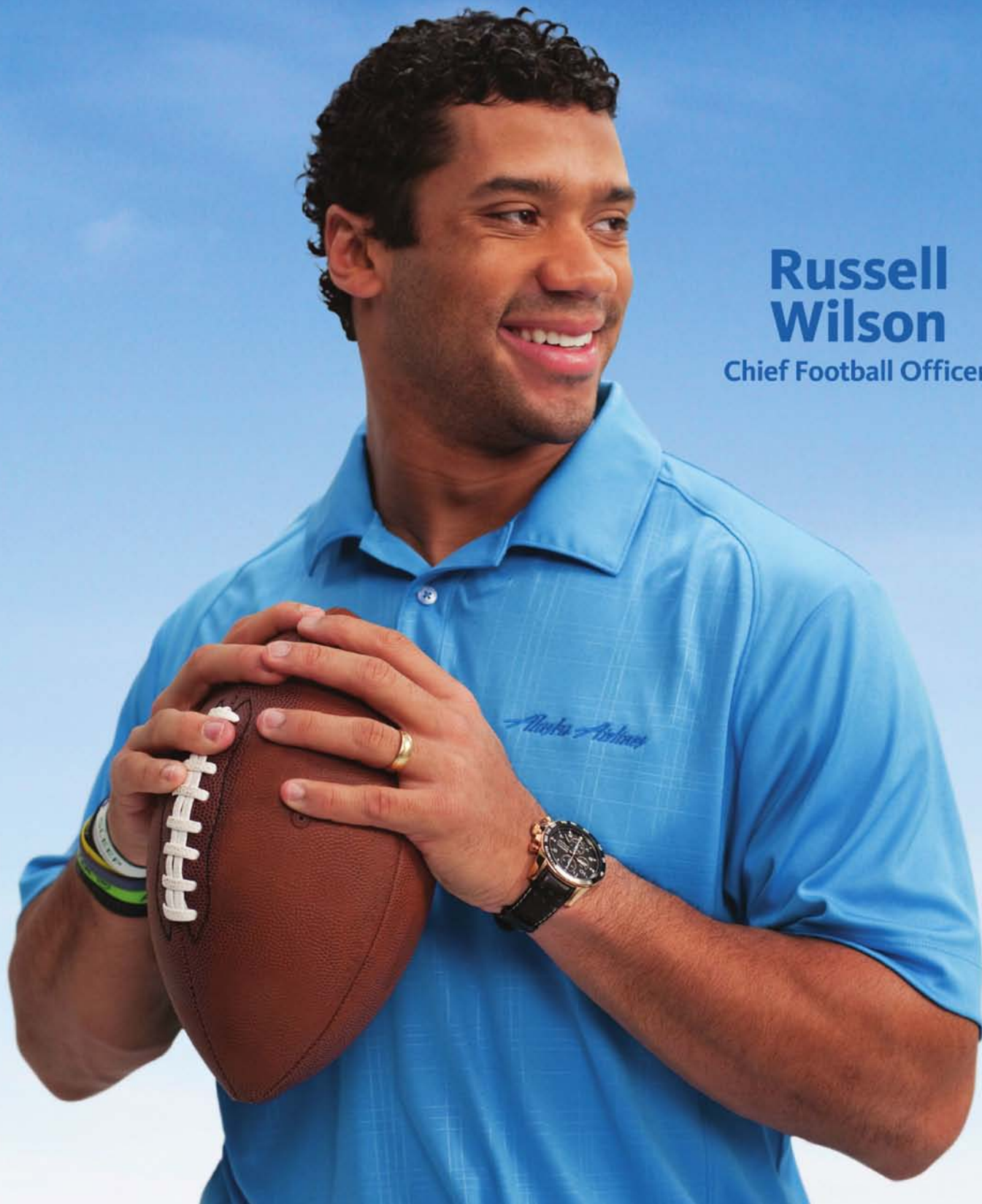


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## VINTAGE ADVENTURES

Enchanting excursions in  
Napa and Sonoma | By Christine Delsol

**A**s I drive along Highway 29, past vineyards glowing with sunny carpets of mustard blooms, I wonder why so many visitors wait until the fall harvest to take a tour of California's Napa Valley and Sonoma County wine country. For me, spring is prime time—the hills are green, the air is cool, the tasting rooms are serene, and the deceptively barren vines are bursting with fuzzy green nubs—the “bud break” that signals the start of a new growing season.

California boasts an impressive 120 American Viticultural Areas (AVAs), or distinct wine grape-growing regions—each with its own personality and flavor. However, for many, wine country remains the Napa Valley and Sonoma County, located



COURTESY: WINE COUNTRY BIKES

about an hour north of the San Francisco Bay Area. These two regions, which bracket the Mayacamas Mountains, with Sonoma to the west and Napa to the east, attract millions of visitors each year to enjoy the wines, the attractions and the natural beauty.

While only about 45 minutes apart, Napa and Sonoma have notably different personalities and geography. Napa's wine region, the eastern bracket, is contained within a single valley and is the more developed of the two. Sonoma is a larger area, where wineries stretch west from rolling hills and farms to redwood forests and finally to the coastal plain. Visitors to these areas, which together are home to more than 1,000 wineries, will find that both Napa and Sonoma offer great food and wine, relaxing resorts and beautiful scenery. In addition, the springtime—when there are fewer visitors and the weather is mild—showcases these two wine regions at their best.

