

LIVING TRAVEL

I got seduced by California's other wine country

By Hana R. Alberts

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Rolling hills backdrop the Riverbench vineyard in California's Santa Maria Valley.

Photo: Handout

Born and bred in Manhattan, I never thought Southern California and I would get along. The laid-back lass in a bikini top and cut-off jean shorts — you know, the one Katy Perry sings about — was simply too foreign from the fast-walking, black-wearing New Yorker I've become.

But then I heard that acres of vineyards blanket rolling hills just north of L.A. The area is hundreds of miles from Napa or Sonoma, as I learned, but a destination in its own right. Made famous by the 2004 movie "Sideways," the Central Coast is prime for drinking, eating and being merry.



Driving with the windows down while taking in fantastic Pacific Ocean views is like the cherry on top. The promise of sunshine and lots of vino worked — I decided to give it a go.

The charming town of Santa Barbara, where cobblestone streets, white stucco walls and red roofs point to a Spanish influence, is the southernmost seat of SoCal's wine country; it's where I started tossing back — er, sampling — the local liquids. A formerly industrial neighborhood by the sea and the Amtrak tracks, dubbed the **Funk Zone**, is now a warren of trendy restaurants serving up delicious grub and tasting rooms pouring out flights of wines made nearby.

My first stop in Santa Barbara's Funk Zone was **The Lark**, an eatery that came highly recommended and lived up to the hype. Its gently lit indoor-outdoor space proved both romantic and convivial; beet and

butternut squash salad, smoked pork belly with blackberry and almond brittle, and brussels sprouts with dates, sesame and lime sent me rolling back to the hotel.

The next night, I visited [Municipal Winemakers](#)' high-ceilinged tasting room, where old filing cabinets holding bottles of red and white with graphic labels sit upon concrete floors. Sufficiently liquored up, I arrived for dinner at local favorite [The Black Sheep](#); the dim, intimate setting befits an Asian-inspired menu that ranges from ramen and wagyu steak to a burrata salad and scallop crudo.



The author samples Riverbench's bottled goodness.

Photo: Hana R. Alberts



Patrons at colorful Black Sheep.

Photo: Jennifer Schuett

For some non-alcoholic fun, I checked out [Lotusland](#), a massive, garden-filled estate that was the brainchild of wealthy flora-lover Ganna "I'm the enemy of the average" Walska, a Polish opera singer who married five times and was quite the spitfire. A two-hour tour highlights not only the Japanese Zen garden, species upon species of cacti and bonsai trees cut into animal shapes but also Walska's eclectic life and legacy (\$45, reservations required).

Steering my rental car down to Arroyo Burro beach — a prime oceanside spot for people- and dog-watching — I caught the sun setting over the horizon.

Since my stomach craved more sustenance before wine country, I made sure to patronize famed ice cream purveyor [McConnell's](#) to try the seasonal flavor, pumpkin pie. I also made a pit stop at the [Santa Barbara Public Market](#), the town's mini Eatery. [Empty Bowl Noodle Bar](#)'s Thai, Chinese and Vietnamese stir-fries lure long lines, while [Enjoy Cupcakes](#)' stall boasts a variety of sweets made with syrah, chardonnay and sangria.

And, yes, because it was California, I had my first acai bowl at the [Brasil Arts Cafe](#). Feeling virtuous because I'd basically downed an enormous fruit smoothie with granola and honey, I prepared to hit the road and engage in some less virtuous boozing.

I had help — and a designated driver, since my boyfriend Julien had flown in from New York and graciously allowed me to take one (or many) for the team in the name of "research." From a home base in the kitschy-cute Danish-themed town of Solvang, we got an early start at the [Lompoc Wine Ghetto](#). Inconspicuously tucked behind a Home Depot amid self-storage facilities, 19 tasting rooms from vineyards around the area lie within walking distance.



At [Ampelos](#), we sipped red varietals while learning that the vineyard also produces labels backed by Kurt Russell and his stepdaughter Kate Hudson. A bubbly-only tasting menu was in the cards at [Flying Goat Cellars](#), while a resident dog and wine-making mechanicals set an insider-y backdrop for a flight at [Stolpman](#).

Treats at Enjoy Cupcakes.

Photo: Jose Villa



Table tasting at Cottonwood Canyon Winery.

Photo: Neil Donaldson

Slightly tipsy, I stuck to shotgun and Google Maps as Julien accelerated the Elantra toward vineyards rumored to offer the best scenery. While the striking modern architecture at [Presqu'île](#) will suit aesthetes and is worth a gander; we hunkered down for a mix of reds and whites at [Cottonwood Canyon](#)'s friendly bar and outdoor patio with a view.

It was high time for this passenger to eat, and the hearty fare at [Sides Hardware and Shoes](#) in the town of Los Olivos was the destination of choice. We noshed on corn soup, roasted carrots with ginger, lamb with goat cheese gnocchi and scallops topped with Sides' signature "bacon steak."

The next day, we made a beeline for [Riverbench](#), another gem, before driving back to the airport. There was eye candy in the form of grape groves as far as the eye could see, a bocce pitch, an outdoor fireplace and picnic tables — plus liver candy in the form of chardonnay, pinot noir and (my personal favorite) more sparkling wines.

"You know," I said to Julien, sipping a flute of Riverbench's bubbly pièce de résistance, made with pinot noir. "I could get used to this." So, California, you won this round. This New Yorker will undoubtedly be back for more.

WHERE TO STAY

The Goodland

Located in Goleta, just minutes outside Santa Barbara proper, The Goodland is a Kimpton hotel with all the perks and thoughtful touches that has won the brand many loyal customers.

Two floors of rooms form a U around an inviting pool. There are cushy chairs clustered around fire pits, bikes available for use and a hipster-ific trailer parked out front.

In the comfortable rooms, patterns and fabrics abound, with a record player and sample discs to spin in every one (more are available upon request).

The side tables' handles double as bottle openers. The on-site bar hosts live music events, too (from \$179/night).

The Landsby



The town of Solvang — a good spot from which to tour the Central Coast — has its Danish flair, but The Landsby used the Nordic influence to inspire only the most classy, cozy design touches.

Pristine white furry rugs, woolly blankets, wooden accents, pleasant geometry and art of llamas, sheep and alpacas create a trendy yet homey place to crash between wine tastings and rich meals.

Here, guests gather around fire pits to recover from days of driving and drinking (from \$229/night).

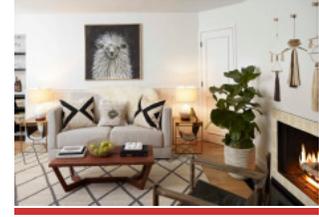


Photo: David Tsay

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