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California Farmland, Known for Its Drinks

By FRED A MOON

EVEN before the first sip of wine, I was drunk on the smell of baked earth and California bay leaves. It was August and the air was hot and dry, and specked with tiny white butterflies. The hills were shrouded in straw, with green vineyards creeping up their sides. The scene was intoxicating.

Cradled between ridges of coastal redwoods and inland oaks, and laced by the narrow, meandering Navarro River, Anderson Valley is a two-hour drive from San Francisco in Mendocino County's under-appreciated interior. Lumber mills and apple orchards once did brisk business here, but now grapevine-draped hills surround the series of outposts that dot the valley floor — the largest town is Boonville, population 715.

In a generation, this 25-mile-long valley has gone from Northern California backwater to internationally known wine appellation. But unlike Napa and Sonoma to the south, Anderson Valley has held on to its identity with a fierce, rural independence that is reinforced by inadequate Internet access, spotty cellphone reception and, among the long-time locals, a palpable skepticism about the country that lies beyond Mendocino's borders.

Here, there are no tour buses shuttling visitors from [winery](#) to winery; no posh spas or chichi restaurants with multimonth waiting lists. The [area even had its own elaborate slang, Boontling](#), created in the late 1800s (and used well into the 20th century). Though Anderson Valley is an easy overnight trip from the Bay Area, it seems far removed — both in geography and in time. But that remoteness is an attribute, a full-bodied gasp of air.

At the north end of the valley, 10 miles from Boonville, the [Navarro Vineyards](#) tasting room — a barnlike building with redwood walls and green wine bottle chandeliers — serves big, impressive wines: meaty [pinot noirs](#) and fruity Alsatian-style whites, surrounded by rose gardens, fountains and a two-acre pen of babydoll sheep, which are used to clear the grapevines of undergrowth.

On a Thursday afternoon, European tourists leaned against the tasting room's white Formica counter, oohing and aahing as they swirled their glasses, swishing each dainty sip from one cheek to the other. Nobody spat.

To a wine novice, the language of the connoisseur can sound like a foreign tongue, wrapped in metaphor, color and irrepressible sense memories. Among the vineyard's list of current releases, for example, was the gewürztraminer, described as having a "brilliant array" of fruit, flowers and "pineapple brûlée" and the pinot noir, which smacks of "Bing cherry backed by bacon and toast." Both were delicious, but to me they tasted of neither breakfast nor dessert.

The first post-Prohibition winery in Anderson Valley, [Husch Vineyards](#), crushed its first fruit in 1971 — and was soon joined by a small gang of adventurous vintners. They were taking a significant risk; the valley had been thought too cold for marketable wine grapes. But French [Champagne](#)-maker Louis Roederer set up shop here in the early 1980s, putting Anderson Valley on the map. The wine industry there has since exploded, growing from just a handful of vineyards in the 1970s to over 70 now.

Today, the region is best known for its pinot noir, which is celebrated in an annual festival in May. Brendan McGuigan, a Mendocino-based sommelier and author of a coming book on Mendocino County wines, calls the pinot "the crown jewel of the valley." It has "a style all its own," he says, "rich fruit intermingled with the loam, mushrooms and the forestal funk that can be found on the edge of every vineyard."

The drive along the narrow, two-lane Highway 128 is itself worth the trip. The road cuts west and weaves through oak-covered hills and along a redwood-banked river before joining Highway 1 at the Pacific Ocean.

Along the way, it cuts through Anderson Valley and past farms raising llamas, goats, sheep and cattle. There's Reilly Heights Ranch, a grand, burnt-red farmhouse beside a lily-pad-covered pond. And there are the hand-painted, wood-plank signs advertising Yellow Transparents, Earligolds and Sweet Spice apples at Gowan's Oak Tree, the last of the valley's old-school orchards.

Gowan's fruit stand sells Dixie-cup apple cider frozen pops, a Northern California childhood classic, and 45 varieties of apple, 51 kinds of peach and 12 types of plum — along with pears, persimmons, apricots, berries and cherries. In a region overrun with vineyards, what's harvested at Gowan's is every bit as exciting as those prestigious grapes.

Still, inebriants are what Anderson Valley does best. In Boonville, the unofficial capital of this sparsely populated corner of Mendocino, Anderson Valley Brewing Company is the town's largest private employer — and a local institution. In recent years, the brewery's reputation has grown (as have its sales, with AVBC now stocked at many big-city beer shops). The company's Boonville base has an 18-hole disc golf course, a roof tiled in solar panels and a mascot named Barkley, a bear with antlers. A brewery tour guide — a bemused, Converse-wearing 23-year-old — explained that the founders “were getting a little stoned, getting a little drunk, and they came up with it: A bear, plus a deer, is a beer.”

