

# Hike in the vines

## High-end or on a budget, many ways to see Sonoma County's beauty, bounty

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CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / The Press Democrat

Zephyr Adventures tour guide Margaret Chastaine, left, leads Gina Lee, Monica Ferguson, Stephen Lee and Khalil Meggett on a hiking tour of Montemaggiore Winery, near Healdsburg, on Feb. 22.

You can cruise through Wine Country in a fancy limo, or ride your bike up and down its gentle, roller-coaster hills. But in the end, what do you really know about its world-class vineyards, complete with trellis systems, cover crops and rootstocks?

Probably not a lot. But if you hike beside the vines and see how they are pruned and trained, from bud break in the spring to harvest in the fall, you may gain a deeper appreciation for the art and science that goes into a bottle of wine.

That's the idea behind two new hiking programs in Sonoma County inviting visitors to explore the terrain of its various vineyards while enjoying lungfuls of fresh air and possibly even an endorphin high.

One of the programs — Sonoma Vineyard Walks, created by Zephyr Adventures of Montana — is geared toward guests who want a high-end experience. The walks include lunch in the vineyards and a visit and tasting at two wineries with a private tour guide.

The travel company, which runs active wine tours all over the world, launched itself with in-line skating trips. Later, they added bike tours and walking tours in the vineyards in France, Spain, Italy, South Africa, Chile, Argentina, Oregon and Sonoma County.

Four Healdsburg wineries are currently taking part in the local program: Alexander Valley Vineyards in the Alexander Valley; Michel-Schlumberger, Montemaggiore and Quivira wineries in the Dry Creek Valley.

These walking tours allow guests to have their wine and work it off, too. Each trip can be tailored to the guest's fitness level and specific interests.

“Most of the time, people want the exercise, especially if it's nice out,” said Margaret Chastaine, a tour guide for Sonoma Vineyard Walks. “It almost makes you feel that you earned your lunch and a glass of wine.”

If you want to get close to the vines but don't want to spend an arm and a leg, there's another new program offering self-guided tours, complete with educational brochures, marked pathways and a tasting at the end.

The tour program offered at four wineries — Matanzas Creek in Bennett Valley, Paradise Ridge and Balletto Vineyards in the Russian River Valley, and Mauritson in the Dry Creek Valley — is the brainchild of the Sonoma County Winegrape Commission.

“We're about making the wine experience more approachable and allowing our guests in the vineyards to see and experience how great grapes are grown,” said Larry Levine, vice president of marketing and communications at the SCWC.

Here are the details about each of these tours, plus what you can expect to find at each winery:

On a warm, sunny morning in late February, four tourists from Philadelphia joined Margaret Chastaine of Sonoma Vineyards Walks at Montemaggiore Winery for a morning hike through the vineyards situated on a rustic ridgetop overlooking the Dry Creek Valley.

The two married couples — Stephen and Gina Lee, Khalil Meggett and Monica Ferguson — have made similar treks in Europe and wanted to deepen their knowledge of California wine.

It all started with a friendship between the two women, who are both physicians at the Hospital at the University of Pennsylvania.

“Monica and I started talking about wine, and I said, ‘We should go out,’” Gina recalled. “The more I learn, the more I appreciate what I'm drinking.”

After Chastaine gives the hikers water bottles, the group sets off through the vineyards, which are in the process of being pruned.

Throughout the one-hour hike, Chastaine gave the group a mini-lesson in viticulture, pointing out the different rootstocks, the planting direction of the rows and the benefits

of the rocky soil, which stresses the vines and diverts more energy into the grapes than the leaves.

After winding their way up and through the olive orchard — 800 trees planted on a steep slope — the hikers arrived back at the winery, where winemaker Lise Ciolino took over.

“Syrah is unique,” she explained as they tasted through several vintages. “When you're making it, it does not age in a predictable nature. It goes through a roller-coaster ride.”

After the tasting, the group moved on to nearby Quivira Vineyards for a picnic lunch al fresco, catered by the Dry Creek General Store.

After lunch, they explored the winery's extensive organic gardens, examined some old, head-trained zinfandel, talked about trellis systems, walked along Wine Creek, then hiked up a small hill between some old vines.

When the couples left, they said they wanted to come back and stay longer next time.

“This is very unique because it's an education,” Chastaine noted. “People get to choose which wineries to go to — for growing, or tasting, or getting a really good hike.”

The other wineries participating in the program include Michel-Schlumberger, known for its small blocks and site-specific terroir; and Alexander Valley Vineyards, famous for its historic landmarks and the edible gardens planted by the late Maggie Wetzel.

The Sonoma Vineyard Walks cost \$125 per person for a full day.  
[sonomavineyardwalks.com](http://sonomavineyardwalks.com).

At Mauritson Winery in the Dry Creek Valley, you can pick up a full-color brochure in the tasting room and head out to the adjacent vineyards for a self-guided tour as part of the Sonoma County Vineyard Adventures.

“The pruning is done, so it's very quiet and very dormant out there,” said staff member Jan Nicholas, of the late-winter weather. “Springtime is good for bud break, but the fall is gorgeous for the leaves.”

Marked by big purple arrows, the pathway winds through five blocks of grapes — zinfandel, sauvignon blanc, cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, and merlot — along a creek, then circles back to the the winery crush pad, where 20 varieties of grapes are processed each fall.

The Mauritson family has been growing grapes in the Dry Creek Valley since 1868. Their great-great-great grandfather S.P. Hallgren was a pioneer in the Rockpile region, and Mauritson Winery still sources its own grapes from that remote region, renowned for its zinfandels.

At the Mauritson tasting room, guests can taste four wines for free, including the 2007 Zinfandel, Dry Creek Valley — its flagship wine. Tasting four more exclusive, limited-production wines, including a flight of Rockpile zinfandels, costs \$10.

Matanzas Creek Winery, known for its lavender gardens (which peak in June) and outdoor sculptures, offers a self-guided walk through its merlot, malbec and grenache vines.

Paradise Ridge Winery, which boasts a world-class sculpture garden, features a self-guided walk through petite sirah, chardonnay, grenache and zinfandel vines.

Balletto Vineyards, a former produce farm adjacent to the Laguna de Santa Rosa, features a walk through chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot gris grapes.

The walks are less than a mile in length and appeal to people of all ages. Most of the wineries charge a nominal tasting fee. [sonomavineyardadventures.com](http://sonomavineyardadventures.com).

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