

Eight great winery picnic spots

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Picnicking defines summer in Northern California, where hundreds of wineries provide picture-perfect views and cozy amenities for lazing the day away while sipping memorable wines.

From the stunning, sloped vineyard views at Loma Prieta Winery in Los Gatos to the farmer's market and bocce ball at Michael David Winery in Lodi, each facility has its own picnic pleasures.

Below, find eight picnic spots with a must-try wine from each winery. Buy a bottle after your tasting to enjoy back at your table or blanket. (Psst, it's poor picnic etiquette to drink an outsider's wine.) Cheers!

Loma Prieta, Los Gatos

With its rugged trails and breathtaking mountaintop locales, the Santa Cruz Mountains appellation has a bit of an advantage when it comes to wow-factor picnicking. That said, the views and vibe at Loma Prieta Winery, set at 2,600 feet above winding Highway 17, are downright mesmerizing.

Lounging on the patio overlooking sloped estate pinot noir vineyards -- the winery is also known as North America's largest producer of pinotage -- you can see the entire Monterey Peninsula and watch waves crashing on the Santa Cruz coastline. Keep in mind, those beautiful, umbrella-covered wrought iron tables and cozy outdoor couch are all first-come, first-served.

Since Loma Prieta is a bit out of the way and doesn't have food for purchase, stop by the Summit Store (24197 Summit Road) for made-to-order sandwiches and other goodies before heading up the mountain.

Picnic perks: Feeling active? Opt for a game of bocce or mega-chess. Glance up between moves and you might spot a whale.

Wine pick: The 2009 Estate Pinot Noir (\$55) is strawberry-rhubarb pie in a glass with roasted chestnuts and a kick of rose petals. An impressive expression of the Summit area.

The details: Open weekends; \$5 tasting fee. 26985 Loma Prieta Way, Los Gatos;
www.lomaprietawinery.com

Nearby: Burrell School, Sonnet and Silver Mountain

Satori Cellars, Gilroy

Settle into one of the rainbow-hued Adirondack chairs with a glass of Satori's rosy Chardonnay of the Pink Ray -- and chances are good that you will not be going anywhere anytime soon. What Sandy and Tom Moller have created in this corner of Gilroy is a landscape of such whimsy and delight, we're still grinning weeks later.

There's a zen-meets-Oz vibe here -- with a touch of Willy Wonka, if he'd gotten into zin, instead of chocolate. A faded yellow brick road winds its way to the patio, past a labyrinth, colorful market umbrellas

and whimsical decor. Even the poles at the ends of the vineyard rows are painted in riotous colors. Grab a seat at the outdoor tasting bar or unpack your picnic basket at one of the many shaded picnic tables near the zinfandel vines, and sip a little jammy, luscious Harmonic Convergence. Ohmmm my.

Picnic perks: There are tables for every taste, from upended barrels to classic picnic style, but if you're with a group, go for the circle of Adirondack chairs near the bocce court. Did we mention Mimosa Sundays?

Wine pick: The unoaked 2012 Chardonnay of the Pink Ray (\$19) is crisp, bright and beautiful, with tropical aromas and a touch of pear -- but not a whit of that butteriness some of us loathe. The "pink ray" color and balance come from petite sirah. Sip this with your picnic. Save the 2011 Ta-Da Syrah (\$30).

The details: Noon to 4 p.m. on weekends; \$7 tasting fee. 2100 Buena Vista Ave., Gilroy; www.satoricellars.com

Nearby: Clos LaChance, Sycamore Creek

Fenestra, Livermore

Lanny and Fran Replogle's rustic winery is the kind of place where families feel comfortable spreading a blanket and sipping the day away. It's not swarming with kids, by any means, but if you do bring the kids, this is the type of no-frills country setting where they can vroom their toy cars, blow bubbles or play hide-and-seek safely outside the cellar and tasting room barn.

The Replogles make more than 20 wines, many award-winning, like the 2009 Tempranillo (\$19.50), with its enticing aromas of black tea and dark cherry, and most are under \$30. So, pack whatever cold cuts and cheese you've got in the fridge and on your way into town, stop by Casse-Croute (50 S. Livermore Ave) for heavenly, freshly baked baguettes.

