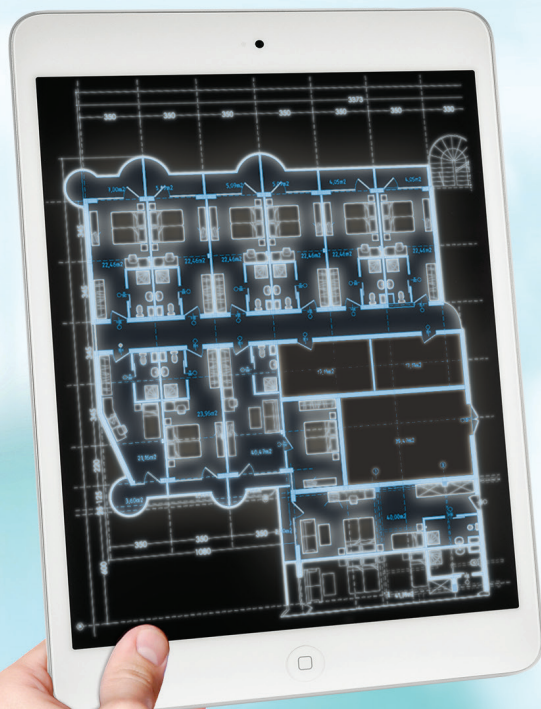




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Winning Wine EXPERIENCES

The West uncorks grape group outings of all kinds

BY EDWARD SCHMIDT JR.

For meetings and events, wine has evolved into more than just an impressive facet of an elegant dinner.

The abundance of wineries, especially in western North America, gives planners a plethora of opportunities to design innovative events and unforgettable outings around the appreciation of fine wines.

From wine tastings, wine walks and cave dinners to winery tours, teambuilding programs, cooking demonstrations and winemaker seminars, the options to enhance a meeting itinerary are fun, creative and plentiful.

Better still, wineries continue to introduce new ways for groups to enjoy the on-site wine experience.

Wine Walk

Forget the van and park the rental cars because the Carmel Wine Walk by-the-Sea allows groups to engage in wine tasting on foot.

"It alleviates transportation and safety issues and creates camaraderie in the group," says Safarina Maluki, destination marketing manager for Carmel-by-the-Sea, Calif., on the Monterey Peninsula.

The Wine Tasting Passport costs \$65 (group rates are available) and offers participants the choice of any nine of the 14 possible tasting rooms—all located within a few blocks of each other on both sides of Ocean Avenue.

Tasters sample local estate-grown still and sparkling wines at elegantly appointed tasting rooms. The Passport, available at the Carmel Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center, does not expire and can be used over several days, weeks, months or even years.

Wine and Olive Oil

For wine and olive oil lovers, Red Ridge Farms in Dayton, Ore., offers options to savor both in a beautiful and peaceful setting.

Set 33 miles southwest of Portland, the



Red Ridge Farms, Dayton, Ore.

venue encompasses the Durant Vineyards, olive groves, Oregon Olive Mill, a nursery, a small lodge and a gourmet retail shop.

The Oregon Olive Mill is a unique event space ideal for wine tastings and olive oil samplings.

"This space is the perfect combination of rustic charm and modern convenience," says

Paul Durant, owner and general manager of Red Ridge Farms. "With two patios that overlook the olive grove and lavender field, meeting attendees will feel inspired by the indoor and outdoor space."

Featuring 1,200 square feet of indoor meeting space, the Oregon Olive Mill has an 800-square-foot viewing deck, 1,200-square-foot paved lower patio, a gas fireplace and hickory wood floors.

New Frontiers

For groups meeting in New Mexico, the wine enjoyment options are surprisingly plentiful with 52 commercial wineries/tasting rooms and several annual wine festivals.

Incorporating a wine festival in a New Mexico itinerary is a great way to sample the state's wines. Among the possibilities are the Albuquerque Wine Festival (Memorial Day weekend), Taos Winter Wine Festival (late January) and Santa Fe Wine and Chile Fiesta (late September).

In Idaho, with its vineyard elevations ranging up to 3,000 feet and rich soils comprised primarily of volcanic ash, there are 51 wineries, most of them situated along the southwestern portion of the Snake River Valley. There are several companies offering guided winery tours, including Idaho Winery Tours and Winery Seekers Wine Tours.

Fine Wine and Dine

For the quintessential Napa Valley experience, the Meritage Resort & Spa in Napa, Calif., has teamed with Trinitas Cellars to offer a variety of experiences.

The Winemaker's Dinner, which can be

Grapes and Golf in the Golden State

If you like to score well on the golf course and at the wineries, the available group options can be especially enticing. And minutes after sinking the last putt for the day, groups can enjoy their wine in style.

Spread out over 1,200 acres in Napa Valley, the Silverado Resort & Spa is ideal for golf and wine lovers. Meeting attendees can play a morning round of golf on the resort's two 18-hole Johnny Miller-designed golf courses and spend the afternoon at one of the 400 wineries within a 45-minute drive.

For those who don't want to venture far from Silverado, the William Hill Estate Winery is located right across the street from the resort.

"More than 80 percent of our golf rounds are played before 1 p.m. because everyone wants to get to the wineries," says Tim Geesey, Silverado Resort's golf director.

Silverado Resort partners with several wineries in the area and can coordinate wine tours, tastings, lunches and dinners. The events typically last two to five hours and transportation is provided.

