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OVERNIGHTER

California Farmland, Known for Its Drinks

By FREDA MOON
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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.

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Lianne Milton for The New York Times

A casita at the Boonville Hotel in the Anderson Valley, which now has some 70 vineyards, north of Napa and Sonoma. [More Photos »](#)

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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

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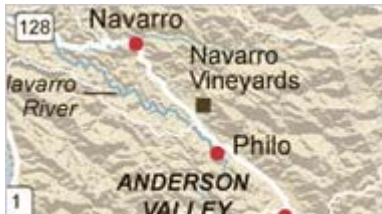


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[Overnight in Anderson Valley, Calif.](#)



Map

[Anderson Valley, Calif.](#)

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 chi-chi 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

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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."

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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.

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