

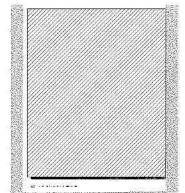
GREAT ESCAPES

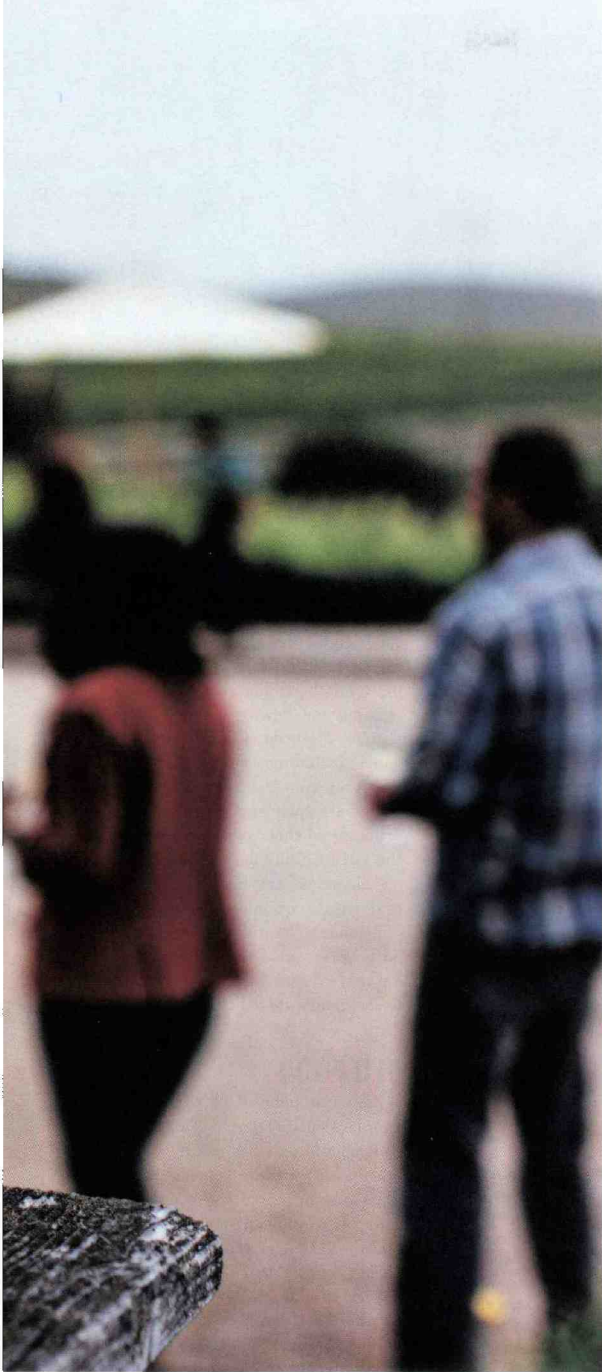
SAN LUIS OBISPO / TRAVEL BAG / CITIZEN HIKER

Laetitia Vineyard & Winery in Arroyo Grande in San Luis Obispo County



PHOTO BY JACOB LACEY PHOTOGRAPHY & TARYN DUDLEY PHOTOGRAPHY





SLO WINE COUNTRY

Take a tipsy tramp through California's best-kept wine secret: the Central Coast wine region of San Luis Obispo County.

BY LEAH LEMOINE

“**HAVE MY WEDNESDAY WINE**, my Friday wine. My husband makes fun of me,” Amy Griffith of *Sextant Winery* says when I ask what she's been drinking lately. My kind of woman. “We do only a few whites, but they're fabulous. The majority of what we do is the reds – big, rich, heavy, delicious, velvety reds.” I raise my glass of Marselan – an aromatic Cabernet-Grenache cross-pollination – to that.

We're sitting in the Sextant tasting room at *Old Edna Townsite* (1655 Old Price Canyon Rd., San Luis Obispo, 805-710-3701, *sextant-wines.com*, *oldedna.com*), one of the first settlements in San Luis Obispo. It opened as a post office in 1887 and now houses a tasting room and gourmet deli set on a farm/vineyard with roaming baby-doll sheep and beautiful farmhouses (and one “gypsy cottage”) lovingly renovated and decorated by Old Edna proprietress Pattea Torrence. It's so much life porn all at once that I feel as if I'm on a Nancy Meyers movie set. I half-expect Meryl Streep to flutter over in a cashmere wrap and pour me a glass of Syrah.

Truth be told, we're in Pinot Noir and Chardonnay country. Here in San Luis Obispo County – lesser known than neighboring Central Coast wine region Paso Robles, it produces the same caliber of fine wines – the cool coastal climate, marine and alluvial soil and misty morning fog swirl together to create the perfect incubator for fruity and intense Pinots and tropical, refreshingly citric Chardonnays. Of course, these are the two varietals I have always found challenging.

