

Wine travel: Why now is the time to visit Napa and Sonoma

Katie Kelly Bell, Special to USA TODAY Published Nov. 14, 2017



Normally this time of year in Napa and Sonoma is bustling with visitors — reservations are hard to come by, tasting rooms are elbow-to-elbow and hotels are fully booked. The wildfires are long gone, the sun is out and the wine is ready to pour — the only thing missing is the tourists.

Now is the time to pack up and make tracks for wine country before the crowds return. Despite the devastating images in the news, wine country by and large remains as lovely as ever.

“Now that we have a clearer picture of what happened in Napa Valley, we are grateful and humbled to report that damage to the Napa Valley wine industry was not widespread,” says Patsy McGaughy, communications director for Napa Valley Vintners, who adds that only a handful of vineyards (believed to be fewer than five) suffered significant losses, which is still five too many, but certainly not an entire region.

“Our little winery here in Saint Helena is fine and reopened on October 18,” says Kevin Morrissey, winemaker at Ehlers Estate. “That first day back, the sun came up, the sky was azure, and I actually saw a pair of bluebirds in the vineyard. I unlocked the tasting room and put on some rock and roll as loud as I wanted it. The phone was already ringing, and out back, the fragrance of the fermentations permeated the air.”



(Photo: Ed DeWitt/Special to the RGJ)

In Sonoma, Marcia Kunde of Kunde Family Winery, says they are very much back in business. “Due to the fires, our Tasting Room had to be closed for two weeks, but thankfully our winery building and surrounding vineyards were spared any damage.” She notes that the views are still magnificent, and “there is no better time of year to book a Mountain Top Tasting Experience at Kunde.”

For the hospitality team at Napa’s Alpha Omega, it was a relief to get back to work. “On our first Saturday open after being closed for eight days during the wildfires, it was just like old times on our terrace with guests sipping wine in the sunshine under umbrellas and a canopy of sycamore trees, while enjoying picturesque views of our fountains and vineyards and the Mayacamas,” says Kelly Carter, director of communication.

Napa Valley Vintners’ figures on actual acreage impacted by fire show a very different story than the one portrayed in the news. “We estimate 3,500 Napa County vineyard acres were somehow affected by the fire, which is less than 8% of the total vineyard acreage in Napa Valley (there are 45,000 total vineyard acres in Napa Valley),” says McGaughy.

The main priority for wine country today is, “working together to get everyone back on their feet as soon as possible,” says Kathleen Heitz Myers, CEO and president of Heitz Cellar. Tourism is the fuel in wine country’s engine, without it the whole region suffers a double blow. “We appreciate the help and kindness that is pouring in from around the world. We look forward to welcoming you back to this beautiful area of the world and sharing a glass of wine together.”