

Flights of Fancy

Enotravel offers the ultimate insight into wine's rich and visceral appeal.

By Susan Kostrzewa

Susan is a veteran wine journalist, educator, and content strategist whose work explores the cultural, emotional, and experiential dimensions of wine. In this article, she argues that wine travel is one of the industry's most powerful growth opportunities, showing how immersive, place-based experiences deepen consumer connection to wine, the people behind it, and the landscapes where it's made.

Though headwinds face the wine industry in myriad forms, there's one element of wine appreciation that goes beyond the glass and represents an exciting and boundless area of discovery and growth: wine travel. Among wine's many appeals is the mental voyage a sip can offer, but it's still no match to experiencing the associated vineyards, villages and people in person.

It's easy for wine lovers to wax poetic about communing with terroir, but hard data backs up the emotional draw. The global wine tourism market is predicted to surge in coming months and years, with recent studies including one by *Market.us* predicting the wine tourism industry to be worth \$160 billion by 2033, growing at a CAGR of 13.2%. It's one of the fastest growing sectors of special-interest travel and dovetails perfectly with overall cultural trends. We all want a more immediate connection, not surprising in a time when remote living has taken much of the humanity out of daily life.

I'm often asked what my favorite wine is. I used to waffle and stammer and avoid answering what is akin to naming your best-loved child. Now, I find my mind immediately going to that Chenin I drank on safari in South Africa, the Torrontes poured as a post-ride reward in Mendoza, to the Cabernet I drank under the stars at a candlelit dinner in Napa. Once out of the tasting vault, I, like everyone else, connect most to the broader emotional and sensory appeal that wine travel experiences bring.

Whether in beginning or advanced stages of wine discovery, most wine lovers count such in-person, immersive experiences among the top a-ha moments in evolving their love of the liquid, culture, people and places connected to wine. Wine travel not only connects us in real-time to the one-of-a-kind regions and vibrant personalities behind the product, but takes us straight to the natural source, offering us an up-close connection to the vineyards and vines on their own turf. Tech sheets, tastings and instructional tomes aside, there's a next-level understanding that comes with sampling grapes on the vine, inhaling the scents of vineyard-adjacent flora or scooping up the fossilized shells of an ancient seabed turned into soil.

There's also the community that vine-focused tourism gives. Wine's communal draw goes back millennia, bonding known and new friends in direct and visceral ways. Sitting at a convivial table laden with local foods and wine, overlooking a sun-drenched vineyard with nowhere to go and nothing to do but soak up the moment, it's no wonder that lifelong friends and memories are made on these kinds of trips.

Wineries and wine regions are increasingly understanding the assignment, building better in-person tasting, wine and food pairing and educational environments as well as broader local experiences...with wine at the center of a much larger emotional journey. They're taking us out of the dark and didactic classroom of yesterday's wine appreciation and pairing us with live music, hands-on blending workshops, vineyard animal hangouts and vintage Rover rides. They're giving us in-person insights on things that matter to us, like sustainability, local conservation and worker's programs that give back to the people behind everything we're drinking.

Can't hop on a plane to the Alsace or Santa Barbara just yet? Options like virtual vineyard tours and IG Live winemaker meet-and-greets are a few ways wineries are offering a taste of wine travel without requiring a passport or the funds to get there. Also, many regions offer discounted rates on tastings, hotels and other experiences in the off-season, which also often gives a better shot at direct contact with the owners, winemakers and staff who make it all happen.

The beauty of wine is, among so many other things, its history, its connection to nature, and its ability to link strangers through their love of something both mysterious and delicious. Traveling with wine as a beacon ensures a depth of experience rarely found, with memories that last far beyond the last savored drop.

Veteran journalist, educator and content strategist Susan Kostrzewa co-hosts global culinary and wine tours in collaboration with Gunnell Innovation. For more information about the tours, go to gunnellinnovation.com. For more about Susan, go to respondentink.com