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Livermore Valley, a perfect winter day trip

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Livermore Valley tourism slows down so much in the winter, a local winemaker once suggested that everyone close for a month and go on vacation. The idea didn't catch on - which is a good thing, if only for visitors searching for a little peace, wine and conversation on a dreary day.

Even with an ever-growing roster of wineries and tasting rooms - 42 at last count - Livermore remains a low-key, concentrated destination for wine lovers. Most of the tasting rooms open only by appointment on weekdays, and about half open on Fridays and on holiday Mondays.

Most tastings are free or cost very little - on a Friday in January, I spent a total of \$5 on tasting fees over the course of four stops. Also, in winter you can pretty much guarantee Livermore will never be insufferably hot and, it turns out, Friday is the day many of the winemakers and owners (often the same person) come out to pour.

In Livermore, they all have great stories to tell - of previous careers, retiring to the dream of growing grapes, finding the challenges and the joys in their new lives. Start this winter escape on a Friday and get an enjoyable earful of knowledge with your mouthfuls of wine.

Getting there

Everyone drives to get to Livermore, but on a Friday morning it's an easy jaunt from the central Bay Area east on Interstate 580, against the traffic.

Livermore is flat and the wineries are concentrated, making it a terrific destination for cyclists. And driver be warned - there are many bikes on the roads on the weekends.

Overnighters who want to feel like they've really gotten away from it all will want to stay at the Purple Orchid Inn, a modern bed-and-breakfast-style property with a pretty pool, a hot tub and a variety of accommodation options starting at about \$150 on a weeknight, including a full breakfast for two.

A perfect day

11:30 a.m. Start at the newest of the valley's tasting rooms, Deer Ridge, a pastel stucco building on the edge of a McMansion development off Arroyo Road. Here, Carl or Cherie Lyle will customize a

tasting of the 26 or so wines they have on their list at any one time; the reserve tasting is \$5 but Carl mixed things up to suit my palate the day I visited. 1828 Wetmore Rd., (925) 292-2222, www.deerridgevineyards.com.

12:30 Cruise over to Greenville Road and see Tom Heineman at Bent Creek, which has a quaint little tasting room with windows in the middle of the vines. This was the liveliest spot on the day I visited, with five visitors lined up at the bar tasting a robust roster of mostly reds and a couple of ports, complete with spiced walnuts and dark chocolate. 5455 Greenville Rd., (925) 989-9610, www.bentcreekwinery.com.

1:30 It's time for lunch; the Poppy Ridge golf course just across the street has a clubhouse with expansive views of its 27 holes, and Chilean sea bass was the touted offering on a recent Friday. I opted for Garre, a Tesla Road winery with patio dining that has a full menu of sandwiches, salads and pastas, and had a Caesar salad with Dungeness crab.

2:30 Venture to the end of Greenville Road, where it turns to dirt, to the surprise of the area, the expansive, rustic tasting room of Charles R set in a quiet valley. This would make a great picnic spot, and now that the laws have changed, visitors can buy a glass of wine and sit outside. Again, a chatty winemaker kept me company at the bar. 8195 Crane Ridge Rd., (925) 454-3040, www.charlesrvineyards.com.

3:30 My last stop was El Sol, but next time it might be my first, for both its easy location off the freeway and for its diverse, long list of wines. Gregarious Hal Liske, a retired firefighter, has set up a large room on his secluded property off the northern side of Greenville Road that overlooks the hills, and he thrives on entertaining visitors there. 8626 Lupin Way, (925) 606-1827, www.elsolwine.com.

4:30 Overnighters can check in at the Purple Orchid now; bring a sandwich and hunker down for the evening, or head out for dinner at Wente or the lesser-known Terra Mia.

Heading home

Saturday is the biggest draw at the wineries, especially in the late afternoon, so it might be fun to stop back at one of the tasting rooms visited on Friday and see the difference.

For a really special day and relaxing return home, play at the Greg Norman-designed Golf Course at Wente Vineyards. My golf partner and I had a wonderful morning on the course, in spite of some befuddling putts on the greens and a dose or two of humility all around, and then we walked over to the property's fine-dining restaurant for a long, luxurious lunch on the patio before heading home around 5.

This was a winter Saturday, we marveled, which may well be the best time to visit the Livermore

Valley. Here's hoping the winemakers find other times for vacation.

If you go

Stay

Purple Orchid Inn Resort and Spa, 4549 Cross Road, (925) 606-8855, www.purpleorchid.com. Modern rooms and suites starting at \$150 weeknights, including breakfast for two.

Alternatives off the freeway include Courtyard by Marriott, Holiday Inn Express, Hampton Inn and Quality Inn.

Eat

Garre Cafe & Winery, 7986 Tesla Road, (925) 371-8200, www.garrewinery.com. Lunch only. Moderately priced.

The Grill at Poppy Ridge, 4280 Greenville Road, (925) 456-8211, www.poppyridgegolf.com. Lunch and weekend brunch. Moderately priced.

Terra Mia, 4040 East Ave., (925) 456-3333, www.terramiarestaurant.com. Lunch and dinner. Moderately priced.

The Restaurant at Wente Vineyards, 5050 Arroyo Road. (925) 456-2400, www.wentevineyards.com. Lunch, dinner, Sunday brunch. Expensive.

Splurge

A weekend day of golf and lunch or dinner at Wente Vineyards amounts to a special treat of probably \$200 a person and up.

Save

From most places around the Bay Area, Livermore is an easy day trip, so don't spend the night.

Good to know

The tastings are often free and there's no pressure to join wine clubs or to buy, but most visitors will find it difficult to spend quality time with a winemaker and not take home a liquid souvenir.

Resources

The Livermore Valley Winegrowers Association has links to wineries, lodging and dining on its easy-to-navigate Web site, www.lvwine.org. (925) 447-9463. A nifty feature is a trip planner, where you can pick out the wineries you want to visit and get an itinerary including driving directions from stop to stop.

For more information on the **Golf Course at Wente Vineyards**, or to make a tee time, visit www.wentevineyards.com.

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