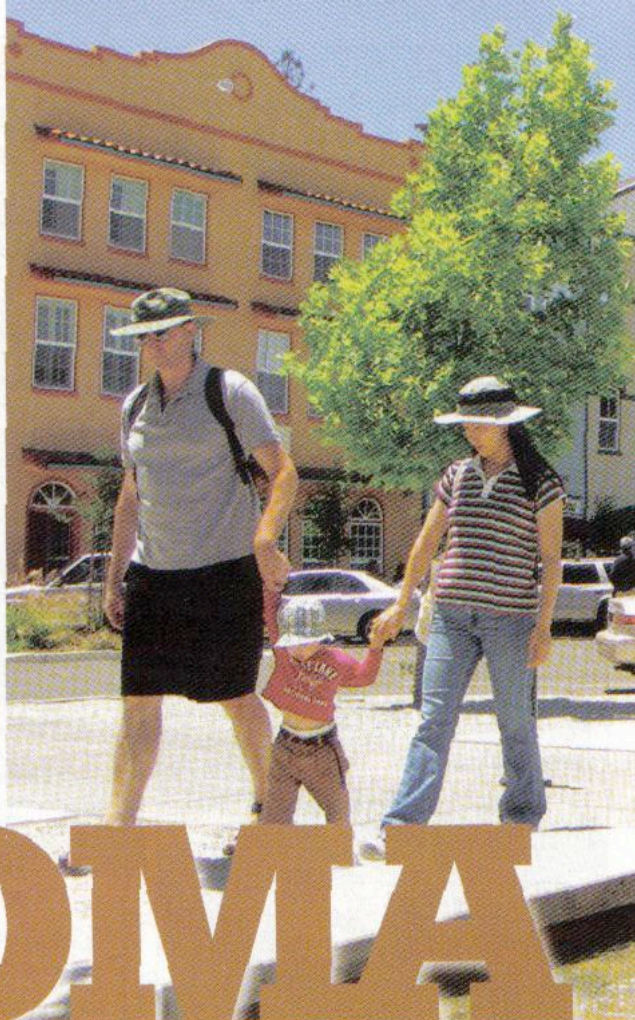


## This California county offers family orientation that contrasts with Napa Valley glitz.

Breakfast at the Honor Mansion offers opulence without glamour.



Honor Mansion



# SONOMA

by J. Eric Eckard

Comparing Napa Valley and Sonoma County wine countries is like weighing Stephen King against William Shakespeare. Both writers are world-famous and have published incredible stories, but one is a little more formal than the other. “Napa certainly makes some wonderful wines, and there are some architectural marvels there,” said Clay Mauritson of Mauritson Family Winery in Healdsburg. “But in Sonoma, you’re dealing with more family-owned and family-run wineries.”

“They’re more relaxed and have more of a blue-collar feel to them.”

Located about an hour north of San Francisco, Sonoma County offers a rural setting with a seaside country atmosphere. It’s home to nearly 200 wineries and 58,000 acres of vineyards that produce 133,000 tons of grapes.

A visit to Sonoma County offers much variety, from hamlet settings in Healdsburg, Sonoma and Petaluma to a larger city like Santa Rosa. Sonoma County has 58 miles of beaches to the east and extensive rural venues to the west, including

a mountain range that separates Sonoma from Napa County.

Sonoma County’s relaxed atmosphere doesn’t stop at wineries either. Restaurants, general stores and shops surrounding Healdsburg offer top-shelf fares without a black-tie mentality.

### Upscale Experience

In downtown Healdsburg, you can find an array of shops that offers a truly upscale experience. Jewelry shops, clothing boutiques, elegant furniture stores and art galleries surround a park in the town square.

Fine dining, wine bars and cafes are abundant. In Healdsburg, you can find Willi’s Seafood and Raw Bar and Costeaux French Bakery and Café, best known for its individually handcrafted artisan breads. Zin Restaurant and Wine Bar also offers mainly American dishes and focuses primarily on Sonoma County wines.

A few miles north in Geyserville is Santi, with an extensive Italian fare, much of it made from locally grown products.

And south to Santa Rosa, you can find Willi’s Wine Bar and Monti’s Rotisserie and Bar.