As you drive up to Fenestra, don't miss the syrah and grenache vineyards near the parking lot or the tiny mourvedre vineyard in the back by the creek and picnic tables.

Picnic perks: Fenestra offers picnic tables from several vantage points. Opt for a spot by the creek across from the winery's entrance and that tiny mourvedre vineyard.

Wine pick: The medium-bodied 2013 Verdelho (\$16) is a unique and easy sipper, with tropical fruit aromas and a crisp, mineral finish.

The details: Open Fridays-Sundays; \$10 tasting fee. 83 Vallecitos Road, Livermore; www.fenestrawinery.com

Nearby: Cuda Ridge and Thomas Coyne

Savannah-Chanelle, Saratoga

Despite awards and accolades for its ultra-premium pinot noir, historic Savannah-Chanelle remains a hidden gem nestled in the lush Santa Cruz Mountains. That's a mystery, given how expansive and gorgeous the property is. When you drive up, you'll notice a marble table in the center of the cobblestone

patio that accommodates up to six. Above, on Pinot Hill, there are another three picnic tables with umbrellas that offer glorious views of Villa Monmartre -- yes, spelled just like that -- built in 1923 and inspired by the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Paris' Montmartre.

By the villa, there are picnic tables next to ancient zinfandel vines with sweeping view of the Santa Clara Valley. But that patio, on the other side of the villa, feels like vacation, with the peaceful splashing of a fountain and bistro tables shaded by a persimmon tree. It's no wonder these coveted spots require reservations. Bring a book or a love interest and you may never leave -- except to find the ultimate shade and serenity.

For that, sneak down the hill to the redwood grove where two picnic tables are planted in the center of a small forest by a babbling creek. Ask anyone in the tasting room to show you the way. Don't forget your glass.

Picnic perks: Enjoy live music from 2 to 5 p.m. on weekends in the historic Redwood Tasting Room. Snag a bistro table with market umbrellas or one of two picnic tables, shaded by walnut trees, and your ears and taste buds will be elated all afternoon.

Wine pick: The tropical 2012 Tondre's Grapefield Chardonnay (on sale at presstime for \$20.25). Hints of green apples give way to a toasty creaminess from the Champagne yeast used in fermentation. But everything in the portfolio is stunning, including the 2009 Estate Pinot Noir (\$50): earthy with black cherry fruit and that Santa Cruz Mountains core of firm, rich tannins and acidity.

The details: Open daily; \$10 tasting fee. 23600 Congress Springs Road, Saratoga; www.savannahchanelle.com.

Nearby: Mount Eden and Mountain Winery.

Las Positas, Livermore

In 2006, Lisa and Lothar Maier replanted this estate vineyard to different clones of cabernet sauvignon, petit verdot, tempranillo, barbera and malbec, among other varietals. The Maiers knew the bright, romantic spot in the southwest corner of Livermore Valley was special. Today, the yellow Spanish-style winery is a venue popular for weddings and picnics.

It's a delightful place to get the girls together for a shower or birthday celebration, or to take in one of the winery's monthly movie nights, which include gourmet meat and vegetarian pizzas. Next up: "Gravity" (May 9) and Disney's "Planes" (June 13). Whatever you do, don't miss out on the Reserve Tasting (\$10), which includes three new wines. Among them, the opulent 2012 Estate Chardonnay and the 2011 Coccineous, a complex mocha-berry blend of tempranillo, petite sirah, and syrah.

Picnic perks: As long as there's no wedding, you can grab a table on the stunning patio, which overlooks acres of vineyards. Take your complimentary Ghiradelli's dark chocolate and oyster crackers with you -- and be sure to ask about the Casimira White, served in a white chocolate port cup.

Wine pick: The full-bodied, juicy 2011 Estate Syrah (\$32) has great structure with aromatics of blackberries, spice and smoky meat.

The details: Open Fridays-Sundays; \$5 tasting fee. 1828 Wetmore Road, Livermore; www.laspositasvineyard.com

Nearby: Wente and Retzlaff

Michael David, Lodi

Long before 6th Sense Syrah, this spot was a road stand, famous for its vegetables and fruit, including 15 wine varietals that were shipped throughout the country during Prohibition -- with instructions on "how not to have the grapes turn into wine."

