

# Napa Valley *Register*

## Napa Valley's wine industry cautiously embarks upon reopening process

Sarah Klearman Jun 9, 2020 Updated 3 min ago



*Alpha Omega Wine Educator Ian Stout (standing) hosts tasting for guests (left to right) Cody Murray, Tanai Murray, Rob Henry and Alexa Goetz, all of Napa, on June 9, 2020.  
Courtesy of Kelly Carter, Alpha Omega*

**N**apa Valley wineries this week began opening their tasting rooms to the public after almost three months of pandemic-prompted closures.

Napa County [confirmed](#) late Friday it would give wineries the green light to begin reopening immediately following the release of new guidelines from state officials and a subsequent assessment of local conditions.

Alpha Omega Winery began accepting reservations the day after wineries were given permission to reopen, according to Chief Operating Officer Jeff Knowles.

“We had been preparing for this with our leadership team during the entire shutdown, and we’d been hard at work starting on safety protocol and changing the physical layout of the winery,” Knowles said.

Alpha Omega had also retained the entirety of its full-time, year-round tasting room staff, according to Knowles, and so pivoted into training and reopening faster than it might otherwise have been able to.

Monday was an unofficial opening, Knowles said, noting that the winery had purposefully chosen a weekday in order to ease into modified customer service.

Much about the process of welcoming guests has been fundamentally changed: upon their arrival at Alpha Omega, customers wait inside of their cars until they receive a text confirming that their table is ready. The winery is using its outdoor patio to seat customers at tables more than six feet away from each other, Knowles said, in order to emphasize social distancing. Customers must wear masks and provide the winery with contact information in case contact tracing becomes necessary, a precaution now mandated by the state.

Those are provisions in line with what Napa Valley Vintners has recommended to its members, according to Associate Director of Industry Relations Michelle Novi. (NVV has begun compiling [a list](#) of members open for business, she noted). The group worked with officials at the local, state and federal levels to solidify its recommendations, and formed a vintner task force to develop and identify how guidelines could best be applicable to wineries of all sizes.

St. Supery CEO Emma Swain, a member of that task force, said the group also took into account advice from wineries in neighboring Sonoma County as well as in Washington state (wineries opened there began opening in some counties in mid-May).

“In typical Napa Valley spirit, we’re all sharing as much information as possible and figuring out what’s best for our teams and the safety of our visitors,” Swain said.

St. Supery will open Friday, Swain said, and will be open for business Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays for the foreseeable future.

“We need our Uber drivers back, and our hotels and restaurants open,” Swain said of the rationale behind modified hours. “When those things happen, we’ll add more days.”

The disruption of the larger tourism ecosystem that supports many of the valley’s businesses poses [a challenge](#), too, for Dos Lagos Vineyards, a boutique Atlas Peak-based label whose wine club members often come to Napa Valley from out of town on multi-day trips, according to owners Tom Dinkle and Marcie Hunt.





*Alpha Omega's first customers, a group celebrating a birthday on Monday, the day the winery reopened its tasting room for service. Guests are required to wear masks but may remove them during tastings. Courtesy of Kelly Carter, Alpha Omega*

Dos Lagos does not have a use permit that allows it to host visitors on its property, Dinkle said. Much of its direct-to-consumer business consists of large dinners with wine club members at restaurants that serve its labels.

As for when that kind of patronage can resume – Dinkel and Hunt aren't sure.

“It’s definitely on hold and looks to remain on hold for a while,” Dinkel said. “A lot depends what happens with the second wave (of the pandemic). If opening up we find that we’re overcome, we’re going to stay locked down for an extended period.”



*Staff at Alpha Omega Winery on Monday at the winery's new greeter station.  
Courtesy of Kelly Carter, Alpha Omega*

Stand-alone tasting rooms nested among respective downtowns in Napa County have begun to reopen for tastings, too. The process, much like with wineries, has not been homogeneous; while Alpha Omega's downtown tasting room has been open since late May (it has a full kitchen, and so was permitted to open under guidelines for restaurants) Vintner Collective owner Garret Murphy said his business would be open "in the next couple of weeks" in order to ensure it was safe to do so.

It's the details that pose a challenge, Murphy said: things like cleaning the restroom after each use, implementing disposable wine glasses and ensuring that clients stay six feet apart. Murphy already plans to drastically limit capacity and require reservations for tastings, which he has not previously done.



“I’m hopeful we’ll move toward a much broader reopening in the summer,” Murphy said, adding it would depend on local and state assessments of the virus’s spread.

Murphy, too, is conscious of the potential “second wave” of infections that local public health officials have warned about, but is also concerned with the logistics of reopening. A nearby restaurant reopened for business last week and has closed already, Murphy said, wondering aloud if it had been too difficult to maintain safety protocol or if there had not been enough patronage to merit the reopening.

“I’m very glad that the county reopened, but we’re going to need to revisit a couple months from now to see how it goes,” he said.

As the Bay Area embarks upon a slow reopening, industry members have posited that Napa Valley could see an increase in drive-through tourism from nearby counties. That’s been the case at Grgich Hills Estate, according to Assistant Marketing Manager Megan Arnett, who said the phones have “been ringing non-stop” since the winery announced it would reopen for tastings beginning Wednesday, June 10.

“We’ve had so many people reach out to us, which has been really uplifting, because we wondered if they would be more cautious,” Arnett said. The winery has reorganized its layout to emphasize its available outdoor seating, she said, and rerouting staff so that they do not serve more than one group at a time.

That will limit Grgich Hills to about 50 percent of its regular capacity, Arnett said.

NVV’s guidelines address not only tasting rooms and winery business operations, but tangential details like wine tours (which, according to Novi, must be redesigned to ensure “household groups” do not mix).

“We have made clear that folks need to be rethinking and redesigning what the hospitality experience is going to look like to protect employee health and guest health and safety,” she said. “Napa Valley stands for excellence in both its wine quality and visitor experience, and we know we must now excel in ensuring safe visits for everyone.”

Alpha Omega’s capacity will also be limited by the guidelines it’s put in place, Knowles said, emphasizing the winery’s priority is safety. Feedback from guests on Monday was very positive, he added.

“The standard best operating practices in this case don’t exist,” Knowles continued. “It’s an everyday exercise, making sure we get this right and that we’re allowing and hearing the voices of everyone, especially our employees.”

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*A shot of Alpha Omega Winery earlier this year, prior to the winery's closure and reconfiguration of its outdoor patio.  
Courtesy of Kelly Carter, Alpha Omega*

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