

PALATEXPOSURE

Top 10 Festivals No Wine and Food Lover Should Miss

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by [Ilona](#)

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I have attended every one of the events below, in addition to dozens of others. Most food and wine events are quite good, some are outstanding, and then there are the Crème de la Crème, Top of the Heap, the Ultimate Event to Plan Your Life Around.

The logistics of any large-scale wine event are formidable. Coordinating wineries, chefs, volunteers, sponsors, sommeliers; managing countless unknown pitfalls is a grueling and detail-oriented task. My hat is off to these remarkable teams—you rock! And when it all comes together and the magic happens—there is nothing like the euphoria of a well-orchestrated affair.

The events below are a medley of small regional events along with large-scale, high-profile endeavors. The criteria: regardless of scale and scope, they have to deliver, and deliver *big*. Above all, value for the consumer needs to be there, regardless of the cost and geography. If you can only partake in one food and wine event this year, this list aims to inform you of where your time and money are best allocated.

I know that I may receive commentary about the fact that four out of my ten events are in Napa Valley. I don't know exactly why Napa does it so well...however, I have some ideas you can read about [here](#). That said, I judge each one on these merits—wine selection, chef participation, seamlessness of the event flow, look and feel, ambiance, ease of access to key participants, quality of educational elements and value for the dollar. Although not formulaic, it is based on criteria developed over that last fifteen years of attending food and wine events.

Here are the ones that edged out the competition:

Aspen Food and Wine Classic

- Where: Aspen, Colorado
- When: June 17-19
- Why: Located in an unbearably picturesque, well-manicured city that is one of the wealthiest communities in America (median income is \$750,000), it's certainly a postcard of a town. However, there is so much more to this quaint millionaire's playground. In June, this ski bunny concourse transforms into a mecca of food, wine and fun. *Food and Wine* magazine clearly knows how to attract top industry talent; but what's so remarkable is that it doesn't seem as though you are only a spectator. Attendees feel like active participants. It's very well-attended, yet doesn't feel crowded. It offers a ton of options, from casual food demos to exclusive and elaborate dinners. Very well-run, it is an easily accessible, extensive and exciting event.
- Hot Tip: Do not miss [Mark Oldman's](#) sessions. I have become a little jaded over the years as to the quality of consumer seminars. Oldman restored my faith in the first 10 minutes of his. The wine selection was spot on, the presentation dynamic and engaging—a five-star experience.
- Learn more [here](#).

Auction Napa Valley

- Where: Napa Valley, California
- When: June 2-5
- Why: In its 35th year, ANV is the longest running and deeply admired charity auction in the US. Founded in 1981 by [Robert Mondavi](#), it's original tally was \$140,000; last year Napa Vintners have raised a staggering \$15.8 million. With its lavish meals featuring all-star vintners and celebrity chefs, it showcases all things Napa. Their wine-centered lifestyle auction lots are one-of-a-kind, extravagant and luxurious—all for a great cause. [Napa Valley Vintners](#) took it upon themselves to take care of their own—migrant farm workers, low-income families, needy children and the ailing. Thus far 145 million has been donated to Napa County non-profits, and counting. The Force is strong with Napa, in wine, heart and the precious spirit of neighbor helping neighbor.

- Hot Tip: Under no circumstances should you miss the Barrel Auction portion of the event. It offers a fantastic opportunity to purchase the futures of limited production wines directly from the winery. An astonishing afternoon essential for any serious wine lover. Beware that the tickets sell out with lightning speed, so do your homework and jump on the opportunity quickly.
- Learn more [here](#).

Read more on Auction Napa Valley [here](#).

Flavor! Napa Valley

- Where: Napa Valley, California
- When: March 16-20
- Why: This event offers the most comprehensive Napa Valley experience short of moving there. There are 500 wineries in the eight by four-mile valley. Many produce wines that are coveted the world over. There are more Michelin-starred restaurants in the area than anywhere in the world. Many of the featured chefs are [Culinary Institute of America](#) alumni, who never forget their Napa roots. A river of fine wine flows freely. The food is beyond outstanding. Plus, many of the world class seminars are curated by the CIA staff. All you have to do to show up with a glass, a smile and a desire to have a blast! This event showcases Napa's largesse.
- Hot Tip: Come for *Flavor*, stay a while longer. There is never enough time to explore Napa, this is your chance to dedicate a week to one of the ultimate wine regions. Get a nice hotel (plenty to choose from) and arrive a few days early.
- Learn more [here](#).

Hospice du Rhône

- Where: Paso Robles, California
- When: April 14-16
- Why: A collective sigh of relief could be heard around the world among Rhone wine lovers when the deeply loved Hospice du Rhone festival came back from hiatus this year. Vicki Carroll, a remarkable wine grower and event organizer extraordinaire, heard the pleas of the orphaned oenophiles. A gathering like no other, it is fueled by an impassioned love of all things Rhone. The event's founder, John Alban, has many friends around the world, and they all come to celebrate the largesse of the worldwide Rhone community.
- Hot Tip: The event features extraordinary seminars led by the world's top Rhone producers; attend as many as you can. They are typically presented by the winery principles themselves and are very informative and engaging.
- Learn more [here](#).

