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5 up-and-coming California wine regions on our radar

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When we think of American wine, we think of the state of California. After all, over 90% of wine produced in this country comes from the Golden State. Famous wine regions like Napa Valley, Sonoma and Santa Barbara County are wildly popular for travelers, but a number of up-and-coming California wine regions are producing stellar grapes – and wines worth seeking out. Below are some of the up and comers that should be on your California wine radar.

Lake County

Bordered by the famous wine regions of Napa (and Mt. St. Helena) directly south, Sonoma to the southwest and Mendocino to the west, Lake County today produces quite a few fine wines in its own right. Carved out of Napa County in 1861, the area combines a few small towns, a hardy landscape, relatively high elevations, pear orchards and a multitude of vineyards. Visitors will be

pleased to find high-quality wines (from approximately 35 wineries) without crowds, traffic or high prices. Vintners in Lake County have learned that their volcanic soils, hot days and mild nights, elevation, cool breezes from the Pacific and a strong will to produce high-quality wines are helping their region prosper.

Big wines such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Petite Sirah do well here as well as delicious Sauvignon Blancs. "We have more light and a very dry climate which produces wines that are dark and tannic," said Clay Shannon, Owner/Vintner at Shannon Ridge. Some of the best places include: Chacewater, Rosa d'Oro Vineyards, Brassfield Estate, Six Sigma, Shannon Ridge, Ceago, Wildhurst (excellent Syrah), Shooting Star and Steele Wines. Visitors heading for Lake County might consider staying at the Tallman Hotel at the northernmost tip of the Clearlake. Built in 1896 yet entirely restored, this is the finest hotel in the area and is a perfect place to rest after a day of wine tasting.

Yolo County

Located just north and east of Napa County, Yolo County is a mostly bucolic, rural place full of farms, walnut and almond orchards, a few cities, small towns and plenty of vineyards. There are two Yolo sub-appellations: the hilly Western Yolo and Clarksburg, which is flat along the water. The Spanish varietal, Tempranillo seems to thrive in the area. Most Yolo wineries are small, family run and easy going. One of the few larger facilities, Bogel, produces many quite good wines at affordable prices. Some of the highly-rated wineries throughout this region include Turkovich, Matchbook, Simas, Roots to Wine, Wilson Vineyards and Berryessa Gap.

The Clarksburg region along the Sacramento Delta houses The Old Sugar Mill with 10 Yolo wineries pouring in the same location. The small historic Yolo County town of Winters has fully embraced the wine lifestyle with new restaurants, art galleries and about five wine tasting rooms on its Main Street. It's a happening, fun spot in the middle of farm/wine country. And you can't go wrong with a steak at The Buckhorn -- the best place in town.

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Amador County

In the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, about 35 miles east of Sacramento lays Amador County, a handsomely rugged locale and truly a superb wine grape growing region -- and it has been for a very long time. Now there are some 40-plus wineries specializing in Zinfandel -- by far the largest crop, but also Syrah, Barbera and Sangiovese. Amador County wineries of note include: Renwood (try the Renwood Flutist), Sobon Estate, Shenandoah Valley Vineyards, Deaver Vineyards, Terra d'Oro and Cooper Vineyards. Helwig Vineyards & Winery not only produces good wine, but has gorgeous caves and an amphitheater used for summertime concerts. Feist Wines has their tasting room in an actual 19th-century saloon.

The tiny town of Plymouth is in the middle of the region and don't miss dining at Taste, an amazing find out there in the county. Amador is old-fashioned wine country -- you won't find any attitude or pretention here, only good wines and nice people.

The extreme Sonoma Coast

The wet, cool, wild and windy coast of Sonoma County, north of the Russian River is an unusual place to find preeminent grape vines. But that's exactly what a small number of intrepid vintners and growers have been producing in the new Ft. Ross/Seaview AVA and proximate areas. The Sonoma Coast is the place to discover serious, balanced Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays. With elevations from about 1,000 to 2,000 feet, the low yielding grapevines generally sit above the fogline. Often when it's raining or foggy down below, these ridgetops will be basking in the sunshine but still cooled by ocean breezes.

There aren't that many wineries here, but the few are worth the drive. Flowers Vineyard & Winery is perhaps the most famous and produces world class Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays. (The Flowers Camp Meeting Ridge Chardonnay is among the very best in America). Hirsch Vineyards is another in the vicinity -- try their excellent "San Andreas Fault" Pinot Noir. The nearby Ft. Ross Winery is a friendly locale and presents a tremendous view that can stretch for 20 miles on a good day.

Other local wineries utilize the nuanced grapes from the Sonoma Coast. Among them are: MacPhail, Littorai, Paul Hobbs, Halleck Vineyards, Martinelli and Freeman Winery. In fact the Freeman Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir delivers the quintessential flavor of this area – elegant, mysterious, contemplative and simply a stunner in a glass. If visiting, the Timber Cove Inn poses a welcoming retreat overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

Coombsville

Napa Valley is a famous region of course, but Coombsville, a three-year-old AVA (American Viticultural Area) is generally unknown, yet literally in Napa's backyard. Located directly east of the city of Napa, Coombsville is like Napa's secret garden. The area is mostly rural with a few homes, small roads, a country club, and vineyards and wineries dotted here and there. Its geography is volcanic and alluvial, and has rocky soil with ash layers and lots of different elevations. Cabernet is king in Coombsville, but worthy Chardonnays, Syrahs and Merlots are produced here too.

The Coombsville region has been harvesting stunning grapes for years, supplying an assortment of Napa's famous labels but is now home to about 20 wineries available for visits -- by appointment. Caldwell, Tournesol (very impressive facility), Blue Oak Vineyard, Meteor, Faust, Sciandri Family Vineyards and Black Cat are some of the standouts.

"2013 was a great vintage for Coombsville," said Grant Long, Winemaker at Blue Oak Vineyard. "Great yield and balance in the fruit. The longer growing season offered something that the region rarely sees...which is the bolder flavors." The city of Napa is very near, and happily has blossomed into one presenting visitors with a myriad of excellent dining and lodging choices. Try the charming Milliken Creek Inn, a lovely secluded spot abutting the Napa River.

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