For adventurous groups, Silverado Resort can arrange activities such as hot air ballooning over the vineyards, grape stomps and sip and bicycle wine tours.

Recently, the golf staff executed a wine and cheese tasting with a 12-hole putting course set up where participants putted into wine boxes to win prizes.

At Wente Vineyards in Livermore, Calif., 50 miles east of San Francisco, guests can play on the on-site Greg Norman-designed golf course and enjoy wine experiences at the unique Winemakers Studio.

"It's a great way to socialize and is a fun and interactive winemaking experience," says Heather Jones, catering sales director at Wente Vineyards.

Highlights of the Winemakers Studio's offerings include a Winemakers Blending Experience, Wine Aroma Seminar and Wine & Cheese Pairing.

Nestled in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains, a 30-minute drive south of San Jose, Calif., Rosewood CordeValle has an 18-hole Robert Trent Jones Jr. golf course, vineyards and winery. If you play golf on the course, you'll notice the 85-acre Clos LaChance Winery adjacent to the sixth hole.

Guests at CordeValle can sample the wine in the tasting room or enjoy it with a picnic lunch, followed by a tour of the winery or a game of bocce ball. There are several other estate wineries within a 20-mile radius of CordeValle as well.

- Edward Schmidt Jr.

executed for up to 600 people, includes a multicourse dinner where each course is paired with a separate wine and set to music and other sensory experiences.

"We recently had a dinner for over 400 people that included a six-course meal and two Trinitas wines paired with each course," says Garrett Busch, proprietor and CEO of Trinitas Cellars. "We paired the wines and courses with iconic movie soundtracks performed by a live band."

Venue options for the Winemaker's Dinner include everything from a cave to outdoor garden areas.

A fixture in the Napa region for more than 20 years, the award-winning, family-owned Whitehall Lane Winery in St. Helena engages its visitors with food and wine at several intriguing venues.

Whitehall Lane has been honored three times for producing wines rated in the top five in the world as judged by *Wine Spectator* magazine's year-end rankings.

"Small corporate groups really enjoy spending a few hours experiencing one of our cooking demonstrations with our chef, Larry Calicchio," says Katie Leonardini, vice president of operations for Whitehall Lane Winery. "Participants learn the preparation techniques for an exquisite meal, which they can then enjoy with some of our perfectly paired wines."

Elegant dinners are possible in a variety of settings at the winery. The Whitehall Lane Barrel Room, where the cabernets are aged, can accommodate 75 guests for luncheons and dinners.

For an outdoor venue, the Whitehall Lane Estate Garden, which is open to the vineyards with views of the Mayacamas Mountains, is suitable for 100 guests.

Vegas Detour

An excellent day-trip escape from the casinos and convention halls of Las Vegas is the Pahrump Winery in the Mojave Desert about a one-hour drive from the Strip.

Located just off Highway 160 in Pahrump, Nev., the Pahrump Valley Winery is the state's largest producing winery, with 388 wine awards since 2004.

Owned and operated by Bill and Gretchen Loken, the winery produces about 10,000 cases a year. It produced the first estate red wine from grapes grown solely in Nevada.

"We offer a fun, interesting and person-



alized getaway for groups meeting in Las Vegas or nearby,” says Gretchen Loken.

One of the winery’s main draws is Symphony’s, an upscale, casual restaurant appointed with dark wood furniture, hardwood floors and white linen tablecloths and a menu dotted with delicacies like Winery Shrimp Scampi, Grilled North American Salmon and Seared Wild Alaskan Halibut.

Symphony’s main dining room seats 45 people and a patio dining area seats an additional 45. A private dining room adjacent to Symphony’s can accommodate 22 people for sit-down dinners, tastings and other wine-related events.

Trail Time

Comprised of six family-owned wineries on a 30-mile stretch through Lacey, Olympia, Tenino and Shelton in Washington state, the South Sound Wine Trail offers participants opportunities to meet winemakers and sample the wines of the region.

Groups can also schedule after-hours, behind-the-scenes tours at the various wineries, which include Walter Dacon Wines, Stottle Winery, Madsen Family Cellars, Medicine Creek Winery, Northwest Mountain Winery and Scatter Creek Winery.



“Typically, groups sample five to seven wines in a tasting and receive insight from owners and winemakers about the methods used to produce the wine,” says George Sharp, executive director of the Olympia, Lacey, Tumwater Visitor & Convention Bureau.

In the town of Union, Wash., the Alderbrook Resort & Spa, with 7,000 square feet of meeting space, stages wine dinners and events to highlight some of Washington’s top regional wines.

Ice Wine

Western Canada’s answer to Napa Valley is the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia.

With 8,060 acres of vineyards and 131 wineries, the region features everything from world-class production facilities to family-run boutique vineyards. Postcard beautiful, many wineries overlook Okanagan Lake.

For groups meeting in Vancouver, Okanagan Valley is located approximately a five-hour drive away. Day trips, spouse programs and wine tastings are popular with visiting groups.

Okanagan Valley is renowned for its ice wine, which is produced from a variety of grapes that remain on the vine into the fall or winter until frozen. The grapes are then pressed and used to produce a delicious dessert-style wine. **mf**

EDWARD SCHMIDT JR. is an Orlando-based writer who enjoys wine research and tasting.

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