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Napa Valley wineries ready to welcome Bay Area visitors

Janelle Bitker June 8, 2020



Lana Malyuk, Tristyn Barreto Tina Mabrouk and Debbie Amaro visit Alpha Omega Winery in Rutherford when it reopened Monday. All tastings at the Napa County winery will now be outside as a precaution. Photo: Kate Munsch / Special to The Chronicle

When guests started arriving at Alpha Omega Winery's resort-like Rutherford estate on Monday, they confirmed their reservation with a greeter from their cars, drove to a shady parking lot and waited for a text message alert that their table was ready.

The new era of luxury Napa Valley wine-tasting experiences is here.

Napa County allowed wineries to reopen their tasting rooms on Friday, right after Gov. Gavin Newsom's updated the state's industry guidelines. Previously, all wineries were required to serve full meals alongside tastings, which prevented Napa Valley wineries from opening because Napa County prohibits wineries from serving full meals. One Napa Valley winery, Caymus Vineyards, sued Newsom and the state public health officer, alleging the state's plan was discriminatory.

But the new guidelines, recommended to start June 12, waive the meal requirement. Some Napa wineries opened this weekend, including Castello di Amorosa and Ashes & Diamonds, with more planning to reopen this week. While many Sonoma County wineries had already reopened for outdoor, sit-down experiences pairing food and wine, shuttered wineries are looking forward to reopening with fewer restrictions on Friday.

Generally, expect wineries to require reservations, have their staff wearing masks, space tables at least 6 feet apart and follow strict sanitizing protocols. But wineries have additional ideas for what will create the safest, most enjoyable experience, from no-touch menus with QR codes to bottle service to blowout tastings in private rooms.

Alpha Omega Chief Operating Officer Jeff Knowles is closing the winery's indoor tasting bar in favor of its large terrace. In addition to classic tasting flights, Alpha Omega will introduce bottle service for customers who want as little interaction with staff as possible. On the other end of the spectrum, some private tasting rooms — completely disinfected before and after each party — will be available with a wine educator on site. Easing the flow of bodies is a key logistical hurdle Knowles has been working through, resulting in separate entrances and exits to avoid cross traffic.

"We're excited to go back to what we love to do, which is pouring and talking about wine," Knowles said.

With 4 acres of gardens and courtyards, Trefethen Family Vineyards CEO Jon Ruel also decided the best move would be keeping everyone outdoors when the Napa winery reopens Wednesday. He even added bathrooms outside so guests won't have to enter the winery at all. A tasting flight starts at \$30 and options go up to \$150 for a private tour and wine tasting paired with bites such as a caramelized spring onion-mushroom tartlet.

Sonoma County's requirement to serve food with wine has kept Healdsburg's Unti Vineyards from opening. Owner Mick Unti said it felt less safe to introduce more packaging and handling while also increasing customers' time at the winery. A simple tasting could take 20 minutes, but a tasting with a full meal might last two hours.

"We decided the best thing all around was for us not to get into the restaurant business," said Unti said. "It put us in a really difficult position because potential customers expect us to be open."

Unti plans to reopen his tasting room Friday and bring the pours indoors — another newly available option for wineries — with a maximum of two groups of two people at a time. This will allow for ample social distance between parties, as well as between winery staff and guests. Unti envisions having an employee pour wine and step aside before the taster approaches the bar to pick up the glass and then walk to a different space. While wineries like Alpha Omega prefer to keep everyone outdoors, Unti said he likes the intimacy and control of his indoor space for the sake of cleaning and social distancing.

Guests stand at the bar inside Unti Vineyards' tasting room in Healdsburg pre-coronavirus. When Unti Vineyards reopens its tasting room, only two parties will be allowed at a time.

It's been tough for the smaller wineries to keep up with all the regulations, said Miriam Puentes of Honrama Cellars. Honrama's Sonoma tasting room has been closed because it lacks a food permit, but Puentes hopes to reopen in the next few days. Before the coronavirus, the winery's sales came exclusively through its tasting room and a couple of restaurants.

"We're keeping our fingers crossed because it seems like things keep changing," she said. "Our hands keep getting tied behind our backs."

Napa Valley winery owners said they don't expect visitors from New York anytime soon, but they hope to attract day-trippers from the Bay Area — despite the fact that cities like San Francisco and Oakland have been harder hit by COVID-19 than Napa.

"We're all worried and anxious. We don't know who has it and there are going to be asymptomatic transmissions," Ruel said. "But I feel like we have to strike a balance. We have to take measures that will dramatically reduce the risk of transmission, and we have to, as humans, allow us to return to things that we know feed our souls."

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