

Not Just the Wine Is Purple: Lavender Wafts Across Sonoma



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times

A lavender field at Matanzas Creek Winery near Santa Rosa, Calif., where several varieties grow.

By LAURA M. HOLSON
Published: July 31, 2009

SONOMA, Calif. — It is not the perfume that seduces, but sound.

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[Where to Eat](#)

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Or so it was for me one summer morning as I toured a lavender farm in the [Sonoma Valley](#) here, [Napa's](#) lesser-known neighbor, which in recent years has become a haven for that herb's enthusiasts. Swollen tufts of violet and green shifted in the breeze like beach balls ready to take flight.

There was a whisper of sweetness in the air, the fragrant oil from flowering stalks clinging to fingertips and pants legs at the slightest brush.

What attracted me, though — stopping me as I walked down a gravel path — was a drone that seemed to pulsate amid the quiet. Was it traffic from a nearby road? An air-conditioner set on low? Neither. Instead the field vibrated with the hum of thousands of bees shifting among

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Sonoma Valley, Calif.

blossoms, a waltz of elegance and economy.

A lavender field, it seems, is an intoxicating but very busy place.

[Provence](#) is well known for its purple highways. There the French have devised herbal factories where vast acres of lavender are grown for use in essential oils, sachets, bath products, tea and honey. But in the past decade Americans too have come to value its culinary and aromatic attributes. As a result, lavender farms have sprung up in small towns from Texas to California to Washington State.

For those unable to wander among the sun-soaked fields of southern [France](#), the Sonoma Valley is a civilized alternative. Nestled between the Pacific Ocean and the more crowded Napa Valley, it retains much of the rural charm of California. At a farmer's market in Santa Rosa one Wednesday night, a woman sold fresh bundled lavender for \$1, the fragrant bouquets stacked two feet high. In June and July many of the area's small growers invite guests to browse blooming fields at their peak. And restaurants liberally use lavender in place of rosemary or thyme in drinks and summer dishes.

On the outskirts of Santa Rosa, down a winding two-lane road set among pastures occupied by languid cattle, is Matanzas Creek Winery. It has been a haven for lavender devotees since 1991, when the winery planted nearly two acres. Much of it is Provence and Grosso, French varieties prized for their pungent, herbal aroma.

When I arrived this month the fields were in full bloom, orbs of lilac and amethyst offset by the golden foothills dotted with stands of sturdy oak trees. Two women walked along a path ahead of me, one lovingly running her hand along the top of a waist-high plant. I winced as I saw a cloud of rising black. Bees are not likely to sting unless disturbed or threatened.

There, too, were other noises of industry. Three men dressed in gardening gear — khaki pants, gloves and sturdy hats — used a motorized hedge clipper to trim the bushes, following the arc of the blossoming stalks. It was a buzz of a different sort: commerce. Matanzas Creek's tasting room offers culinary products — including tea, spice rubs, sugar and salt — that use lavender from its gardens.

Unlike Matanzas Creek, few lavender farms allow visitors to show up unannounced. Instead many hold summer festivals. Kenwood is a town on Highway 12 about a half-hour from Matanzas Creek. There I caught up with Rebecca Rosenberg, an urban refugee from [San Francisco](#) and a former advertising executive who founded Sonoma Lavender and grows three acres of lavender at her home next to Chateau St. Jean, among the valley's grander wineries.

Sonoma Lavender is one of the larger lavender farms — with 6,000 plants — open to tourists once a year. But it has the hallmark of smaller plots: it is steps from Ms. Rosenberg's front door. It does not distill oil; the oil she uses is imported from France. (Much of the oil sold in the United States is imported.) But the sachets, pillows and cooking lavender that Ms. Rosenberg sells are made with blossoms from her fields.

As many as 5,000 people each summer attend Sonoma Lavender's three-day festival, which features food and wine booths, crafts and lectures on growing and harvesting blossoms. The rest of the year the curious can view the fields from a long driveway leading to Chateau St. Jean. During harvest, stalks are cut, bundled and hung to dry (using paper clips) in the attic of a barn, giant metal fans circulating the hot air. Once the bundles are crisp — in about two weeks — the blossoms are removed. This can be done by hand, scraping dried stalks against a metal screen.

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(Page 2 of 2)

Ms. Rosenberg explained that she used the Grosso variety in sachets and pillows. She used the more floral Hidcote, an English variety, to brighten sweets, like crème brûlée. After we sniffed several stalks, I went next door to Chateau St. Jean, where I bought a sandwich and a glass of sauvignon blanc and watched two couples play bocce on the winery's court.

