

SIPPING IN THE SUNSHINE

When in California, it's best to go nowhere fast, suggests Jillian Anthony. Take a leisurely road trip from LA to Santa Cruz, then stop off at Napa for a heavy pour of wine country

When one thinks about wine in the US, one usually thinks about Napa. But that leaves out 400 miles of lush soil that's the birthplace of exciting wines throughout the rest of the Golden State. So hop in the car (ideally, a convertible), and take a slow roll from the lights of Los Angeles to the shores of Carmel and revel in everything in between.

Start your trip in Santa Barbara, a city on the hill less than two hours north of LA that feels a world away. Keep it casual for your first meal at Bettina, a sourdough pizza place that stands out. Its owners, Rachel Greenspan and Brendan Smith, met at famed Brooklyn pizza spot Roberta's the old-fashioned way: over cheese. She worked for a specialty food seller and he worked as a chef; they fell in love and brought their pies west.

The restaurant focuses on localizing classic Italian dishes, "so we use San Marzano tomatoes for pizza, but they're from Los Gatos, California," Greenspan says. "And we use domestic cheese curd and make that into mozzarella in-house."

Greenspan and Smith trawl the Santa Barbara farmers market twice a week for most of their produce. That freshness resonates in seasonal pizzas, such as kabocha squash with pepita pesto, as well as salads and antipasto dishes. The crowd favorite is the pepperoni pizza with chili oil and honey, an homage to the couple's Roberta's beginnings pair it with a glass from their wine list with a focus on organic, natural wines.

Next, drive up to Los Olivos and stop by Stolpman Vineyards, recommended by Greenspan. Pick your poison at this certified organic,

family-owned vineyard: the classic tasting room, where you can try the local favorite Sangiovese, or the Fresh Garage, which pours chilled wines with a lower ABV that are made with uncrushed grapes. "Not only do we take care of our land, we take care of our people, which means we only employ full-time, year-round, which is extremely rare in the viticulture business," says managing partner Pete Stolpman, the son of the founder. You may wish to plan your visit for the first Sunday of the month, when you can take an educational tour of the vineyard at 9am and explore all 15 varietals.

Wander the 40-plus tasting rooms in Los Olivos' charming and walkable downtown area, including Story of Soil, which is focused on small, single-varietal vineyards, and Saarloos and Sons, which zeros in on Syrah. Stolpman suggests lunching at Panino deli and R Country Market, or dining on Italian fare at Nella. Make time for a special meal at seafood haven Bar Le Côte; try the whole barramundi, or dive into the chef's five-course tasting menu.

Continue up the coast, stopping for bites at Bell's, a Michelin-starred French bistro (and California chef and vintner favorite) in Los Alamos; and Ember, a hotspot for wood-fired pizza in Arroyo Grande, if time allows. (And keep in mind that time is a concept, especially in California.)

Make sure you make your reservation at Six Test Kitchen a month before you arrive among the rolling hills of Paso Robles. The 12-seat restaurant is "inspired by nature," from the farm-to-table food to the custom-made ceramics, according to chef Ricky Odbert. The restaurant earned a Michelin star in 2021 and serves up hyperfresh seafood.

"We get our oysters about two hours after

they're out on the water of Morro Bay," Odbert says. "We work with a fisherman that catches black cod, which is representative of the air here. It's a cold-water deep, deep fish." Choose an acid-driven wine to accompany your meal from a list that focuses on lesser-known varietals. "We also have a reserve wine pairing with a lot of Old World wines, like some Barolos from the 1960s and Château d'Yquem from the 1980s," Odbert says.

For your final tasting, Odbert suggests heading to the nearby Thatcher Winery, which sits on 53 acres of cattle farm and has a jovial country vibe. There's alfalfa fields, ambling goats and chickens which delight kids and tipsy adults alike, and plenty of outdoor tasting areas.

"We like to do varietals that no one else is really doing here in Paso; a lot of Rhône varietals," says tasting room manager Drew Mulkern. "We practice natural wines, so we only use native yeast that grows on the skins themselves." The winery uses predominantly neutral oak barrels, but also terracotta jars, which are like giant clay pots. "Terracotta is a good old Italian, gritty way of aging wines," Mulkern says.

Be sure to taste their Cinsault, which you can only get in the tasting room. And if you're looking for an educational, elevated experience, book a private stable tasting in a horse carriage.

Finally, make your way to idyllic Carmel, a true gem of California's coast. Indulge in a tasting menu rife with meticulously plated seafood like uni, oysters, and ayu smelt at Aubergine, then rest your head somewhere you can fall asleep to the calming crash of ocean waves. Don't be surprised if you're overwhelmed with thoughts of relocating to this sunny, sensual coast permanently.