Many wineries move beyond the tasting room this time of year. In the small Napa Valley town of Rutherford, for example, you can reserve Frog's Leap Winery's guided tour and tastings, where they pour samples in the garden, the barn and the vineyard at different points along the tour. Taking a tip from the ancient Romans, some wineries in Napa have built wine caves, where wine rests in an ideal subterranean environment of high humidity and constant temperatures.

The caves appear on quite a few tours and even accommodate tastings. These are not rough-hewn caves, but rather large underground storage facilities. Some even feature chandeliers and water-



COURTESY: THE MERITAGE RESORT AND SPA

Left: Cyclists enjoy a springtime ride near vineyards in Sonoma County's Dry Creek Valley. Above: A couple experience the Meritage Resort's Spa Terra in Napa. Below: Sonoma Valley docent Bill Myers leads a tour through the large Kunde Family Estate.



COURTESY: KUNDE FAMILY ESTATE

COURTESY: THE FAIRMONT SONOMA MISSION INN & SPA



COURTESY: THE HESS COLLECTION



Left: The Willow Stream Spa at The Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn. Above: Art displayed at Napa's The Hess Collection Winery. Below: Touring the Benziger Family Winery in Glen Ellen.

olive-stone body scrubs and facials using sea micro-organisms and grape-seed extract.

In Sonoma County, the Benziger Family Winery in the town of Glen Ellen has put its own spin on touring by having a tractor pull a tram full of

visitors through the vineyards for one of the best educations in organic, sustainable and biodynamic grape growing anywhere.

falls. Napa Valley's Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, for instance, has a Foucault pendulum within its cave. And Rutherford Hill Winery, near St. Helena, boasts a mile-long cavern that houses approximately 8,000 barrels. Those who enjoy mixing art with their wine will like The Hess Collection, located in the small town of Napa, which is as much art gallery as winery. It offers a well-chosen selection of modern art displayed in the century-old stone facility. The well-known Robert Mondavi Winery in Oakville showcases artworks throughout its extensive grounds.

Calistoga is also home to Sterling Vineyards, where visitors can ride an aerial tramway up to the winery's hilltop home, 400 feet above the valley floor. The trip offers stunning views of the valley and countryside. My excursions to Napa and Sonoma are as much about unwinding in a beautiful setting as they are about wine. The fun of standing in the shadow of a medieval-looking Tuscan castle at Castello di Amorosa in Calistoga is a unique experience you won't find anywhere else.

The Benziger tour is among dozens available in this extensive wine region. To help you decide where to visit, the Sonoma County Winegrowers' Vineyard Adventures program offers free, self-guided tours of vineyards at eight wineries in six appellations, from Carneros in the south to Alexander Valley in the north. The tours give insights into winemaking and the unique local wine regions. Those seeking advice can also join the Wine Road, Northern Sonoma County, an organization that offers tours, special events and maps to the region's wineries.

Among my favorite places to visit is the Kunde Family Estate, which offers monthly (except December) hikes through its 1,850-acre property, pouring wine in vineyards along the way. Gundlach Bundschu, located in the town of Sonoma and one of the region's



COURTESY: BENZIGER FAMILY WINERY

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first wineries, offers cave tours and vineyard excursions. Another favorite is Korbel Champagne Cellars, located near Sonoma County's Russian River. The daily tours are a journey into more than 130 years of winemaking history.

UPTick Vineyards, near the town of Healdsburg, in 2013 opened a handsome tasting room and large outdoor patio area that is set amid the winery's vineyards and offers views of the beautiful countryside.

Continuing north, you will find the 16-mile-long Dry Creek Valley. This wine region is home to 70 excellent wineries. About seven miles north of Dry Creek Valley is the popular Francis Ford Coppola Winery in Geyserville. While known for its excellent wines, the facility is also famous for its displays of the renowned director's awards, props from *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now* motion pictures, and other memorabilia.

Workaday stress vanishes when you visit the famous Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn's Willow Stream Spa. Indulge in a bath fed by local hot springs before enjoying massages, wraps, facials and other treatments. There is also Santa Rosa's Vintners Inn, which offers the Courtyard Spa Room, where couples can enjoy massages and skin treatments.

Spring also offers various wine festivals, including 2014 Savor Sonoma Valley ([heartofsonomavalley.com](http://heartofsonomavalley.com)), March 15-16, in which 26 wineries will pour their latest vintages. The Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association is marking its 25th anniversary at this year's annual Vineyard to Vintner festival ([stagsleapdistrict.com](http://stagsleapdistrict.com)), April 25-27.

Such festivals are great ways to begin exploring the many attractions, getaways and boundless beauty to be enjoyed in Napa Valley and Sonoma County. ▲

*Christine Delsol is a freelance writer living in the Bay Area.*

*Alaska Airlines offers daily service to Santa Rosa, gateway to Sonoma and Napa wine country. For more information or to book a flight reservation, call 800-ALASKAAIR, or visit [alaskaair.com](http://alaskaair.com).*