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[Where to Stay](#)

[Where to Eat](#)

[What to Do](#)

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[Map Sonoma Valley, Calif.](#)

One morning I crossed the Sonoma County line to Napa to visit Harms Vineyard and Lavender Fields, which two weeks earlier had had more than 1,000 guests at an open house. Patricia Damery and her husband, Donald Harms, are biodynamic farmers who grow lavender. They tend several plots of Grosso, and each, Ms. Damery said, has a different intensity, depending on where it is grown.

To prove it, she invited me to smell four oils her husband distilled from last year's crop. The first had a grassy aroma, another antiseptic, with a hint of eucalyptus. The third was powdery soft, while the last had a sharp edge — a sour, medicinal smell that exploded in my nose. Last year Ms. Damery and Mr. Harms produced 380 ounces of oil.

"It seduces you," she said. "It is so beautiful to look it. It has personality."

Back in Sonoma, the Girl & the Fig, a French-inspired restaurant, has embraced lavender, a challenge because if the herb is not used properly, food can taste soapy. One night I had a refreshing lavender mojito made with rum, lime, lavender-infused simple syrup and rosewater. For dessert I enjoyed lavender-and-wildflower-honey crème brûlée that had the right balance of floral notes and creaminess.

After two days visiting lavender fields I was ready for a less precious view of Sonoma

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Valley. Jack London State Historic Park in Glen Ellen was a tart tonic. The rolling hills there are overgrown with oak trees and eucalyptus, the spicy smell of damp earth wafting up with the crush of leaves underfoot.

London lived on the property until his death in 1916. I walked a mile to the remains of Wolf House (keeping an eye out for deer and rattlesnakes), a home he built that was ravaged by fire in 1913. London is buried at the park, and a museum houses a collection of his writings and books.

In wine country you must oblige the noble grape. So I made an appointment to visit Moon Mountain Vineyard, a boutique winemaker near Sonoma, the town, where I was staying. The winery was a delightful surprise. I lingered for more than an hour and tried at least six wines, soaking up information about the vintages, valley lore and books about wine. One recommended title was “The Billionaire’s Vinegar,” about the most expensive bottle of wine ever sold. (I bought the book the next day.) My hostess offered a plate of local Point Reyes blue cheese, nuts, gourmet snacks and chocolate for in-between pours, instead of the bland crackers typical of tasting rooms.

As I said goodbye, the sweet murmur of “Dreams,” sung by [Stevie Nicks](#), played in the background. I took with me a few bottles of syrah and a promise to return — whether the lavender was blooming or not.

If You Go

The [Sonoma Valley](#) is a 90-minute drive from the San Francisco International Airport or [Oakland](#) International Airport.

WHERE TO STAY

MacArthur Place (29 East MacArthur Street, Sonoma; 707-938-2929, [macarthurplace.com](#)) is a historical inn and spa near the main plaza of Sonoma. Rooms start at \$349 a night, although the inn offers specials as low as \$199. Rates include continental breakfast and local wines and cheeses in the early evening.

WHERE TO EAT

The Girl & the Fig (110 West Spain Street, Sonoma; 707-938-3634, [thegirlandthefig.com](#)) is a wine-country restaurant with French flair that serves lavender-infused food and drinks, including a mojito with lavender-infused simple syrup and rosewater for \$8.50.

El Dorado Kitchen (405 First Street West, Sonoma; 707-996-3030, [eldoradosonoma.com/el_dorado_kitchen.html](#)) has a menu that regularly includes farm frites (lightly breaded and fried seasonal vegetables) for \$13 and a tasting of house-made fennel sausage for \$4.

WHAT TO DO

Sonoma Lavender (420 Tesconi Circle, Santa Rosa; 707-523-4411, [sonomalavender.com](#)) is a family-owned farm that holds a lavender festival every summer. Visitors can see the fields as they drive past Chateau St. Jean in Kenwood.

Matanzas Creek Winery (6097 Bennett Valley Road, Santa Rosa; 707-528-6464, [matanzascreek.com](#)) has two acres of lavender that visitors can wander through all year round. Lavender products like spice rubs and tea are sold in the gift shop.

Moon Mountain Vineyard (1700 Moon Mountain Drive, Sonoma; 707-996-5870, [moonmountainvineyard.com](#)) is not far from Sonoma. Reservations to taste are required.

Jack London State Historic Park (2400 London Ranch Road, Glen Ellen; 707-938-5216, [jacklondonpark.com](#)) is where Jack London lived and was buried. Guests can visit the museum and hike about 10 miles of trails.