



Sideways in Santa Ynez

Santa Barbara's wine country leaves an unforgettable taste. By Ann C. Shultz

In 1861, the Overland Coast Stage Line was built, linking San Francisco to San Diego. The route threaded through Santa Barbara, up over the rugged mountains and down into the Santa Ynez Valley. In those days, the little town of Los Olivos was a way station for weary travelers. Today, Los Olivos continues to welcome visitors just as it did nearly 150 years ago. But along with its sister towns of Santa Ynez, Ballard, Solvang and

Buellton, it has become known as Santa Barbara's wine country. And as my husband and I discovered, there is no better place to spend an autumn weekend than the Santa Ynez Valley.

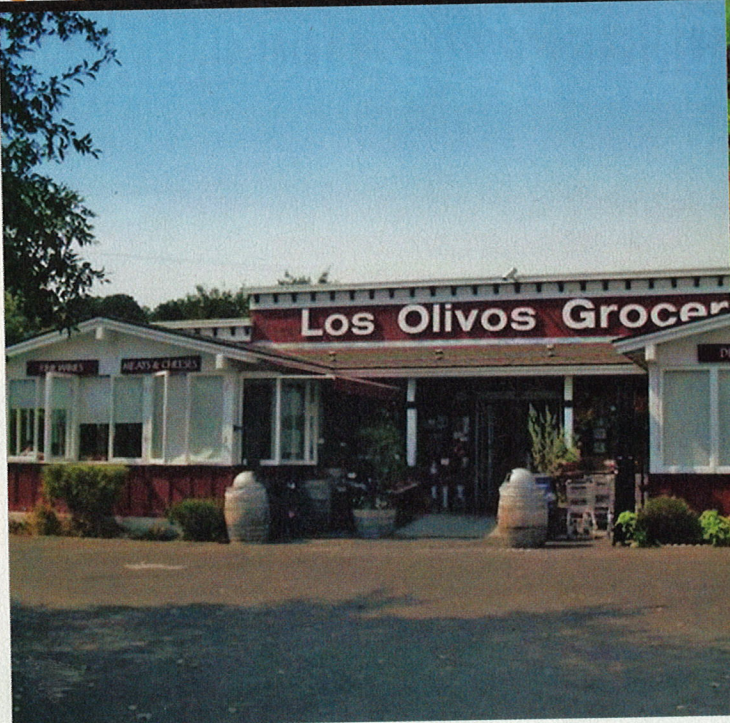
It's an easy and scenic trip from Orange County once you get through the tangle of L.A. traffic. The 101 soon joins the gorgeous coastline, eventually passing through Santa Barbara and meeting the turnoff for Highway 154. From there, the

The Santa Ynez Valley is the heart of Santa Barbara's wine country.

road winds upward, affording a panoramic view of Santa Barbara and the blue Pacific, spans the Cold Springs Arch Bridge and drops down. Along the way, it passes vast Lake Cachuma before reaching the turnoff to Solvang. Now you are truly in the Santa Ynez Valley.

Santa Ynez got lots of publicity with the release of the movie "Sideways" three years ago. The Golden Globe Award-winning and Oscar-nominated film tells the story of hapless protagonist Miles and his adventures with his narcissistic buddy during a week of wine tasting. The movie was filmed in and around the area. Some of the wineries and restaurants actually

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The town of Los Olivos was a former way station for travelers, more than 100 years ago.

Quaint wineries offer lovely settings for tasting.

advertise this as a draw. But there is so much more to the valley than just wineries.

It's a lovely land linked by country roads that meander past ranches and farms. Cattle graze in grassy fields, horses lounge under the shady branches of oak trees, and orchards of olive trees show off their gray-green leaves and black fruit. Then there's the exotic - llama and alpaca farms and meadows full of miniature horses looking like something out of a fairy tale.

Santa Ynez is a smaller, less commercial version of the Napa Valley. There are two main wine trails, the Foxen Canyon Wine Trail and the Santa Ynez Valley Wine Trail. Dozens of wineries are located along the two routes; fields of vines are

covered with netting and strewn with silver streamers to keep the birds away.

We chose to visit a couple of wineries each of the two days of our trip. Gainey at the fork of the 154 and the 246 (the road to Solvang) is a long-standing tradition in the valley. It has been making award-

winning wines since the 1980s. Known for distinct Pinot Noirs, Chardonnays and Syrahs, the winery offers an interesting tour through the vineyards and aging vaults that end in the tasting room where you can sample

an array of wines.

There was a time when the valley's wineries offered free tastings or if they charged a small fee, it included a signature wine glass. Those days are

gone. All the wineries charge \$7-\$10 a tasting sans glass. Still, the tastings include six to seven wines of some variety.

Zaca Mesa, on Foxen Canyon Road (and OC METRO Magazine Executive Editor Craig Reem's favorite), is a quaint winery complete with a picnic area, hiking trail and life-size chess board. Its large, open tasting room is staffed by knowledgeable, amiable employees. As it turned out, the lady pouring our tastings is the resident chef who creates recipes to pair with Zaca Mesa's tasty Syrahs, Viogniers and Chardonnays.

We were staying at Fess Parker's Wine Country Inn. Our stay included a free tasting at the winery, just up the road from Zaca Mesa. Roses grow as hardily as grapes in the valley and the walkway up to the rustic brick winery was flanked by gardens of rose bushes full of fragrant blooms.

You can stay in any of the small towns located in the val-

ley. We had booked two nights at the Wine Country Inn in Los Olivos. On our way to the Inn, we stopped at the Los Olivos Grocery. This charming little store has a wide selection of cheeses, olive oils, local wines and fresh baked breads and pastries. You can also buy a picnic for your trek through the valley or eat at the Grocery's Porch Restaurant. We bought fresh cheese and a crusty baguette for an afternoon snack.

Other suggestions during your visit:

- Mattei's Tavern, a historic landmark known for its great food.
- Golf, including the River Course located near Solvang.
- Solvang itself, a Danish rendition smack in mid-coastal California, along with its own mission. **OCM**

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