian River Vineyards, 5700 Gravenstein Highway North, 707-887-3344, www.russianrivervineyards.com.

Twist Eatery, 6536 Front St., Forestville 707-820-8443, www.twisteatery.com.

Willow Wood Market Cafe, 9020 Graton Road, Graton, 707-823-0233, www.willowwoodgraton.com.

Zazu Kitchen + Farm, 6770 McKinley St., Sebastopol, 707-523-4814, www.zazurestaurant.com.

Stay

Flamingo Conference Resort and Spa, 2777 Fourth St., Santa Rosa, 707-545-8530, www.flamingoresort.com.