

Travelling winefully

Lucille Howe visits the tasting rooms of Santa Barbara to discover how fearless, entrepreneurial women are bringing a mindful approach to winemaking >



Sonja Magdevski planted her own vines and has been hands on with her wine ever since.

Photography: VisitCalifornia.com

Hidden in a corner of the 'Funk Zone' is the Santa Barbara Wine Collective (santabarbarawinecollective.com) and winemaker Sonja Magdevski, from Casa Dumetz winery, is one of its leading ladies. Like her wines, Sonja is ageing beautifully and her toned arms are the result of working the fields rather than working out at the gym. Her rainbow dress reflects her colourful personality.

This tasting room, from like-minded wine producers, is housed in one of the zone's warehouses with a patio that traps the sun to warm my glass of Pinot. "The swing of the seasons, the beauty of the vineyard, the splendour of working in agriculture and the wonderful people involved – it's just incredible on every level," enthuses Sonja.

A relatively new addition to the wine scene, her boutique company bottles a micro vintage each year of around 1,000 cases. The etched lines on her hands are evidence that her work is not just in the tasting rooms but on the frontline too. "As a newcomer to wine – and a woman at that – I wanted to get my hands dirty. Actually, men who have been in the industry for decades have been very generous with help. We all pool our knowledge, and we all benefit."

As a side note, Sonja is married to the actor Emelio Estevez (Young Guns, The Breakfast Club) who founded the winery with her. But I'm not fooled – a solid IMDb profile doesn't guarantee a good vintage and Sonja bravely committed herself to the venture with no fancy 'help'.

"On our very first date, Emilio dug the holes and I planted the vines," she laughs, and when her husband was away filming, it was Sonja who called the harvest; she has honed her instincts ever since.

Santa Barbara has a unique topography; it's the longest traverse valley (running east to west) on the Pacific coast. That means microclimates that range from the chilly and foggy to dry and warm, yielding grapes from Pinot to Zinfandel.

And Sonja has a secret spot for enjoying a glass of her popular 2014 Grenache, praised for its tones of cherry and hibiscus: "Butterfly Beach in Montecito. There's this little nook where you can walk for quite a while on the beach during low tide and you can always find a place to park." Given that Montecito boasts Ellen Degeneres and Jennifer Lopez as residents, you could find yourself in good company.

For any owners of a smartphone, the new Eat This, Shoot That (eatthisshootthat.com), food, wine and photography tour is ideal for exploring creativity through winefulness. At least, that was my aim.

Author and tour guide, Tara Jones Haaf, knows everything about maximising your camera settings ▶



Tara Jones (left) leads 'Eat This, Shoot That' food, wine and photography tours.



Photography: thispoplife.com



Blend your own wine at Margerum Wine Company.

Street art in Santa Barbara's 'Funk Zone', home to the Santa Barbara Wine Collective, many of whose producers are women.

Uncork the Merlot and assume the lotus position because there's a new way to relax that's right up my street – 'winefulness'. From a trending hashtag on Instagram to a new experience offered by Airbnb hosts who enjoy merging wine tasting and mindfulness, the practice is enjoying some popularity. Eager to learn more, I head down California's Highway One to a place where wine is savoured, not sunk.

Santa Barbara is to Los Angeles what The Hamptons are to New York; a luxuriant, exclusive and easy-on-the-eye weekend escape. The star of the American Riviera, it provides a perfect antidote to the smog and superhighways of Los Angeles with a distinctly European vibe.

The first thing I notice is the light which, by 8am, casts a flamingo-pink glow onto the sidewalks and shutters. Together with the palms, the boardwalk and the breaking waves, it feels like Santa Barbara has bottled the best bits of Americana. Even the street art looks like it has been signed off by quality control.

"Santa Barbara has one of the largest communities of women winemakers"





Photography: VisitCalifornia.com

SLEEP IN STYLE

At the top of Santa Barbara's Main Street, Hotel Californian (thehotelcalifornian.com) is a Martyn Lawrence Bullard masterpiece, combining Spanish colonial revival and Moorish decadence.

