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The throwback appeal of the Santa Ynez Valley

By Fran Endicott Miller



Crown Point Vineyards Photo courtesy Crown Point Vineyards

The small and very charming towns that comprise the Santa Ynez Valley are clustered together as tightly as the wine grapes from which the region's wonderful varietals are derived. Los Olivos, Solvang, Buellton, Ballard, Santa Ynez, and Los Alamos are all within easy driving (and even biking) distance from each other, making it simple to experience each within a short visit. Two to three nights is optimal, and allows for ample sampling of delicious wines, gourmet meals, and delightful hospitality.

Just less than a five-hour drive from Lamorinda, the area is often overlooked in favor of the higher profile Paso Robles, San Luis Obispo, and Santa Barbara. But the east and west detours off of Hwy 101 are worth a stop. Perhaps best known as home of Pea Soup Andersen's, Buellton is ready to move beyond its "Sideways" notoriety. The brand new Zaca Creek Inn and Tavern provide good reason for an overnight stay.

Go expressly to experience one of the Inn's six distinctive stone-walled suites to which you can retire after a gourmet meal at The Tavern where executive chef Cullen Campbell showcases the best of the Central Coast's varied purveyors in an incredibly creative menu. Featured are local caught seafood including Purple Hotchi, abalone, Grassy Bar oysters, and local spiny lobster, as well as farm fresh produce and steaks.

The cocktail program preserves the allure of the site's historic Tavern Bar, and aims to highlight and enhance the old-style feel. From the most sought-after bourbons and ryes, to the most region-centric agave flavors of tequila and mezcal, guests can taste through a hand-picked selection. The highly curated and extensive wine list features local favorites as well as international selections.

Ballard is home to the charming Ballard Inn, across from which is one of the best reasons to awaken on any day: Bob's Well Bread. This French style bakery features a decadent and bountiful display of pastry in addition to hot dish items, to be enjoyed on its sunny patio. Drive around the corner to see the town's beloved and genuine Little Red Schoolhouse where, since 1883, young Ballard residents have received their elementary school education.

If wine is of interest, make Los Olivos your next destination. At least 30 wine tasting rooms are found within its walkable five blocks. Try Liquid Farm, where owner Jeff Nelson and winemaker James Sparks create Burgundian style chardonnay and elegant pinot noir. Enjoy lunch at Nella, adjacent to the Fess Parker Wine Country Inn, where Pinsas, Roman-style pizzas with flatbread-like crusts, are the starring attraction. And do not miss fanciful and whimsical J. Woeste home and garden store where whirling wind ornaments, chimes, and every themed garden trinket imaginable can be found.

The main thoroughfare in Los Alamos, at the northern entry to the Valley, is only seven blocks long yet it reflects as much Old West heritage as any small town along California's Central Coast. Santa Ynez is at once equally as historic, yet also sophisticated, as illustrated by gorgeous Crown Point Vineyards where proprietor Roger Bower and winemaker Simon Faury are making some of California's tastiest Cabernet Sauvignon. Make a wine tasting appointment and accept the offer of a jeep tour in order to experience expansive views from its hilltop vineyard. Back in town, the Santa Ynez Valley Historical Society Museum and Parks-Janeway Carriage House offer a fascinating dose of Old West heritage.

Finally, a visit to the region is not complete without a Solvang stop for pastry. Long a favorite of visitors the world over, this Danish-settled town maintains traditions of language, folk dancing, music, and cuisine, while also keeping-up with hospitality and restaurant trends. Try the wildly off-theme Ramen Kotori and its decadent bowls of ramen, the Michelin level First & Oak, and coming soon, Coast Range & Vaquero Bar, from a star-studded team of chefs and renowned winemaker/sommelier, Rajat Parr.

Perhaps what is most captivating about the region is the wide open and bucolic terrain. Vineyards and horse farms intermingle, presenting a distinct vibe of what California must have been like in 'the olden' days. It's relaxing, refreshing, and enchanting, and exactly what we all need right now as we start to venture out after a year of sheltering.



Zaca Creek Photo Danielle Honea

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