“I'm still not crazy about Pinot,” Griffith says. “They're a little lighter, and I like bolder, heavier.” Is she reading my mind? “There are winemakers here who do it a little heavier. Give them a try.”

She hasn't led me astray yet.

SLO WINE

The first wine in SLO Wine Country was made by padres at Mission San Luis Obispo in the 1770s. SLO's first commercial vintages were produced by French settler Pierre Hypolite Dallidet in the 1870s. In the 1970s, the original vines planted by Englishman Henry Ditmas at Rancho Saucelito in the upper Arroyo Grande Valley in 1880 were revived and continue to produce Zinfandel today (see sidebar).

Many wineries in SLO are run by families with these deep roots in California agriculture. Sextant's Stoller family owns plant nurseries and supplies more than 40 percent of the rootstock in California. The Kelsey family of *Kelsey See Canyon Vineyards* (1947 See Canyon Rd., Avila Valley, 805-595-9700, *kelseywine.com*) started growing apples in 1951 and planted wine grapes in 1971. Interestingly, in addition to wine, they co-ferment wine and apple cider – the Golden

Coastal fog in the valleys of San Luis Obispo County



Delicious blends Chardonnay (of course) and apple cider, and the Red Delicious combines rosé and apple cider. Both are weirdly good, with just the right sweetness and effervescence. The Talley family owns Talley Farms, the “largest producer of bell peppers in the U.S.,” my guide boasts. **Talley Vineyards** (3031 Lopez Dr., Arroyo Grande, 805-489-0446, talleyvineyards.com) is among the oldest wineries in the region. The histories are all very impressive, as are the wines. I find myself joyfully slurping Talley’s 2013 Estate Pinot Noir. It’s bright and peppery, with notes of raspberry – a far cry from the watery Pinots I’ve had that resembled diluted cough syrup more than wine.

I find similarly excellent Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays at **Peloton Cellars** (470 Front St., Avila Beach, 805-627-1080, pelotoncellars.com), **Biddler Ranch Winery**

(2050 Biddler Ranch Rd., San Luis Obispo, 805-543-2399, biddleranch.com) and **Edna Valley Vineyard** (2585 Biddler Ranch Rd., San Luis Obispo, 805-544-5855, ednavallevineyard.com).

The wines that bowl me over – physically not *that* difficult at this point in my odyssey of lushery – are at **Sinor-LaVallee** (550 First St., Avila Beach, 805-459-9595, sinorlavallee.com), **Laetitia Vineyard & Winery** (453 Laetitia Vineyard Dr., Arroyo Grande, 805-481-1772 laetitiiawine.com) and **Chamisal Vineyards** (7525 Orcutt Rd., San Luis Obispo, 805-541-9463, chamisalvineyards.com). At the Sinor-LaVallee tasting room, I learn that winemaker Mike Sinor made 46 distinct barrels of Pinot Noir in 2013 – different pick times, different yeasts – in order to get the perfect blend. That’s dedication. And it paid off: The result-

ing wine was nice and light, with lower alcohol (13.6 percent, low-ish for the area) and higher acidity. “It’s a wine geek wine,” says the friendly tasting room manager.

At Laetitia, I sip reds, whites (including quaffable Pinots and Chards – they’re wearing me down) and the winery’s signature Méthode Champenoise sparkling wines, including a juicy, fruity brut rosé. I finish my vino trek at Chamisal, where the Pinots are spicy and fruit-forward (imagine drinking bushels of crushed berries) and the 2013 Califa Chardonnay tastes of lemon, pineapple and hazelnut. I can’t believe that the Chardonnays here are so multi-dimensional, so unlike the one-note, overly buttery versions I’ve been attempting to like for years. I buy a Califa wine bottle candle to commemorate my Chardonnay epiphany.

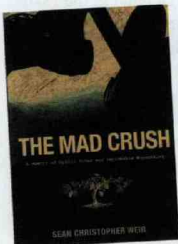
SLO FOOD

After a handful of wine-tasting trips, I’ve developed a couple of rules about food: 1) It should pair beautifully with the wine to enhance the overall epicurean experience. 2) If not being paired, the food should soak up the wine so you can drink more wine. Luckily, my SLO food picks knock it out of the park. **Comfort Market** (116 W. Branch St., Arroyo Grande, 805-481-1558, comfortmarkets.com) is a dreamy little local goods market/bistro where I eat the most epic bánh mì of my life: crispy pork belly, freshly shaved

PHOTO COURTESY SAN LUIS OBISPO CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

READING BETWEEN THE VINES

Looking for the perfect book pairing for your Pinot? Pick up a copy of **The Mad Crush** (\$11.95, Mooncatcher Media) by Sean Christopher Weir. Part youthful memoir, part history of San Luis Obispo County wine, part wine-making how-to and part firsthand journalistic account of a mythical harvest of Zinfandel in 1995, Weir’s slim volume is as rich and complex as the wine that inspired it. “Wine is a living thing, and like all of us it goes through awkward moments and growth spurts and rebellious phases,” writes Weir, now a public relations pro who represents **SLO Wine Country**. You’ll be on tenterhooks as he spins the tale of the headstrong 1995 Saucelito Canyon Zinfandel.