Fans will know Bullard - originally a South-Londoner - as the star of the series, Million Dollar Decorators, and the interior designer for Tommy Hilfiger, Edward Norton and both Khloe and Kourtney Kardashian.

The term 'bespoke' couldn't be more deserved, with over a million hand painted tiles from Morocco and Bullard-designed studded leather headboards in cherry red or racing green. Each room has one of five specially commissioned prints as

its centrepiece. Hollywood legends including Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn have been given the tattoo treatment with full-sleeve rockabilly ink that makes you look twice.

The devil is in the details and they are everywhere, from the cobra motifs which symbolise power and protection in ancient Egypt to the fluffiest towelling robe I've ever wrapped around my tired limbs.

Each night, perfectly turned down 300-thread linen is topped with a literary quote on a large yellow post-it. Mine included: "Judge nothing, you will be happy. Forgive everything, you will be happier. Love everything, you will be happiest - Jack Kerouac." And in such luxury, what's not to love?

to capture your champagne bubbles and taking backlit sundown selfies. She also confirms the recent influx of female tastemakers. "The wine industry, like other farming industries, has for years been a bit of a boys' club but we're lucky in Santa Barbara to have one of the largest communities of women winemakers; trailblazers really."

Over two hours touring with Tara, I take in several tasting rooms with a potted history of the area as my walk gets a little wobbly. "I hate being a tourist, which is why it's really not about the tour but eating like a local and shooting like a pro. I want you to feel like I'm a friend showing you the neighbourhood. The only rule I have is shoot first, eat second," Tara says.

At Cebada tasting room (forbiddenfruitorchards.com), with its marble worktops, floor-to-ceiling-windows and framed photography, Tara explains the art of wine appreciation. "Checking the colour and tone of the wine will help you identify buttery from crisp or dry whites or light to full-bodied reds," she says. "You'll also want to give your wine time to breathe, then linger over your palate so that you truly taste the different aspects of the flavour profile."

At the Grassini tasting room in the historic El Paseo shopping district (grassinifamilgvineyards.com), I perch an elbow on a rustic bar made of reclaimed wood. In between sips, the cosy interior is swathed in scents from upcycled soy candles (so Santa Barbara) homed in Cabernet Sauvignon bottles. Fragrances from pomegranate to peach do for your nose what the wine does for your tongue.

And if you fancy yourself as a burgeoning vintner, you can blend your own signature wine at the Margerum Wine Company (margerumwines.com). Armed with pipettes and the best of the producer's wines, hostess Rani Melean guides us through the best percentages for a top seller in a way I think only a woman could. "I think that women tend to be, generally speaking, social and personable. You have to enjoy people if you work in a wine tasting room. Women are observant, we pay attention and we are good listeners. Guests appreciate that level of connection," she says.

The 50% Merlot, 20% Cabernet Sauvignon and 10% Malbec I concoct isn't going to win me any awards for its overly heavy and smoky palette. It certainly won't help me slip into a calming state of zen. "For a wine meditation, try our Uber Syrah," suggests Rani. "It has an array of notes on the bouquet that can put you in a trance, then you'll notice the changes as the wine continues to open up." Their hit and my miss prove that it takes a lot of work to create the perfect antidote to a stressful day, and the women of Santa Barbara are fearlessly leading the way. So, 'cheers' for that. 🍷

Getting there

Virgin Atlantic (virginatlantic.com) fly from London Heathrow to Los Angeles. For more information about Santa Barbara, go to visitcalifornia.com



California

Combining carefully curated wine with meditation is a sure route to calm for writer Lucille Howe.



Photography: VisitCalifornia.com

How to drink mindfully

- 1 First, make a 'baseline check' to see where you are emotionally. Notice where that is and let it go.
- 2 As you lift the glass, feel its weight, temperature and texture. Hold it to the light and take in the colour of your wine.
- 3 Swirl your wine in the glass, and bring your nose to the rim and inhale deeply.
- 4 As you drink your wine, track its progress through your body. Notice what physical sensations are stimulated.
- 5 If you begin to lose awareness of your senses at any point, pause the meditation and then resume when you are ready.