

Off Season Activities in America's Vineyards



As anyone who has lived year-round in a tourist destination has observed, a destination's true character is revealed when the tourists go home.

But savvy travelers can take advantage of off-season deals and activities while getting to experience a town the way the locals do. Jamie Stringfellow uncovers off-season spring activities in America's vineyards.

For years I lived full-time in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, famous for its beaches, and fishing, which is crowded with tourists during "the season."

When the season ends around Labor Day, visitors go home, and those of us who remain get reacquainted with friends and reclaimed the beaches.

The biggest symbol of this beach reclamation was (and still is) the annual Striped Bass and Bluefish Derby. If you hang around Martha's Vineyard through September and early October, you will not only get to watch some great fish be weighed in, you'll get to eavesdrop on what people do when the tourists aren't watching. You get to see real life in the place: those who work in the summertime as carpenters, painters, realtors, and waiters discussing their catches over coffee and enjoying their quiet season, before the cycle begins again.



The same holds true in "actual" vineyards, aka where locals work year-round to plant and cultivate crops for wine production. Most tourists show up at vineyards—from California to Vermont and Virginia to Oregon—in summer and fall, when vines are leafy and grapes are being picked and "crushed," and the full harvest abundance is celebrated.

Don't miss [Off the Brochure Travel Guide: North Fork, Long Island, the Hamptons Alternative for Shopping, Dining & Wine Tasting](#).

At that time of year, those working at this industry are so darn busy you might get some great wine, but not a whole lot of their attention or insight into their work and their culture.

But the important work of that harvest and abundance begins much earlier, on the flip side of



the year, as far back as February. Or in the case of some wines—such as ice wine—after visitors go home in the fall, after the first hard frost, when frozen grapes are harvested for sweet wine that comes due in March.

When you visit a vineyard or wine-producing area in the off-season, not only do you get to see the real workings of the enterprise the area is known for, you get that sense of what the people in this place are really about—beyond the visitor-centric hospitality. And bare branches and shorn vines mean more affordable, less crowded, and experiences that just as sweet.

Find more great up-close-and-personal experiences in vineyards with our feature: [Wine Boot Camp Chronicles](#).

A few weeks ago, I went up to Sonoma County to see their annual pruning contest. Pruning—which takes place from just after Thanksgiving until early March—signals the beginning of the horticultural year, and the first cycle of the annual Sonoma economy.

Thousands of skilled workers prepare the vines for the coming year. A good pruner cuts back up to 300 dead and dormant vines a day so new grapes can grow. His eye will tell him immediately how to cut the overgrown vines back to produce the best grapes in the coming year, and the years beyond.



To complicate matters, different grapevines require different types of cuts.

And economic and climatic realities mean working fast to get the vines in order before “bud break.” In Sonoma, the winemakers’ best pruners compete in regional competitions and duke it out (or prune it out) at the annual county-wide pruning contest in February.

Explore California’s wine region with Suzy Gershman:

- [Suzy’s First Bottle Blog: The Napa Wine Train](#)
- [Bottle Blogs, Pt. 2: Cutie-Pie Napa Stores & Selected Vineyards](#)
- [Bottle Blogs, Pt. 3: Sonoma County’s Rodney Strong](#)
- [Bottle Blogs, Pt. 4: Napa’s Jordan Vineyards & Winery](#)
- [Bottle Blogs, Pt. 5: Cakebread Cellars](#)
- [Bottle Blogs, Pt. 6: Beringer Wines](#)

“It’s the best time to see the whole grape-growing industry together,” says Larry Levine, of the [Sonoma Wine Grape Commission](#), “and a time to praise the skills of vineyard employees.” Pruning is a job, he said, that can’t be done by a machine—one of the last of those that must be done by skilled human hands.



On pruning contest day, the fields at Shone Farm at Santa Rosa Junior College are crowded with winemakers, locals with their kids, and the two finalists from each of the county’s five regions. The parked vehicles are trucks, everyone is in work boots, guys in “Vinepro” jackets give instructions and a lot of people have shears hanging off their work pants.

Each contestant has five vines to prune, and 4 minutes to do them all. The contestants are judged on speed, precision and neatness. An announcer reads the rules in Spanish. All 10 pruners start at once. They’re fast, their hands moving as their eyes scan the vines ahead, planning each cut. There’s a rush of pulling out dead vines, clipping, yanking, smoothing, contemplating. It’s *Edward Scissorhands* meets *Sideways*. The crowd hoots and cheers.