Today, Michael David is a favorite among Lodiphiles and often the first stop for folks hopping off Highway 5. Fifth generation growers Michael and David Phillips farm 650 acres of premium wine grapes, and their reputation for old-vine zinfandel precedes them.

So does the reputation of the multifaceted property, where your kids can run around the red Adirondack chairs dotting the grassy knoll and visit with goats and chickens, while you partake in bocce or sip on the shaded patio. If you're more of a white wine drinker, Michael David offers four, including a unique sipper called Incognito (\$18), a full-bodied, viognier-based blend with a heady aroma.

Picnic perks: A market with fresh produce, cheeses and salamis for purchase. Craving a cafe experience? Order a salad or sandwich at the restaurant, open daily until 3 p.m. The bakery is open daily and churns out pies made from fruit grown on the farm.

Wine pick: 2012 Ancient Vine Cinsault (\$25), the winery's lightest red, is a slightly earthy, cherry-berry beauty produced from 128-year-old vines.

The details: Open daily; \$5 tasting fee. 4580 W. Highway 12, Lodi; www.michaeldavidwinery.com

Nearby: Van Ruiten and Jessie's Grove

Blue Victorian, Suisun Valley

Venture just 10 minutes from the roar of Highway 80 and Fairfield's concrete and billboards give way to the country lanes and farm stands of the Suisun Valley. This is petite sirah country, and vineyards and olive groves dot the rolling hills of this 15,000-acre American Viticultural Area. But you'll hardly need the address to find this Vezer Family Vineyards tasting room. The blue Victorian rises from a sea of grapevines just off Suisun Valley Road.

If you're a Ravenswood zinfandel fan, you've probably already tasted Frank and Liz Vezer's grapes. The Vezers began producing their own award-winning zinfandels in 2003. You can do a variety of vineyard tours here, including an ATV romp through the vines, but few things beat the languid pleasures of a winery picnic.

If you favor vineyard views and sunshine with your picnic, opt for the small, umbrella-shaded tables on the patio of the Blue Victorian. Prefer plentiful shade and a view of the historic Pony Express office instead? Swing by the Vezers' Mankas Corner tasting room half a mile away. Either way, save your receipt; the tasting fee covers sips at both.

Picnic perks: The vineyard views from the umbrella-topped tables on the Blue Victorian patio are charming, and the winery offers cheese, charcuterie and chocolate pairings if you book ahead.

Wine pick: Try the crisp, refreshing 2012 Sauvignon Blanc (\$25), with grapefruit and guava flavors and just enough minerality to keep things interesting. (The flagship La Salette is lovely, but at \$90, it's no picnic quaff.)

The details: Open daily; \$10 tasting fee. 5071 Suisun Valley Road, Fairfield; vezerfamilyvineyard.com

Nearby: Mankas Corner, Suisun Valley Wine Cooperative

Harney Lane, Lodi

Every inch of this winery off Highway 99 feels like an oasis, from the warm, inviting tasting room to the magnificent, shaded garden and the patio that wraps around the property. The Mettler family has been farming zinfandel on Harney Lane and other Lodi sites since 1907, but it was only in 2008 that they built and developed their own winery and brand.

Not only are the wines stellar (the 2012 Chardonnay has a delightful butterscotch kiss), but whoever designed the garden is a landscaping genius. It takes just a few moments among those massive deodora cedar pine trees, breathing in that cool Delta breeze, to determine that this is where you plan to laze the day away. It's beyond relaxing.

Before it sells out, snag a bottle of the crisp, tangy 2012 Albarino (\$19) because it will pair well with anything in your picnic basket, from tuna sandwiches to chicken salad. Or, for \$20, order a cheese plate with nuts and salumi from the tasting room. They'll rush it out to you.

Picnic perks: Grab the table in the center of the garden, which is shaded by massive, overgrown corky oak, pine, magnolia and redwood trees. It's a spectacular spot.

Wine pick: The refreshing 2012 Dry Rose (\$17) has a light salmon hue, big watermelon fruit, and a slightly creamy texture from 18 months in French oak.

The details: Open Thursdays-Mondays; \$5 tasting fee. 9010 E. Harney Lane, Lodi; harneylane.com

Nearby: Klinker Brick and D'Art