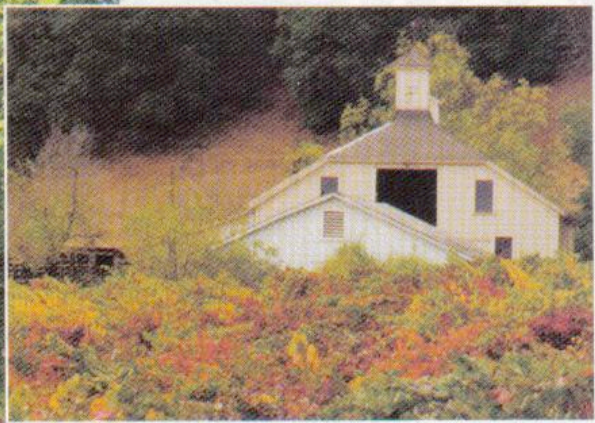
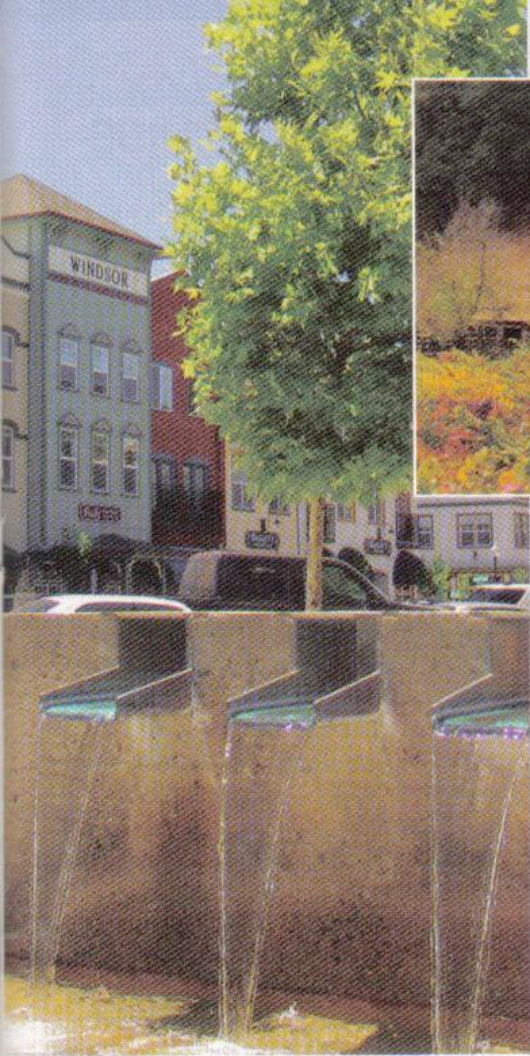
Bed and breakfast inns, resort hotels, economy motels and camping are available for travelers to the area. Many of the lodges are historic sites, including the Honor Mansion, which was built in 1893 and originally owned by William S. Butcher, a wealthy cattleman and botanist.

It was owned by Dr. Herbert Honor for more than 100 years and was renovated by its present owners.

“Napa has done a wonderful job of marketing the Napa Valley,” said Cathi Fowler, who owns and operates the Honor Mansion with her husband, Steve. “And they have some fabulous wineries, but they’ve almost become the Disneyland or Las Vegas of wine country.”

### Honor Mansion

The Honor Mansion, a AAA four-diamond property, also is in Healdsburg, and the Fowlers have the same approach to their bed-and-breakfast as many of the Sonoma wineries—opulence without



An historic barn nestled in the vineyards along the historic Valley of the Moon Highway (Hwy 12).

Robert Janner

Sonoma in Geyserville, said Sonoma is so unique because of the various micro-climates within one area. This provides winemakers in the county many options when deciding what grapes to grow.

“The temperature changes are the most anywhere in California,” Hardin said. “It could be 100 degrees in Healdsburg and 80 degrees in the Russian River Valley, 20 minutes away.”

Mauritson agreed, calling Sonoma much more diverse than Napa because of the micro-climates.

“Napa is one big, long valley,” he said. “We have the Russian River Valley, Alexander Valley, Knights Valley, Sonoma Valley and the Dry Creek Valley.”

And each valley has its own climate, which allows grape farmers to diversify more within one region. For example, Pinot Noir grapes are typically grown in cooler areas, while Merlot grapes blossom better in warmer fields. In Sonoma, you have both.

### Other Diversions

To be sure, wine is a huge draw for visitors to Sonoma County.

But it also offers a wide variety of many other diversions.

A stop at Jimtown Store in the Alexander Valley of Sonoma is well worth the visit. The general store, which also was built in 1893, is famous for its line of fresh condiments and sandwiches, including chopped olive, fig and olive and spicy olive spread.

Carrie Brown, who reopened the store in 1991, co-authored a Jimtown Store cookbook and has been featured on television cooking shows and numerous national magazines.

Several companies, including Getaway Adventures in Santa Rosa, offer bike tours of the county. Cycling through the

countryside allows riders to get an up-close view of the exquisite fields of grape vines. Long-standing farm homes dot the countryside of rolling hills.

Guided safaris at an animal reserve allow visitors a glimpse of local wildlife. Golf, balloon rides and skydiving are more activities available in Sonoma County.

And a day drive to San Francisco offers even more possibilities.

“You have a little chunk of paradise like Mayberry, but then you can step out and go to the big city,” Fowler said. “It’s the best of both worlds.”



#### AAA Takes You There

To plan your trip to Sonoma, please call AAA Vacations at 1-800-398-0379, visit your nearest AAA branch office or go online to [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel).

glitz and luxury without glamour.

With a tennis court, bocce ball field, pool and putting green, the Honor Mansion offers guests all the amenities of a resort hotel.

Spa treatment is available at the Honor Mansion, but there are numerous other day spas in Sonoma where you can pamper yourself.

Even with all Sonoma County has to offer, it inevitably draws comparisons to its more famous neighbor, Napa County.

Napa-wood, as Mauritson calls it, has a Hollywood feel to it—showy and flashy.

“We have a different approach here,” he added.

Tasting rooms at Sonoma wineries rarely charge for tastings, something that’s common at Napa wineries. Because of the many family-operated wineries in Sonoma, you might get a pour from an owner—something almost unheard of in Napa.

### Climate Is Everything

Giant chandeliers and marble floors are abundant in Napa, while Sonoma wineries are almost pedestrian comparatively, and definitely more informal.

Tim Hardin, who operates Stryker

Let's stay at the beach and...

Watch the sunrise. Smell the sea breezes! Listen to the surf.

**ISLAND REALTY**  
 Charleston Beaches  
 Isle of Palms, SC  
 800.707.6425  
[www.seacabins.com](http://www.seacabins.com)