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## JUST OVER THE HILL

### Suisun Valley wineries taste at a slower pace

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SUISUN VALLEY — Just over Napa County's eastern shoulder lies a patch of wine country that's widely ignored by tourists, despite its expansive scenery and friendly, often fee-free tasting rooms.

Solano County's Suisun Valley has been designated an American Viticultural Area for nearly three decades, but for many years growers here sold most of their grapes to vintners in other counties who used the Suisun fruit for blending.

The well-kept secret about the valley, and the reason informed winemakers like its grapes, is that Suisun soils have much in common with Napa's, while its climate — heavily influenced by the marine layer from San Pablo Bay — can resemble that of Carneros.

You'll still find Suisun grapes in wines from around the state, but in the 21st century the valley has gradually established itself as a legitimate destination for wine-tasting.

There are now five Suisun Valley tasting rooms open to the public, all within a short drive of each other. Three of them operate seven days a week, so even on the spur of the moment it's possible to enjoy an unhurried tasting tour.

Though the valley's wineries can be reached from Napa by driving east on Highway 12 and taking either the Suisun Valley Road or Abernathy Road exits, there's a much more scenic and exciting route for those who don't mind a little mountain driving.

Head east on Monticello Road, over Mount George — where you might glimpse a winter waterfall amid the

rugged fastnesses — and turn right on Wooden Valley Road, where it's not unheard-of to spot a bald eagle perched on a creekside snag.

Wooden Valley Road leads you over the Napa-Solano county line to Suisun Valley Road, where the wineries begin. First along the route, and impossible to miss in its solitary splendor on the right-hand side of the road, is the recently-opened Blue Victorian Vineyards.

Open daily, and staffed not only by hospitable people but by resident cat Simon, Blue Victorian is the second Suisun Valley winery owned by Frank and Liz Vezer, whose zinfandel and petite sirah grapes have gone into wines from such well-known labels as Sin Zin and Ravenswood.

At both Blue Victorian and their Vezer Family Vineyard Tasting Room, just down the way on Mankas Corner Road, you can sample these varietals as well as cabernet sauvignon and a proprietary red blend called La Salette.

For whites, the Vezers make verdelho — a relatively rare Portuguese grape with orchard fruit and flower aromas, balanced by just the right acidity — pinot grigio and sauvignon blanc. They also have a black muscat. Gary Galleron is the winemaker.

A "European deli" at the Vezers' Mankas Corner site (once a Pony Express station) has closed down, but hungry tasters can get a meal next door at the Vintage Caffè.

Back on Suisun Valley Road, don't miss the granddaddy of all the area's tasting rooms, Wooden Valley Winery.

## SUISUN VALLEY GRAPE GROWERS ASSOCIATION.



Owned and operated by the same family for more than 50 years, the winery offers big names like cab, merlot and chardonnay alongside niche varietals including white gamay, primitivo and valdiguie, often at prices that seem jaw-droppingly low by Napa standards. There's also a well-stocked deli/gift shop and an outdoor picnic area.

Farther south and on the opposite side of the road, the Suisun Valley Wine Co-op gathers wines from five vintners — Blacksmith, King Andrews, Shale Peak, Sunset Cellars and Winterhawk — for a broad-based tasting experience that includes free pretzels and chocolate.

Nearly all of the wines, including some delectable syrahs and petite syrahs, are made from Suisun Valley grapes, but a handful hail from the Alexander and Potter valleys.

Ledgewood Creek Winery, on Abernathy Road south of Mankas Corner, was once a pear orchard and, like many other North Bay fruitlands, was planted to grapes in the 1980s. Also family-owned and operated, Ledgewood Creek began producing its own wines in the early years of this decade, working with consulting winemaker Larry Langbehn.

The winery's reds list includes cab, merlot, syrah and grenache rose as well as a Rhone GSM blend and a merlot-mourvedre-cab blend called PicniQue.

From Ledgewood Creek, you've got a straight shot south on Abernathy to Interstate 80; or you can take a more picturesque route, following Rockville Road to the west and then dodging south on Green Valley Road. Whichever road you take, it's safe to bet you'll have a few bottles of Suisun Valley wine in the back of your vehicle.

For more information about touring the Suisun Valley, visit [www.suisunvalley.com](http://www.suisunvalley.com).