Napa Valley Film Festival

- Where: Napa Valley, California
- When: November 9-13
- Why: This affair is where the glamor of Hollywood meets the glamor of Napa. It features film screenings, panels, endless parties, glitz, charm, wine, food, sprits and cigars. It is a whirlwind of hedonism and overindulgence. Student and indie filmmakers are offered an opportunity to share their creative vision. Socially conscious, thought-provoking filmmaking finds a welcome home in the valley. The Napa Valley Film Festival is a five-day long intense immersion in all film, food and wine of the highest caliber.
- Hot Tip: Opt for the Gala events. Last year, one of them featured many top Napa Valley vintners pouring out of large format bottles. Feel like tasting 2002 Corison Kronos out of a Magnum? Be there.
- Learn more [here](#).

Nantucket Food and Wine Festival

- Where: Nantucket, Massachusetts
- When: May 18-22
- Why: This ultra-charming, picturesque location is transformed into a series of "luminary" driven food and wine happenings during this amazing event. There are several walk-around tastings, a multitude of seminars, over-the-top meals and fabulous parties. The scene is straight out of a Hollywood movie set. Mingle to your heart's content with culinary celebrities, drink like royalty—all while taking in some postcard-like views.
- Hot Tip: Take time and bike around the island. Nantucket is a lovely destination to relax and enjoy the nature's serenity, beaches, and wildlife.
- Learn more [here](#).

Read more on Nantucket [here](#).

Naples Winter Wine Festival

- Where: Naples, Florida
- When: Jan 28-31
- Why: One of the most compelling charity auctions in the world. Naples is a city of contrasts, a lovely retirement community of bankers, lawyers and techies from around the country who arrive seeking the upscale tranquility and the dire, heart-piercing poverty-ridden residents who comprise the 40% of the population. Since 2001, the auction's trustees have been putting together a mind-bending line-up of vintners and chefs from around the world. They also produce one of the most impressive wine auctions in the country. Their lifestyle action lots are some of the most exciting I have seen, the Vintner dinners are legendary and every single dollar raised goes to charity. This year they raised \$11.1 million for children's charities in Collier County.
- Hot Tip: Do visit the kids, who benefit from the charities, supported by the auction, which is an optional excursion prior to the big event. Although emotionally challenging, as evidenced by strategically placed boxes of tissue, it's an extraordinary experience. The 5-12 year olds, despite presenting their organizations to a large group of complete strangers, are not shy or sad—they are jovial and bubbling with excitement. These kids, who have been through many hardships, are remarkably resilient. Hearing their stories, you will need that box of tissue. You will walk away uplifted, wanting to be a better person.
- Learn more [here](#).

Pebble Beach Food and Wine

- Where: Pebble Beach, California
- When: March 31-April 3
- Why: If verticals of Chateau Margaux or Vega-Sicilia delivered by the winery principles themselves is your thing, you may want to attend this affair. The multitude of demos are highly interactive, with chefs and vintners right at your tables, joining in the fun. The rarity of wine experiences cannot be overestimated. From California Cults to rare bubbles it's rife with truly incomparable opportunities. Same goes for the food. Last year's "Meatopia" on the beach yielded my favorite bite of the year—mouth-melting gulf shrimp. The Grand Tastings are the most extraordinary in the gourmet festival business, with an obscene abundance wine, food and spirits. The chefs show up for the cooking and stay for the excitement. This is your chance to party with the rock stars of the wine and food world.
- Hot Tip: If golf is your game, don't stop at wining and dining. One of the most famous golf courses in the world is yours for partaking. Also, visit nearby Carmel, a charming town strewn with art galleries and wonderful eateries. Carmel Valley wine country is a stone's throw away, and well worth a visit.
- Learn more [here](#).

Read more on Nantucket [here](#).

Sonoma Wine Country Weekend

- Where: Sonoma, California
- When: Sept 4-6
- Why: A beautiful annual gathering, Sonoma Wine Country Weekend is the county's largest fundraiser than brings together over 200 vintners. Aimed at supporting students, farmworkers and those in need, its focus last year was dedicated to raising funds for children's literacy. Vintners go all out, offering large format signed bottles, exotic trips, and hospitality galore. Part of the series of events, "Sonoma Starlight" is a great gathering at Niebaum-Coppola winery under stars. Sip, savor, indulge in its opulent offerings. One of my favorite events, "Taste of Sonoma," is an appellation-based tasting, takes place at MacMurray ranch. Each tent is dedicated to a single region: Alexander Valley, Dry Creek, Russian River Valley, Sonoma, etc. It's a great way to taste through the region and the vintage in a cohesive fashion.
- Hot Tip: Sonoma is a vast wine country with countless number of wine, food and scenic destinations. You owe it to yourself to explore at least some part of it. Whatever you do, don't miss the nearby town of Healdsburg, a foodie and wine mecca that is delightful to the last drop.
- Learn more [here](#).

Vineyard to Vintner

- Where: Napa Valley California
- When: April 29-May 1

- Why: Napa's Best Kept Secret, you won't see this affair advertised anywhere. Nancy Bialek, [Stags Leap Winegrowers](#) Association Executive Director has organized it for a number of years, and she puts her heart and soul into it. It shows. The tiny appellation houses some of the most sought-after producers in Napa, such as [Shafer](#) and [Cliff Lede](#). Need I say more? What makes this event remarkably special isn't the high-profile of its participants. It's the intimacy and the overflowing goodwill that will push you over the edge emotionally and palatably. Sign up early for the experience, as tickets go fast. This event has a staunchly loyal following, I have talked to many guests who have attended for several years and would not miss it for the world.
- Hot Tip: Some of the winery members only open their doors to public only one day a year. Use this opportunity to visit the highly regarded, elusive [Lindstrom Winery](#) where Celia Welch is the winemaker, or [Isley Vineyards](#) who grows fruit for Shafer Vineyards.
- Learn more [here](#).