

Exploring California's Santa Lucia Highlands

Visitors are drawn to the Santa Lucia Highlands and Salinas Valley for the region's exceptional wine, but few stay to experience all the wild mountains have to offer. With so much to discover, we've come up with some tips to help you get the most out of your visit.

BY MATT KETTMANN



Wrath Wines / Photo by Michael Housewright

If you look west from Highway 101 between Salinas and King City, the views of the Santa Lucia Highlands will captivate you. Rays of sunshine slice through a waning marine layer, and vineyards sprinkle the benchlands just above the Salinas River.

They slip, slowly at first, then precariously, toward the towering peaks of sharp, wild mountains that native son John Steinbeck called “dark and brooding, unfriendly and dangerous” in *East of Eden*. Though most of the predominantly Pinot Noir and Chardonnay vines ride along the subtle shelf, you can see a few brave patches of vinifera perched like islands on their own ridges.

But the views you'll get gazing the other direction, from within the Santa Lucia Highlands and out over the Salinas Valley, are even more magical. The landscape crescendos down through the vines into the row-cropped flatness known as the "Salad Bowl of the World," then back up the smooth, hay-colored Gabilan Range and into the craggy peaks of Pinnacles National Park.



Testarossa Winery tasting Room / Photo by Wine Enthusiast

Steinbeck thought better of those mountains. "You wanted to climb into their warm foothills almost as you want to climb into the lap of a beloved mother," he wrote.

Unfortunately, not many people ever take in the latter vistas. Despite its reputation for lush, balanced wines, the Santa Lucia Highlands is home to only a handful of tasting rooms, and hospitality options in the surrounding area are almost nonexistent. This is partly due to the restrictions imposed by Monterey County, which strives to protect its agricultural heritage.

It drives visitors into the nearby towns of Carmel-by-the-Sea and Carmel Valley, which boast hotel, restaurant and extracurricular options galore. It's also pushed many of the region's producers to open tasting rooms there. As a result, most people who come to taste the Santa Lucia Highlands never see the region itself, which is a shame.

But as wine lovers grow more interested about where their wine comes from, the area seeks to establish itself as more than a day trip. Here are our top tips to get the most out of your Santa Lucia Highlands experience.



Hahn Family Wines / Photo by Michael Housewright

Highland Hospitality

At the southern, sunnier end of the Santa Lucia Highlands, the spacious wooden deck that surrounds Paraiso Vineyard's tasting room is an ideal place to begin exploration. Perfect for a picnic lunch, it overlooks the vineyards that its late founder, Rich Smith, first planted in 1973. About 15 years later, Smith and his wife, Claudia, started making their own wine in hopes to improve the region's quality.

“My parents started this to support Monterey County,” says their son, Jason Smith. After Rich died of cancer in 2015, Jason hired experienced Central Coast winemaker Larry Brooks to re-focus the family's brands, which include the higher-end Alexander-Smith wines. Try them in the tasting room, where Jason's wife, Jennifer Murphy Smith, has been in charge for two decades. “Anything that looks nice is because of her,” he says.



Wrath Wines' winemaker Sabine Rodems / Photo by Michael Housewright

A similar perch awaits just a few minutes up River Road at Hahn Family Wines, where Nicolaus “Nicky” and Gabrielle Hahn staked their claim in the late 1970s. The winery now produces nationally known brands like Hahn, Smith & Hook and Lucienne. Opt for the “Elevated Wine Tasting,” which includes a food pairing, or let loose on the “Estate Vineyard ATV Adventure,” which sends you through the vines before you taste luxury-level wines.

Down the hill, make a quick pilgrimage to the quaint Mission Soledad, founded in 1791, and then head back northbound on River Road. At Wrath Wines, Winemaker Sabine Rodems crafts single-vineyard and clonal expressions of Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Syrah, Grenache and Falanghina, an Italian variety. The patio overlooks a cattail-lined pond, surrounding vines and the Stafford House, a tilting, Queen Anne-style mansion that casts an impressive profile both in the distance and on Wrath’s labels.



Odonata Wines / Photo by Michael Housewright

Farther north toward Salinas is newcomer [Odonata Wines](#), where former brewer and [Santa Cruz Mountains Vineyards](#) Winemaker Denis Hoey bought a closed winery and small vineyard in 2014. The South tasting room (they also have a North location in Santa Cruz) features art made by wine club members, a Ms. Pac-Man table arcade game and a wide variety of wines that Hoey makes from both near and far. This is wine tasting at its most relaxed and eye-opening.

