

Wine Country's Top Meeting Resorts

By Susan Jacobs

Planners toast this robust and romantic region

If indeed there is a heaven on earth, it might be in Northern California's Napa Valley or Sonoma County. It's hard to conceive of a more idyllic destination. The sun-drenched valleys and mild climate are perfect for growing grapes, and the fertile region rivals France and Italy in its ability to produce award-winning wines.

When fine wine is uncorked, good food should be available to complement it. Luckily, the lush area is also famous for its cuisine. Cows and goats roam the grassy hills, producing rich milk that gets transformed into fine cheese. Blending ethically raised meats and organically grown produce procured from local vendors, the area's many artful chefs create visual and culinary masterpieces.

Outstanding cuisine is just one of Northern California Wine Country's many charms. Culturally sophisticated and casually elegant, the region is ideal for meeting planners looking to pamper and impress attendees. A plethora of fine hotels and resorts offer luxurious yet unpretentious accommodations—many with world-class spas and championship golf courses. Interesting offsite activities can include cooking classes with master chefs, cycling on country roads and hot-air ballooning over the vineyards. It's no wonder planners find Napa and Sonoma irresistible.

Napa Valley

Those who appreciate the finer things in life are drawn to Napa Valley, where clean air, natural hot springs and stunning scenery invite them to slow down and savor the environment. A gourmet's paradise, it boasts 125 restaurants, many of which are award-winning, and more than 400 wineries—95 percent of which are family-owned and operated.

A unique way to explore the region is via an excursion on the Napa Valley Wine Train. Evoke a bygone era while enjoying a gourmet meal as refurbished Pullman cars chug through the valley. But Napa is not just about wining, dining and relaxing. Visitors also find live music, community theater and charming shops with enticing, handcrafted merchandise.

Napa is a delight for planners, who have at their disposal more than 200,000 sq. ft. of interesting event space, ranging from spacious ballrooms to intimate barrel rooms. "With nearly 150 overnight accommodation options including hotels, resorts, country inns and B&Bs—many of which feature unique meeting venues—Napa Valley provides planners with endless opportunities to create a truly memorable meeting," says Teresa Savage, vice president of sales for Visit Napa Valley.

The destination lends itself to some unusual offsite experiences: Your team can stomp grapes during harvest season, blend varietals at a winery or kayak down the Napa River. "Holding a meeting in Napa Valley is sure to wow attendees and make the meeting planner shine," Savage promises.

Here is a toast to some of Napa Valley's grand meeting resorts!

The Westin Verasa Napa



Located on the riverbank in the heart of downtown, The Westin Verasa Napa is within walking distance of many restaurants, boutiques and wine-tasting rooms. The sleek, modern resort has 180 guest rooms and 12,000 sq. ft. of meeting space with state-of-the-art audiovisual capabilities.

Guests at the property can enjoy many amenities including a heated saltwater pool and complimentary daily wine tasting. Planners can arrange for an experienced sommelier to conduct a team-building blind tasting exercise where participants can learn how to properly identify key flavor components in different wines.

During their free time, attendees can explore Oxbow Public Market, a popular nearby attraction. The lively market is home to nearly two dozen local vendors selling everything from tacos to ice cream. At Oxbow it is possible to arrange meet and greets with individual purveyors or attend a spice-blending workshop. A short drive away, Cakebread Cellars offers hands-on cooking classes that include a property tour and a three-course lunch with wine pairing. All participants receive a Cakebread Cellars apron and a recipe booklet.