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Following the Emerald Green Road: Northern California's Cannabis Culture Heads to Wine Country

BY CARLY FISHER

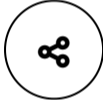


Image Courtesy of Cavan Clark / Sonoma Hills

Northern California's contribution to the American wine scene is well-documented, but its equally significant cannabis culture is finally receiving its flowers. Nearly a decade after the legalization of recreational cannabis, the region's cannabis culture is blossoming from the Bay to Emerald Triangle, an area encompassing [Humboldt](#), [Mendocino](#) and Trinity counties. This astronomical growth has prompted the creation of a nine-county [Cannabis Trail](#) and development of [a cannabis appellation program](#) by the [California Department of Food and Agriculture \(CDFA\)](#), mirrored after the [American Viticultural Area \(AVA\)](#) system. Somewhat similar to the AVA system, the goal of this new initiative is to underscore the importance of sun-grown cannabis and genetic heritage.

Legacy cannabis pioneers who once retreated to Humboldt's secluded forests to covertly harvest their crop are stepping into the light, with celebrations that go well beyond 4/20. [San Francisco](#)'s boutique dispensaries and consumption lounges are starting to bounce back after the pandemic crash, hosting regular events like comedy shows and industry nights while the plant integrates into regular programming at [Outside Lands Music Festival](#). Premier B2B trade show [Hall of Flowers](#) in Santa Rosa opens its doors to the public for the first time ever this year, signifying its mainstream acceptance. Even Napa has its own [Napa Valley Cannabis Association](#) (though the region doesn't currently allow commercial cannabis production and is not participating in the AVA program).



FROM THE SHOP

Full Grain Buffalo Leather 6-Bottle Wine Bag

This versatile messenger-style wine bag comes with removable bottle liners, a corkscrew and an aerator.

\$199

For those who want to head up north in search of weed and wine, the culture is thick in Humboldt. But, given the county's remote location—a nearly six hours' drive from both San Francisco and [Sacramento](#)—it is often considered too far for a quick getaway for most urbanites. Alternative wine regions like [Sonoma](#), [Anderson Valley](#) and [Mendocino](#) are far easier to reach, and have been building a reputation for up-and-coming cannabis scenes that play nice with wineries. While the weed industry often finds itself butting heads with wine, here the convergence is harmonious, delivering experiences in line with award-winning restaurants, hotels, wineries and spas.

“Scenic regions like Sonoma and Mendocino County are already known for being some of the best destinations for lovers of wine, but most people forget that these areas that grow some of the top grapes in the world also offer ideal conditions for growing the best cannabis,” says

Chelsea Davis, a San Francisco-based journalist, content creator and founder of [Cannescape](#), the first travel-centric cannabis dining company with a focus on Northern California experiences. “Younger generations are looking for not just unique wine tastings, but also upscale cannabis experiences—whether that's infused fine dining or food pairings enhanced by specific strains to smoke.”

You May Also Like: [Why Weed and Wine Have More in Common Than You Think](#)

This crossover has led to a growing number of sommeliers and hospitality tastemakers who found their footing in wine to flex their palates as cannasseurs, a.k.a connoisseurs of cannabis. Among them is Jamie Evans, who after a decade of working in wine, crossed over to cannabis in 2017 when she launched her blog and events business, [The Herb Somm](#). The company specializes in wine and cannabis pairing experiences and infused dinners throughout San Francisco and wine country. Already, she's forged a partnership with boutique dispensary [The Bohemian Chemist](#) and their cannabis-friendly hotel, [The Madrones](#) to highlight regional pairings of wine and weed grown in the Anderson Valley.

With a background in wine and passion for cannabis, Evans saw potential in the culinary side of the quickly growing industry. “Much like wine, cannabis showcases many unique smells, tastes and effects,” says Evans, a certified sommelier, certified wine specialist (CWS) and French Wine Scholar (FWS). “When you tap into your senses, you can learn the nuances

between each cultivar and apply this knowledge to craft cannabis, food and wine pairings. Cannabis is very much a gourmet ingredient, so I've made it my mission to educate about the plant in this way."



FROM THE SHOP

Wine Print Waterproof Roll-Up Picnic Blanket with Carry Strap

This oversized blanket with waterproof backing offers comfortable seating for picnicking anywhere.