Lodging Lowdown

Modest options are available in the nearby cities of Greenfield, King City and Soledad, with even more recognized chains in Salinas. Rooms at [Barlocker's Rustling Oaks Ranch](#) can be booked through [Airbnb](#), while larger groups will like [Mesa del Sol Estate Retreat & Winery](#), a historic ranch along the Arroyo Seco River.

Insider Tips

Secret sausage: In a cinder-block shack down a dead-end dirt road, [Roy's Swiss Sausage Factory](#) handcrafts some of the best links in the world.

Produce play: It's not just grapevines in the Salinas Valley. Get a close-up look at the Salad Bowl of the World's 40 other crops with [Ag Venture Tours](#).

Wild walks: Catch a glimpse of the rugged [Ventana Wilderness](#) that frames Big Sur with a hike on the [Rocky Creek Trail](#). It's best to park at the [Arroyo Seco Picnic Area](#).



Joyce Vineyards' tasting room / Photo by Michael Housewright

Carmel Calling

The best place to try the most wines from the Santa Lucia Highlands remains the foggy, cypress tree-lined streets of Carmel-by-the-Sea and, a short drive inland, the warmer, oak-shaded Carmel Valley. Developed as tourist getaways, hotel and dining options abound, and both are now hotbeds of wine tasting opportunities.

Carmel Valley has been a grape-growing appellation since 1983, eight years before the Highlands. These days, it's booming with wine more than ever, with approximately two-dozen tasting rooms within a 10-minute walk. Many specialize in bottlings from around Monterey and elsewhere, but a few focus heavily on the Santa Lucia Highlands like Bernardus, housed in an old bank.



The Wine House / Photo by Michael Housewright

A brand new complex recently opened in the heart of town, featuring a food-serving bar called The Wine House as well as bocce, cornhole and outdoor lounge chairs. It's also home to the tasting rooms of Joyce Vineyards and Testarossa Winery, which makes more than half a dozen wines from the Santa Lucia Highlands, among many other regions.

Back by the coast in Carmel-by-the-Sea, tasting rooms lurk around every corner, in storybook cottages or along quaint plazas. Like many other prominent names in the Santa Lucia Highlands, such as Boekenoogen Winery, McIntyre Vineyards and Scheid Vineyards, Morgan Winery runs its lone tasting room here. Dan Morgan Lee's iconic Chardonnays are poured in a bright, welcoming space at The Crossroads, a modern-looking strip mall on the outskirts of the village that offers plenty of parking.

For the most unique taste of the region, brave the village's tour bus crowds to find Caraccioli Cellars. It serves sparkling wine made from the Escolle Vineyard on the wind-whipped northern edge of the Santa Lucia Highlands.

"I was lucky enough to inherit something that I cared about," says Scott Caraccioli, who runs the project with his father, Gary, a longtime Salinas Valley farmer. "We felt it was a real opportunity to do something distinctive."



Bernardus Lodge & Spa / Photo by Michael Housewright

Lodging Lowdown

Carmel-by-the-Sea options vary widely, from cozy places like [Forest Lodge](#) to the upscale [L'Auberge Carmel](#). There's also variety in Carmel Valley, but the full-service spreads of the [Carmel Valley Ranch](#) and [Bernardus Lodge & Spa](#) attract dedicated followings.

Insider Tips

Sandy stroll: [Carmel Beach](#) is one of the world's most iconic jaunts, a sandy half-moon framed by cypress trees, frolicking dolphins and dog walkers. It's easy to spend half the day just wandering around.

Big city bites: Just opened last year, [Seventh & Dolores Steakhouse](#), run by the folks behind [Folktale Winery](#), brings metropolitan steakhouse vibes and plentiful seafood to the heart of Carmel-by-the-Sea.

Mellow monks: From April 26 to September 9, those who seek a relaxing, quiet day of hot spring soaks, hiking and a vegetarian lunch can visit [Tassajara Zen Mountain Center](#).



About the Author

MATT KETTMANN

@mattkettmann

Contributing Editor

Reviews wines from California.

A fifth generation Californian originally from San Jose, Matt Kettmann covers California's Central Coast and South Coast for the magazine. He is also the senior editor of The Santa Barbara Independent, where he's worked since 1999, has written for the New York Times, Time Magazine, Wine Spectator, and Smithsonian, and co-founded New Noise Santa Barbara, a music festival.

Email: mkettmann@wineenthusiast.net.