The tour began at the long copper bar of the brewery's visitor center (guests are entitled to two sippy-cup-size samples as part of the \$5 tour fee), then moved to the brewery's three-story brew house. There, visitors took turns sticking their heads into giant copper containers, smelling that day's recipe. The various pieces of equipment — bought from a German brewery and transported more than 5,000 miles to Boonville — are magnificent mid-20th-century works of industrial art. With its enormous mash tun tanks and brew kettles, vintage control panels and sweltering heat, the room resembles the belly of a steamship.

In the cellar, which is used for fermentation and bottling, beer bubbled and frothed, overflowing onto the cement floor like the product of an over-filled cartoon washing machine. In the hop freezer, the guide put some dried, whole-flower hops into our cupped hands. “Smell it,” she said. “You can put it in your purse, like potpourri.”

As the tour group left, one of the brewers — beaming with pride — offered an early taste of the Winter Solstice seasonal ale, which was passed from person to person and shared from a single glass. “The beer you'll get in the visitor's center,” the guide said, “is the freshest you'll ever have.” She should know; employees receive a “beer benefit” — one per shift, and bottles to take home.

As it passes through Boonville, Highway 128 becomes the town's main drag. It's lined by a handful of shops, a few unpretentious restaurants and the Boonville Hotel, a 12-room “modern roadhouse” that is the only lodging in town. (Another lodging option just beyond town is the Toll House Inn on Bell Valley Farm, off Highway 128.)

At the Boonville Hotel, after the tasting rooms have closed and exploring is done, guests linger on the expansive side deck, holding on to what's left of the sun, while tree-shaped shadows encroach from the far corners of the sprawling backyard garden.

In the evening, the candles and strings of exposed-bulb lights are lit and, for those who eat in, food slowly emerges from a clanking, frenetic kitchen. Meals are leisurely, as there's little else to do with a Boonville evening than have conversations — the setting, the company and

the wine prompt people to stay long after their plates are clean. In those after-dinner hours, parents give up on wrangling their children, who scurry about on a post-dessert sugar high, and neighboring tables drift into discussion about politics and family — the sorts of things not usually shared among strangers.

All of this, the wine tasting and brewery touring, the apple cider frozen pops and marathon dinners, can easily edge into over-indulgence. The next day, I went to Hendy Woods State Park. Eight miles northwest of Boonville near the town of Philo, it is Anderson Valley's cure for its own excesses. There, giant redwoods rise hundreds of feet overhead, creating a light-deprived landscape underneath — a primeval sensory-deprivation chamber.

Beneath the canopy, it's cool no matter the season and dark enough to be ominous, even at midday. The sun that does penetrate the towering ceiling arrives in long, sword-like rays. Save for the sound of footsteps on dry redwood duff and the occasional chirp of a small bird, high overhead, the forest is eerily quiet. It's hard to imagine feeling farther from the metropolis two hours to the south.

IF YOU GO

Anderson Valley can't be fully explored without a car. Rentals are available in either San Francisco or Santa Rosa. From the Bay Area, take Highway 101 to Highway 128 West toward Mendocino.

WHERE TO EAT

Libby's Restaurant (8651 Highway 128, Philo; 707-895-2646) is an unpretentious Mexican food joint with diner-like décor, considered by many locals to be the best restaurant in the valley.

Lauren's Cafe (14211 Highway 128, Boonville; 707-895-3869) is a local hangout; it serves an eclectic international menu in a checkered-tablecloth dining room. There's entertainment — from trivia to live music — many nights.

The **Boonville General Store** (17810 Farrer Lane, Boonville; 707-895-9477) offers tasty breakfast snacks, sandwiches on fresh baked bread and a good selection of picnic grub — best for a quick bite or takeout.

WHERE TO STAY

The **Boonville Hotel** (14050 Highway 128, Boonville; boonvillehotel.com; 707-895-2210) is the only hotel in Boonville proper, a casual but elegant roadhouse with an impressive house restaurant.

The **Toll House Inn** (12378 Boonville Road, Boonville; tollhouseinn.com; 707-895-2572) sits on 650 acres of meadows and forest in the hills east of town.

WHAT TO DO

Navarro Vineyards (5601 Highway 128, Philo; navarrowine.com; 707-895-3686, or 800-537-9463; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily), one of the oldest post-Prohibition **wineries** in the valley, serves excellent wines in an attractive tasting room. Tours twice daily, weather permitting. Call ahead or reserve online.

Hendy Woods State Park (18599 Philo-Greenwood Road, Philo; parks.ca.gov; 707-895-3141; \$8 parking fee) offers strolls beneath giant redwoods or, during the hot summer months, a swim in the Navarro River.

Anderson Valley Brewing Company (17700 Highway 253, Boonville, avbc.com; 707-895-2337, \$5) offers tours at 1:30 and 3 p.m. Monday through Saturday, during the summer months. Call for winter hours.

To reach **Pepperwood Pottery** (Mile Marker 14.68, Highway 128 and Salmela Road, Navarro; 707-895-3640) look for the tile mosaic on the highway, which leads you to Doug Johnson's pottery studio and showrooms — a series of small, bright buildings spread across the hillside.