

# Parade

## 7 UNDER-THE-RADAR NAPA WINERIES LOCALS SWEAR BY

**These are the spots locals actually book when they want great wine without the scene.**

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To me, a trip to Napa does not need to be a marathon. After 16 years as a food and travel writer, I have learned that the best tastings are rarely the loudest or flashiest. They are the wineries that feel unhurried, where you can grab a seat outside, ask a few nerdy questions about varietals without the eye roll, and actually taste without watching the clock. That easy, low-fi energy is exactly what San Francisco Chronicle wine reporter Jess Lander points readers toward: “For a chill, no-frills visit, head to Corison, Tres Sabores or Prager Port Works,” she wrote.

Not surprisingly, those options (and the ones below) are also the places locals swear by. They keep the focus on what is in the glass, and they make you want to linger and leave with a few bottles tucked under your arm.

On my most recent trip, I only booked tasting rooms with that vibe. The kind that feels like the quiet, family-run stop in Sideways, where you sit down for one flight and somehow end up staying for another, chatting with the staff and collecting a short list of their favorite under-the-radar places to go next. Napa can be many things, but it does not have

to be pretentious or stressful. Some of the best wines I have had there came from the most unassuming addresses. Below, the seven I'd recommend for your next trip.

### **Key Points**

- Book tastings early; many wineries require reservations and have limited seating.
- Focus on relaxed, unpretentious wineries praised by locals and experts for authentic experiences.
- Recommended spots: Matthiasson, Corison, Joseph Phelps, Ehlers, Tres Sabores, Keenan, Hendry Ranch.

### **1) Matthiasson (Oak Knoll District)**

If Napa had a cool, unfussy friend who always knows the best place to go, it would be Matthiasson. Napa writer Tim Carl of the Napa Valley Register famously quoted in a 2020 article that Matthiasson's "entire ethos is antithetical to the sometimes chichi exclusivity exuded by many local vintners." Tastings are outdoors, overlooking Phoenix Vineyard, and they keep it intimate with a guided, 75-minute flight featuring around five or six wines. They often surprise guests with pours that are only available at the tasting room as well, which makes the whole visit feel like a private tasting just for you.

### **2) Corison Winery (St. Helena)**

If you're a Cabernet person (hi, it's me, I'm the problem, it's me), Corison is the kind of stop you'll want to savor. Founded by pioneer winemaker Cathy Corison, she's long been regarded for her famed Cabernet. Everything at Corison feels refreshingly unfussy: the wines are elegant and focused, and the setting is quietly understated. Tastings often start with a look at the Kronos Vineyard, then move into a flight that lets you learn a little while you sip. Book the shorter Discovery Tasting if you're keeping things light, or opt for the library-focused option if you want to go deeper, and taste what time does to a very good Cab.

### **3) Joseph Phelps Vineyards (St. Helena)**

Not as under-the-radar (it's well-known around the wine circles), but locals still recommend Joseph Phelps when you want a guaranteed great experience that blends elegance with approachability. Everything is by appointment (so plan ahead, since walk-ins aren't welcome), and the lineup can include current releases plus their flagship Insignia and even vintage selections depending on what you book. It's a splurge, but one that is really worth it (it was my group's favorite winery during a recent girl's getaway).

#### **4) Ehlers Estate (St. Helena)**

If your group wants something more personal than a standard tasting-room lineup, Ehlers Estate delivers. The estate tasting is intentionally small, limited to just six guests, and is guided by a wine educator, and includes a short tour plus stories about the property and their organic farming approach.

Local wine writer Dave Thompson, of the Napa Valley Project, recommends this stop because of their heritage. “As a result of their historic setting, intimate tasting experiences and premium wines a stop here is highly recommended,” he wrote. The vibe is calm and unhurried, with the kind of one-on-one attention that makes the experience feel even more curated.

#### **5) Tres Sabores (Rutherford)**

Tres Sabores is the “come hang out on the ranch with the real people who work there” answer to Napa. It’s woman-owned, certified organic, and famously un-snobbish, with private tables by the vineyard and a tasting experience that usually runs around 90 minutes.

Local Anna Brittain, Executive Director of Napa Green, calls Tres Sabores a must: in a blog post highlighting woman-owned wineries, she wrote that “a visit to Tres Sabores is a visit to authentic Napa Valley.” It’s also picnic-friendly (with a small additional fee), so you can bring your own snacks and build your own wine-pairing moment.

#### **6) Keenan Winery (Spring Mountain District)**

Keenan needs to be your choice when you want big views and a tasting that doesn’t feel like it’s being timed with a stopwatch (by a man in a monocle). Tastings are by appointment, run about 75 minutes, and the fee can be applied to purchases (I call it girl math). It’s polished but still warm, and the mountain setting does a lot of heavy lifting in the breathtaking department.

#### **7) Hendry Ranch Wines (Napa)**

If you want Napa without the Napa theatrics, book a visit to Hendry Ranch. As San Francisco Chronicle wine critic Esther Mobley puts it, “This unassuming family-run estate is one of Napa’s best-kept secrets.” It’s a multigenerational family ranch just outside town, and tastings are private, more porch conversation than highbrow tasting-room hustle. You’ll sit down with a host who’s happy to talk through what you’re drinking (and what you actually like), then tailor the flight accordingly, from classic bottlings to reserve-leaning pours. Reservations are offered daily (roughly 10 to 3-ish), and well-behaved dogs are welcome outside when the weather cooperates.

#### TIPS FOR BOOKING NAPA WINERIES

Book early, especially for weekends. Many tastings are reservation-only with limited seatings; lock in your “must-do” spots first, then fill the gaps.

Build in buffer time. Assume 90 minutes per tasting, plus 20–40 minutes of driving/parking (more in peak hours), and schedule lunch so you’re not rushing.

Match the tasting style to your group. Decide if you want seated + hosted (more intimate), walk-in bar tastings (faster), or tour + tasting (longer), then book accordingly.

#### **Bonus detour (not Napa, but worth the side quest): Flowers Vineyards & Winery (Healdsburg)**

Flowers is Sonoma Coast Pinot and Chardonnay at its most polished, poured at Flowers Winery in Healdsburg just minutes from downtown. If you are stretching a Napa weekend into one more day, make it a garden tasting here. You’ll sip some crisp whites in a beautiful setting with great pours and a coastal fresh reset your palate will thank you for.

<https://parade.com/travel/best-napa-wineries-according-to-locals>