\$29.99

Everyone's heard of the munchies, but the psychotropic side effects of cannabis can heighten a Michelin-star dining experience that plays into the romance of visiting wine country, explains Brian Applegarth, founder of boutique cannabis travel marketing agency [Applegarth Strategies](#) and [the Cannabis Travel Association International](#). "Cannabis is the new vermouth, a pre-dinner aperitif," he says. "Certain cultivars have the ability to accentuate the palate and enhance flavor, taste and texture."

It's this sort of crossover, paired with the wine- and weed-friendly terroir, that has prompted businesses and communities in these tourism hotspots to embrace the potential for combination travel. "Sonoma and Mendocino Counties are ideal destinations for both wine and cannabis," says Applegarth. "Santa Barbara County is also positioning itself for similar opportunities, which is exciting for those looking for both experiences while visiting California."

Northern California's fusion of wine and cannabis tourism shows a region at the forefront of a cultural evolution, where the legacy of the past and the innovation of the future meet—though cannabis's murky federal legal status means these industries remain stuck in the past as cash-only operations for the moment. Here's how to plan your journey.

San Francisco: The Urban Gateway

Begin in the city that started it all: the Beat Generation, Hippie Hill, the Castro and the nation's first public dispensary, The San Francisco Cannabis Buyers Club.

Get a taste of the past while exploring the latest cultural iteration of the legal landscape. From iconic dispensaries like [Flore Dispensary](#) and boutiques like [The Apothecarium](#) to consumption lounges such as [Moe Greens](#), [Barbary Coast](#) and [Mission Cannabis Club](#), the city offers a diverse, centrally located cannabis culture.

As for accommodations, near Fisherman's Wharf, [Kimpton Alton](#) offers a "[Leafy Dreams](#)" package. It confers a VIP experience at local cannabis dispensary [Cannabis Cultures](#) with a 20% discount and a complimentary luxurious sleep kit featuring eucalyptus pillow spray, sleep mask and Sensi 100mg CBD Chocolate Caramels.



IMAGE COURTESY OF CAVAN CLARK / SONOMA HILLS

Sonoma: The Land of Grapes and Genetics

Sonoma County, with its rich agricultural heritage that includes 19 unique AVAs growing more than 60 grape varieties, is also a hotspot for cannabis genetics and innovation. This is the birthplace of cookie strains, plus coveted compounds like GlitterBomb and Pink Jesus. The latter is a temperamental cultivar and fan favorite—not unlike [Pinot Noir](#)—from [Sonoma Hills Farm](#), the very first [OCal](#) organic certified cannabis farm in California. It's led by Aaron Keefer, the former culinary gardener for the French Laundry. Meanwhile, [Garden Society](#), a Northern California cannabis brand, taps into the wine country vibe with gummies touting inspired flavors like tart cherry Pinot Noir, peach [Prosecco](#) and sparkling strawberry rosé.

Santa Rosa is home to the bulk of noteworthy dispensaries showcasing local and sustainable cannabis products, reflecting the area's commitment to quality and community. Check out small-batch cannabis with [Sun+Earth](#) and biodynamic certifications from hyper-local farms at [Solful](#) in Sebastopol and Santa Rosa. Also stop by [Jane](#), an award-winning, woman-owned dispensary with locations in Cotati and Santa Rosa, plus a soon-to-open outpost in Healdsburg with an unmatched selection of premium brands in a luxury shopping space.

See the plants up close and personal at [Flore Terra](#), home to a high-end, 10,000-square-foot indoor cultivation area nurturing over 20,000 clones. Finally, chat up a budtender about NorCal brands like Mendocino Grasslands, Moon Valley Cannabis, Farmer & the Felon, A Golden State and Fig Farms at the upscale dispensary [Cannadel](#).



IMAGE COURTESY OF NIKOLAS ZVOLENSKY

Mendocino: Rustic Charm at the Tip of the Emerald Triangle

At the southern tip of the Emerald Triangle is Mendocino County, a down-to-earth region that proudly celebrates its terroir through the motto “wine, waves and wilderness.” Notable dispensaries include [The Bohemian Chemist](#) in Philo; [Plantshop](#) in Ukiah; and [Sol de Mendocino](#) in Mendocino Village—all of which have become destinations for educational tastings and scenic views.

Plantshop in particular features a fantastic outdoor consumption lounge that offers flower flight tastings of five strains of sun-grown cannabis with tasting notes and education on local farms, common cannabinoids and terpenes, plus seasonal mocktails and snacks. Sol de Mendocino is situated steps away from the Mendocino Headlands Bluff Trail along the Pacific coast.

