

November 2010

Napa/Sonoma

Wine Country Cousins

by [Maria Lenhart](#)

Mention the words "wine country" and most people think of Napa and Sonoma, two adjacent counties north of San Francisco where nature and human ingenuity have come together to provide some of the finest food and wine experiences this side of Tuscany and Provence.

While sharing many characteristics, Napa and Sonoma are also two distinct destinations. Napa is compact, manicured and refined, while Sonoma, four times larger, is more of a free spirit, capable of surprising even the most frequent visitors at every turn.

"Napa is the elite of Wine Country, usually more expensive than Sonoma, but not always," says Linda Viviani, owner of Viviani Inc., a local DMC that has been designing Wine Country events and tours for over 25 years. "Sonoma is a bit more down-home—it has what I call 'rustic elegance.'"

Both counties have been a magnet in recent years for investors with big bucks, drawing Hollywood icons, superstar chefs and tech billionaires eager to make their own mark on the region with signature restaurants and wineries. For groups, the result is an ever-expanding choice of venues and experiences.

Napa

For years, most visitors bypassed the city of Napa for what was considered the county's real attraction—the Napa Valley. While the Valley has lost none of its allure, the big news is that the city of Napa is coming into its own as a stellar food and wine destination.

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Completed just last summer, Napa Riverfront is a mixed-use development that, along with harboring shops and office space, is a veritable restaurant row manned by celebrity chefs. The dining options along the Napa River now include Morimoto, a minimalist urban restaurant run by Masaharu Morimoto of *Iron Chef* that is strong on sushi, sashimi and Wagyu beef; Tyler Florence's Rotisserie, a casual bistro that is part of the Food Network star's growing culinary empire; and Fish Story, a new entry from the Lark Restaurant Group with Chef Stephen Barber at the helm.

"These new restaurants are a huge asset for Napa—we've been doing events at all of them," Viviani says.

Another foodie hot spot in Napa is the Oxbow Market, where visitors can chow down on fresh seafood at Hog Island Oyster Co. and Venezuelan street food at Pica Pica Maize Kitchen. The Oxbow Wine Merchant, which offers a huge selection of wines, cheeses and small-plate appetizers, is a popular group venue, offering both indoor and outdoor space along the river.

All through downtown Napa are signs of impressive historic preservation, including the Napa Valley Opera House, a restored 1879 Italianate Victorian gem housing a 500-seat theater available for rent, and the depot for the Napa Valley Wine Train, which makes excursions into the Valley, with gourmet dining and wine tasting onboard.

Napa's growing number of hotels and resorts are also drawing more visitors, especially groups. Meetings-friendly properties within the city include Westin Verasa, Embassy Suites Napa Valley, Napa River Inn and the new Avia Napa, a downtown boutique hotel.

In the Napa Valley, the choice of world-class wineries and resorts continues to expand. An exciting new winery venue is Kenzo Estate, which occupies a prime 4,000-acre site on the slopes of Mt. George and offers 20,000 square feet of caves and a stunning wine hospitality center. Among the dining options are customized wine-paired menus devised by Chef Thomas Keller, who runs the celebrated French Laundry restaurant in Yountville.

Yountville, a gourmet mecca where the dining choices include not only French Laundry but its casual sister Ad Hoc as well as Bistro Jeanty, Bouchon and Domaine Chandon, is the site of one of the Valley's newest hotels, Bardessano. Villaggio and Vintage Inn are two other Yountville properties catering to the group market.

Silverado Resort, one of the Valley's most legendary properties, was recently purchased by golf great Johnny Miller and is now operated by Dolce Hotels and Resorts. A major renovation is planned, along with the establishment of a

Johnny Miller Golf Academy.

Among the many other meetings-friendly choices in the area are Meadowood; Meritage Resort & Spa, which boasts the largest ballroom in Napa Valley; Harvest Inn; and Gaia Napa Valley Hotel, an environmentally sustainable property with an award-winning spa.

Sonoma

"What do you want to do? We can do it," says Mark Crabb, director of sales for the Sonoma County Tourism Bureau, when describing the event and activity options available in the destination. "Sonoma County is ideal for groups—no problems with traffic and everything is very accessible. We can do large tented events at places like McMurray Ranch or more intimate dinners at wineries like St. Francis and Chateau St. Jean."

Linda Viviani is equally enthusiastic about Sonoma County.

"Sonoma has so much—the coast, redwood forests, organic farms, as well as a vast number of wineries," she says. "The possibilities for outdoor activities are endless—there's ocean kayaking, mountain climbing, cycling adventures, the Infineon Raceway and even playing polo in the vineyards."

While accommodating groups of all sizes, Crabb says small executive meetings and retreats are a growing specialty.

"Executive retreat business is perfect for us," he says. "Groups can take over beautiful properties like the Vintner's Inn, Sonoma Coast Villas and Madrona Manor."

Sonoma County's largest city, Santa Rosa, offers a wide range of hotels that make a convenient base for exploring the region. Its landmark property is the Flamingo Conference Resort & Spa, a prime example of mid-century architecture that was modeled after the Flamingo resort in Las Vegas. The 170-room resort offers a full-service health club and spa, two huge swimming pools and 13,000 square feet of meeting space.

Additional group friendly properties in Santa Rosa include the Hyatt Vineyard Creek, FountainGrove Inn Hotel and Conference Center and Hilton Sonoma Wine Country. Other notable meetings properties in Sonoma County include the Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn and Spa, Bodega Bay Lodge and Spa and Lodge at Sonoma.