



# Wine country is all yours

**Sonoma County** shows its true colors after the craziness of crush. By Christine Ciarmello





**T**he time to go to wine country, it's said, is during the crush, in late September, early October. I once visited Sonoma County's Healdsburg during this festive time, when tour-

ists littered tasting rooms with badges around their necks like conventioners. Pay a flat fee, go to a participating winery, hold a red-stained glass at the ready. Drink. My visit was less designed, so I couldn't get into a restaurant, or book a room for under \$350. Wine country during crush? Pfft. I drove home that evening.

A little more than a month later, I went back. (Scored a hotel room a few exits north of town for \$99.) Healdsburg still bustled with visitors, but without the air of drunken recklessness. On Center Street, just as many people were drawn to Flying Goat Coffee with its signature Aztec mocha as to the tasting rooms with their Cabernet.

I drove into the heart of the Russian River Valley on the country roads, where no pickup tailgated me for following the speed limit of 25. The grasses and hills had turned from a thirsty straw brown to green, thanks to fall rains. And at rustic **Copain Wines** (\$15 tasting; [copainwines.com](http://copainwines.com)), up on a hill, the outdoor tables weren't jammed. In the tasting room, Wells Guthrie, the winemaker, mingled with the few of us there, explaining his Pinot Noir at length.

A few weeks earlier, Guthrie wouldn't have had time to talk to me. In fact, I may not have even recognized him. (Some winemakers adhere to a crush tradition of letting themselves go—with grape-stained fingernails and castaway-style facial hair—during those days spent frantically bringing in grapes.) Instead, he glowed with accomplishment, and gave the tasting room the welcoming vibe of a party successfully thrown, when the spirit of fun still hangs in the air, but everyone's gone home except a few lingering guests with interesting things to say.

From my perch on the hill, I looked out at the vineyards in the valley. Grapes just plucked, the vines' leaves had begun to turn golden. It was fall in wine country. ■