For those staying the night, bed-and-breakfast accommodations like [The Madrones](#), in Philo, and [MacCallum House](#), in Mendocino Village, offer cannabis-friendly stays where you can order a wine pairing or gourmet snacks before stepping out for a smoke break on your private deck.



IMAGE COURTESY OF MARK COMPTON

Napa: Spas, Sips & Strains

Wine is still very much the focus in Napa County, but it's still possible to find opportunities that throw cannabis into the mix.

Pop an edible and get a CBD massage out in Calistoga, best known for its hot-spring spas and mud baths. Luxury properties like [Solage Auberge](#), [Calistoga Motor Lodge & Spa](#), [Indian Springs](#) and [Dr. Wilkinson Mud Bath Experience](#) all provide CBD-enhanced treatments, combining the therapeutic benefits of cannabis with traditional spa services, with overnight stays to unwind carefree.

Dispensaries like [Abide](#) and [Velvet Cannabis](#) cater to the discerning consumer, offering premium selections like Kiva chocolate bars, Tempo infused crackers and Kush Queen bath bombs.

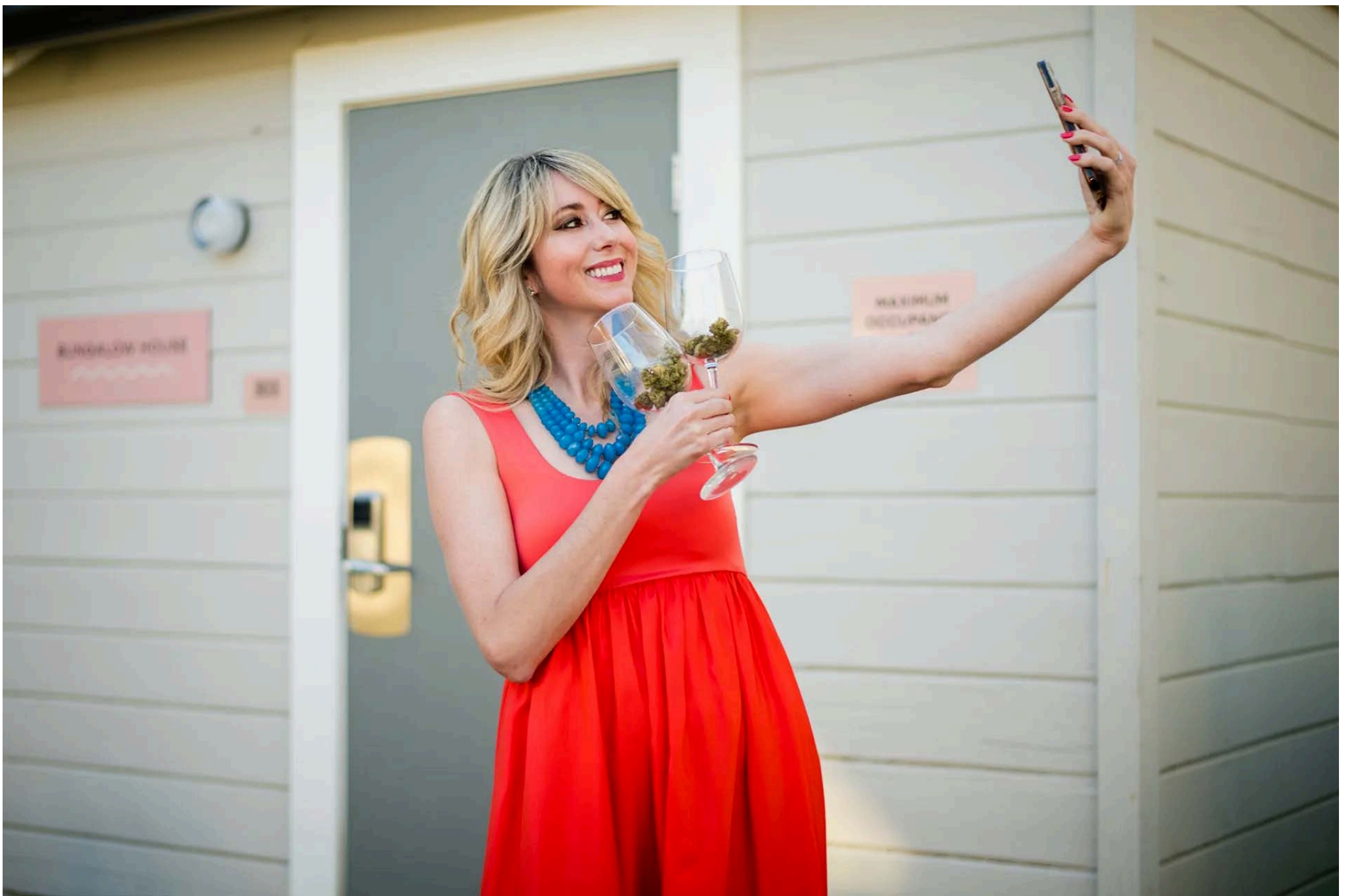


IMAGE COURTESY OF CYNTHIA GLASSELL

Let the Pros Do the Work

Planning a well-tailored trip requires a lot of planning—why not let someone else do it?

