



# Wine Tourism Wisely Planned

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*Whether you're heading to California, Oregon, or some other U.S. wine country or jetting further to France, here's how to win at wine-ing*

**W**ine tasting tours come in all shapes and sizes. This form of tourism even has more than one name. There's oenotourism, enotourism, and vinotourism to name three. It's a *dégustation* in France.

There are also multiple options on how to go about enjoying organized wine tours as part of your vacation. Over the years, my wife Patty and I have experimented with the variations of this travel experience seeking a good fit.

Along the way, we've met some characters, relaxed and spent meaningful time with friends, and sampled wines we'd never have discovered. Can't say we've ever had a bad time on a wine tasting trip. Our forays among the vineyards and *caves* have produced some memorable moments.

## **STRANGERS ON THE BUS, CLANGING GLASSES**

On several occasions, Patty and I have hopped into a vehicle with strangers to be chauffeured around a wine region. In Sonoma, Calif., one year, we were carted from winery to winery in a minibus. The driver picked us up at our accommodation, and we introduced ourselves to three couples—people not previously known to us—already aboard.

The group's level of enthusiasm was reminiscent of a school bus on Monday morning. It was a quiet ride.

Until the second tasting. No one on board got the hang of spitting wine into the pot at the tasting rooms.

By midafternoon, the mood on the bus had shifted. The last hour of the tour was more like a New Year's Eve party as we carried on with our new best friends. Our driver professed to have known Grace Slick before she *was* Grace Slick, and he entertained us with tales of the San Francisco music scene in the 1960s.

We began the day wondering how our leader chose the wineries we visited. We noticed he lingered after the tastings, chatting up the proprietors, while the rest of us boarded the bus. He always came away with a bottle or two tucked under his arm. We'd figured out how he selected which wines we were exposed to that day.

## **FRIENDS IN THE VAN WITH A WINE MAN**

Last year, we were invited to join friends for a day among the vines in France's Southern Rhone Valley. A friend found an experienced guide who specialized in the region. On the appointed day, 10 of us met for coffee in a small village with Olivier Hickman of Wine Uncovered.

Hickman succumbed to the draw of France in the 1990s, leaving his position as a financial controller in London to move to the sunny village of Sablet. He

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obtained his wine certifications and started selling Rhone wines. Now, when not conducting tours and introducing travelers to the wines of the region, Olivier is making wine.

After finishing our cafés and croissants, we rode off in Olivier's van to a sunny—and hot—hillside, where we traipsed about the vines. With French wine villages on the hills as a backdrop, we spent an hour learning about the *terroire* and practices of the vintners of Gigondas.

After visiting the vines, we worked our way through three tastings. There we met vintners who poured for us wines of their *domaines*. Later we relaxed on a shaded terrace and enjoyed a fine and leisurely lunch, then enjoyed another tasting before calling it a day.

The trunks of our cars were jammed with bottles as we headed home in the late afternoon. We all learned something during our tour, and being chauffeured about the countryside by Olivier was a treat.

## TWO DAYS IN BEAUJOLAIS

On a trip to France's Beaujolais wine region a few years ago, we stayed at a small inn in the village of Vieux Morgon. A chalkboard in the bar presented a staggering list of the local nectar, none of which were priced more than \$8 a glass. In the spirit of being good guests, we diligently worked our way through the offerings as best we could during our several days at the inn.

It was a homey atmosphere. The owner was friendly, even asking one of our traveling companions and me to mind the bar while she ran an errand. Our skills were never tested by a customer.

One evening we eavesdropped on the next table's conversation. There we picked up the names of two nearby *domaines* our neighbors had visited. Two phone calls yielded two appointments. The next morning, we were off to the hills of Fleury, where we enjoyed several memorable wine-tasting experiences.

The vintner at Domaine Chignard worked his way through a delightful collection of modestly priced bottles from his *cave*. At a pause in our tasting—*dégustation*, I meant—Monsieur Chignard asked if we wished to taste his wine that's served in some of the best restaurants in Paris.

We consented and weren't disappointed. It was delicious. Then we braced ourselves for a price point out of our range. We happily learned we were enjoying a \$16 bottle of wine. And we again drove gingerly over every bump as the tail of our car sagged under the weight of the cases being transported home to our small wine *caves*.