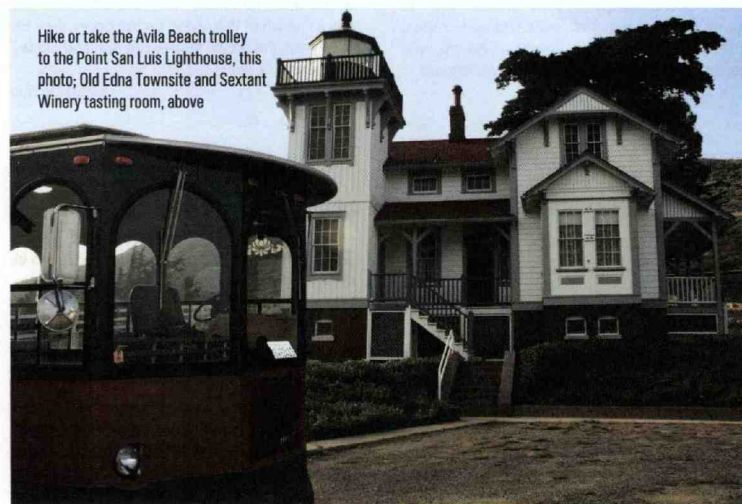
ham, spicy carrot and daikon radish pickles. It pairs nicely with a local Chardonnay, as do the fresh fish dishes at **Ocean Grill** (268 Front St., Avila Beach, 805-595-4050, ocean-grillavila.com). For Pinot pairings, I recommend the wood-fired fare at **Ember** (1200 E. Grand Ave., Arroyo Grande, 805-474-7700, emberwoodfire.com) or the Brussels sprouts with goat cheese, dried cherries and pickled mustard seeds at **Granada Hotel & Bistro** (1130 Morro St., San Luis Obispo, 805-544-9100, granadahotelandbistro.com). Order a craft cocktail if you're all wined out.

For wine-soaking purposes, there are no more delicious sponges than the tasty buns at **Old West Cinnamon Rolls** (861 Dolliver St., Pismo Beach, 805-773-1428, oldwestcinnamonrolls.com). Unfortunately, the coffee leaves a bit to be desired. Head to downtown SLO for a cappuccino at **Scout Coffee Co.** (1130 Garden St., San Luis Obispo, 805-439-2175, scoutcoffee.com).

SLO LIFE

"It sounds better than Boob Coast," our salty docent guide Jana says during our group hike of the **Pecho Coast Trail** ("pecho" is Spanish for "chest"). This hike, offered for a \$5 cash donation through a partnership between PG&E, the California Coastal Commission and the Port San Luis Harbor District (pge.com/trails), includes a two-hour trek to the historical **Point San Luis Lighthouse** (pointsanluislighthouse.org; tours cost an additional \$5 donation). Our path is flanked by the Pacific Ocean on the left, dotted with morros (plugged volcanos) and covered in mist, and hills and crags dusted with wildflowers (my favorite: sweet purple California morning glory) on the right. I've never hiked outside of the desert, so the novelty of seeing beach on one side and forest on the other delights me, even as I huff and puff during our two-hour return hike. It doesn't hurt that our other docent guide, Chalmers, has the spirit and vocabulary of a surfer dude despite being a well-heeled retiree. "I'm stoked you came to San Luis," he says while he pushes the bridge of his Wayfarers back on his tanned nose.

That night, as I lie in bed at the **Dolphin Bay Resort & Spa** (2727 Shell Beach Rd., Pismo Beach, 800-516-0112, thedolphinbay.com), I listen to the nearby waves tumble upon the shore and sip another glass of Pinot. This one is medicinal – my legs are essentially jelly after that hike. I think back on all the wines I tasted, the meals I ate, and the beguiling charms of Chalmers. I'm pretty stoked I came, too.



Hike or take the Avila Beach trolley to the Point San Luis Lighthouse, this photo; Old Edna Townsite and Sextant Winery tasting room, above

PHOTOS COURTESY CALIFORNIA HIGHWAY 1 DISCOVERY ROUTE