Davis's company [Cannescape](#) curates one-of-a-kind, overnight dining experiences in Northern California. The offerings include cooking classes and private infused dining with [glamping at Mendocino Grove](#) and stays at [Mine and Farm Inn](#), which merges cannabis education with inspired seasonal cuisine from chef Solomon Johnson, the first [Bay Area Champion](#) of the Discovery+ series *Chopped 420*.

[San Francisco Cannabis Tour](#), a local San Francisco-based tour company, takes visitors on a half-day journey to learn about the origin and history of cannabis with stops at two dispensaries and one consumption lounge, as well as famous sights including Haight-Ashbury, Dolores Park and Twin Peaks. Meanwhile [Mendocino Cannabis Farm Tour](#) takes visitors straight to the source with a visit to a working cannabis farm.

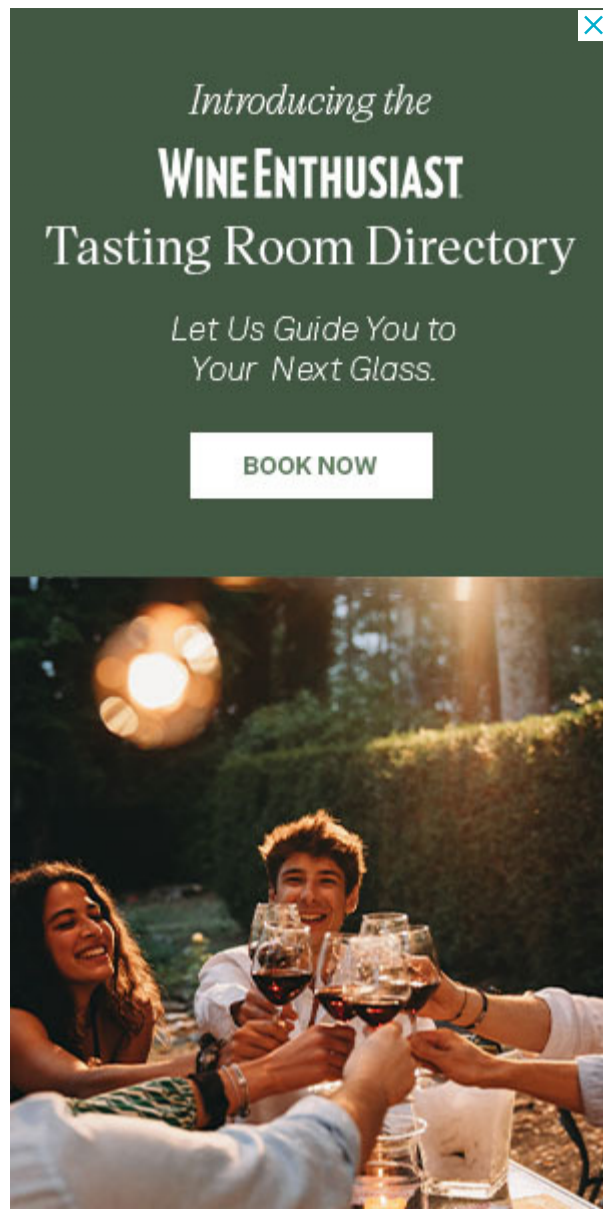
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[Carly Fisher](#) is a James Beard Award-nominated journalist, strategist and author of Easy Weekend Getaways in the Hudson Valley & Catskills. Her work covering the cultural intersection of food, beverage, travel, cannabis and sensory experiences at-large has been featured in GQ, CNN Travel, Bon Appetit, Food & Wine, Fodors Travel and more.

Published: April 16, 2024

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