This one was a bit more work than riding around in a guide's van. The impromptu visits we scheduled after overhearing the names of vintners to call upon added to the experience. But it may have gone bad without our good fortune of stumbling upon charming wine makers—and good wine.

## DO THE RHONE ON YOUR OWN

Small, family wine producers dot the countryside in the wine-growing region in southern France known as the Côtes du Rhone. We've had good fun on self-guided tours among these hills. Within a one-hour drive from Avignon, there are scores of wineries to visit.

Often we take an afternoon drive to the hills to simply enjoy the views, a lunch, and then buy a few bottles directly from a favorite vintner. It's more a wine-buying trip than a wine-tasting excursion.

There are many vintages in the region that we don't know. Given the fun we've had without tour organizers, Patty and I have dabbled in arranging do-it-yourself tours with friends. This is an endeavor I recommend if you have an interest in wines and a desire to plan your own tasting tour.

There's no shortage of signs along the routes we travel on the backroads near the Rhone River inviting passersby to stop for a *dégustation* and an opportunity to purchase a few bottles directly from the producer. You need only consult your computer to do a bit of research.

Then organize your visits to suit your tastes. If you're taking friends along, it's also wise to extract a commitment from one in your group to serve as chauffeur. The art of sipping and spitting is a foreign concept for many Americans.

## GET THE RIGHT GUIDE

I circled back to Olivier Hickman for advice on selecting the right guide for wine tasting. Like any other endeavor, the more thorough your planning, the more likely you are to enjoy the experience. Inclined to go the route of hiring an experienced guide? If a planned professional tour is more suited to your tastes, here are a few tips.

Choose wisely if you're going to pay someone to spend the day with you. No point being disappointed because you rushed the pre-trip planning process. The best method for finding the right guide is the same one that helps people find a good lawyer—the personal referral. Ask a trusted wine-drinking friend if they have the name of a guide to share with you.



The internet of course will provide no shortage of suggestions. Click on TripAdvisor, Reddit, and Fodor's for recommendations. Don't jump at the first glitzy website. The company with the slick ad featuring smiling couples gazing at each other as they tinkle amongst the vines as the sun sets in the distance may not be for you. Cross check your research, the same as you do when writing a brief.

For the paperbound voyager, visit the library or travel section of your local bookstore. There you can peruse guidebooks for the region you plan to visit. Hickman says many clients find their way to him through Rick Steves' popular travel guides.

If you're short on time, as often happens when lawyers plan a vacation, another option is to contact the hotel where you're staying. But be alert to the possibility that a referral by the concierge might be influenced by a commission flowing in that direction or by a family member in the wine-guide business.

### **SLOW DOWN AND ENJOY**

Whatever your preferred style of vino-culture touring, take the time to enjoy it. Experience has taught us that buzzing up and down the road to partake in five or six tastings in a day isn't for us. A relaxing lunch sharing a bottle of recently purchased local wine makes for a nice break in the action.

Others I know prefer packing it all in when the opportunity presents since they may never return for a second run at a particular region. There's no better way to discover your wine tasting preference than to test drive every option. Enjoy the journey. Cheers! 🍷

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**KEVIN MCGOFF** retired from the practice of law and embraced the life of voyager, author, speaker, and travel writer. His book, *Find Your Landing Zone—Life Beyond The Bar*, will be published by the ABA this year. You can reach him at kevin.mcgoff1@gmail.com.



## QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU COMMIT

"It's important to determine your genuine level of interest in the region and in wine generally to locate a guide that's the best fit for you," suggests Olivier Hickman of Wine Uncovered. "If you like tasting wine but aren't really that interested in learning a lot about wine, it's not necessary to secure the services of a wine expert. You might want more of a generalist."

Here's Hickman's checklist of what to ask before booking your guide:

- 🍷 What will be the duration of the day and the time the guided activity starts, beyond the introductions and driving time if you'll be chauffeured?
- 🍷 What fees are included, and what additional costs must I pick up?
- 🍷 How much explanation will be provided by the guide and how much by staff at the properties we'll visit? Hickman prefers that his clients meet the winery owners when the owners are available, but he prefers to do the talking. "This results in a coherent story across the different visits. Too many voices can lead to repetition of basic information and information provided without context," he explains.
- 🍷 What's the maximum number of people that could be in the group?
- 🍷 Are the vintners you'll visit frequented by lots of tourists?
- 🍷 What's the recommended attire for the tour, particularly footwear?

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