Ulises Valdez watches his pruner, Javier Lopez—one of the Russian River Valley regional champions. Valdez is one of those classic Sonoma success stories, I learn. He arrived 25 years ago from Mexico as a 15-year-old boy, knocking on growers’ doors until he landed a job as a picker.

In 2003, the fifth year of the pruning contest, Valdez won the championship. Now he owns Valdez & Sons Vineyard Management, and has his own winery (Valdez Family Winery which produced its first vintage in 2006), and a champion of his own in the finals.

A man with a stop watch times each contestant. It’s over in 4 minutes—at least, the pruning is. The judging takes more than an hour. Three men with clipboards inspect each and every cut, adding and subtracting points for vines cut too close, or not close enough. I hear “too deep” and “is this a bonus?” as the judges inspect the vines.





The *1812 Overture* blasts from a boombox on the tailgate of a truck, and we watch a “celebrity” pruning contest featuring local winemakers and vineyard managers, who aren’t as fast or as deft as the regional champs but get a lot of laughs from the crowd.

Then Merilark Padget-Johnson, a Santa Rosa Junior College viticulture instructor, demonstrates on a grapevine what it was we all just watched, explaining why certain cuts are better than others.

Don’t miss this [Photo Gallery: Vineyards of Sonoma County](#).

Soon, the judges announce they are done, and we all walk up to a fiesta with chicken enchiladas and wine, and then it’s time to announce the winners. The music stops, the room gets quiet and then it’s official: First place goes to Javier Lopez of Valdez & Sons Winery, eliciting a lot of cheering, and a big smile from Ulises Valdez.



For some great off-season values in lodging, try the family-friendly [Flamingo Resort](#) in Santa Rosa or [The Healdsburg Inn](#).

While the pruning contest is a great event to put on next year’s calendar ([visit here for information](#) on future events) there are plenty of other off-season vineyard events still to come this spring.

Don’t miss our [Ask the Locals Travel Guide: Sonoma, California](#).

Check out the self-guided Sonoma winery tours you can do any time of year. With no advance reservation, you can take short (none longer than a mile) walks around vineyards that have placed educational signs and displays among the vines. Go to [Sonoma Vineyard Adventures](#) for information (make sure to call wineries before visiting to check on weather conditions).



In March, the vines may be bare, but the fields between them are lush with wildflowers—planted because they generously restore nitrogen to the soil.

Sonoma’s annual [Art at the Wineries](#), runs for all of April and May, and features local Sonoma area painters, sculptors, photographers, potters, and jewelers on display at over 40 Wine Road members’ tasting rooms.

Farther south is the annual [Santa Barbara Vintner’s Festival](#) on April 17. The

annual “rite of spring” celebrates the start of the 2010 vintage with more than 100 Santa Barbara County winemakers pouring their latest wines, and joined by dozens of local chefs serving appetizers. There is live music, and a silent auction of some impressive wines to benefit local charities. Individual wineries host separate events all weekend, from Friday, April 16 to Monday, the 19th.

Find accommodations with [Villa Rental Tips from a Weekend in Sonoma](#).

In Oregon, early spring is marked by the Red Lips & Tulips celebration at St. Josef’s Winery, just outside Portland. As you might guess, tulips (and red wine) are in abundance at the winery and nearby Wooden Shoe Tulip Fields in April and May. St. Josef’s Founders Day Celebration is April 10 & 11 this year, and features live music (including “gypsy jazz”), barrel tastings, Hungarian goulash, tours and tulips. For more information, visit www.stjosefswinery.com/events.

Just outside Eugene, in Lane County, the annual [Fern Ridge Wings & Wine Festival](#) will be held on May 8, also known as International Migratory Bird Day. Events include bird and nature walks, canoe trips, and a wine-tasting bus tour.

Mark your calendars for next year’s celebrations in Virginia, where the state’s mushrooming wine industry marks the vernal equinox with the Mushroom & Merlot Equinox Celebration at [Fox Meadow Winery](#). Mushroom soup and other fungi-inspired dishes are paired with Merlot and live music. Coming up on



March 27-28 are barrel tastings that allow you to compare wines being aged in French and American Oak Barrels.

In Vermont and upstate New York, the thaw is celebrated with ice wines. That's right, ice wines symbolize the circle that is the horticultural year. The grapes are plucked long after the official harvest (anywhere from late November to January) when most vineyard visitors have returned home. Frozen grapes are left to sweeten on the vine, and the wines are introduced and tasted in spring when the cycle begins again. Check out www.sheldrakepoint.com in New York, and www.boydenvalley.com in Vermont for tours, events and ice wine tasting information.

By Jamie Stringfellow for PeterGreenberg.com.