

The New York Times

In Sonoma County, ‘Regenerative Agriculture’ Is the Next Big Thing

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/19/travel/sonoma-county-regenerative-agriculture.html>

Carbon sequestration, pollinator habitat restoration and simple composting: An increasing number of the region’s winegrowers are going beyond sustainability. Here’s how to see, and taste, the fruits of their labors.



Cabernet grapes growing on Medlock Ames, a small estate vineyard in Healdsburg, Calif. Credit... Jason Henry for The New York Times

By Amy Tara Koch

Published Oct. 19, 2021 Updated Oct. 21, 2021, 12:57 p.m. ET

To Lauren and Alex Benward, sixth-generation owners of the [Beltane Ranch](#) vineyard in Glen Ellen, Calif., the word “sustainability” does not adequately convey the agricultural measures that they and many of their fellow vineyard owners have adopted in recent years. Steering clear of pesticides and industrial tillage is a no-brainer. They also use

roving chickens to forage for pests, maximize soil fertility by planting cover crops like ryegrass and employ a herd of sheep — referred to as “woolly weeders” — to help fertilize the fields. Even the vineyard’s wine shipments reflect land stewardship: Bottles — recycled, with natural corks — are transported with carbon-neutral shipping.

This holistic approach to land management is called regenerative agriculture. It eschews conventional farming techniques and taps into composting, pollinator habitat restoration and other measures to encourage nutrient-dense soil. These practices also curb skyrocketing carbon emissions by coaxing nitrogen from the atmosphere and into plant roots, a practice known as carbon sequestration.



“Sustainability infers maintenance. We are focused on improvements,” said Ames Morrison, who also practices regenerative agriculture on [Medlock Ames](#), the small estate vineyard he co-owns in Healdsburg, Calif. “By creating healthier soil, we make the land more resilient. We can turn the dial back on climate change by reducing greenhouse gases naturally.”

Indeed, mitigating climate change is the end goal. And while many wineries around the world are also implementing decarbonization measures, vineyards in Sonoma County are some of the earliest pioneers in the practice.

“Agriculture has a unique opportunity to be a part of the climate solution,” said Karissa Kruse, president of [Sonoma County Winegrowers](#), a local trade group, which, like the [California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance](#) and [California Land Stewardship Institute](#), emphasizes environmental, social and economic sustainability in the region. “Best management practices optimize carbon sequestration, minimize greenhouse gas emissions and support water conservation. This matters locally as our multigenerational family farmers see themselves as caretakers of the land for the next generation.”

To eco-minded travelers, a crash course on carbon sequestration plus a wine tasting — within proximity to smart land conservation — is the ultimate pairing. Here are a few events and activities offered by Sonoma County vineyards and other businesses:



Tucker Taylor, Kendall Jackson’s master culinary gardener, continues to harvest some of the most esoteric produce in Northern California. Credit...Jason Henry for The New York Times

GARDEN TOUR & TASTING

Kendall Jackson

Spigarello? Shungiko? Blue oyster leaf? Ice lettuce? Tucker Taylor, Kendall Jackson's master culinary gardener, continues to harvest some of the most esoteric produce in Northern California, not surprising from the man who developed Thomas Keller's garden at the Michelin-starred French Laundry. His vegetables can be found at some of the top Bay Area restaurants, but in Sonoma, you can enjoy the rare bounty and appreciate Mr. Taylor's commitment to pesticide-free, no-till farming with a garden tour at Kendall Jackson. Self-guided walks are free, or sign up for a hosted 90-minute wander through the seven plots, past beehives and bat boxes, and into sensory gardens that offer details of the estate varietals. The tour culminates with a wine tasting and harvest crudité snack (*\$40 per person; four-course [farm-to-table pairings dinner](#) are offered in the gardens May to October, \$195 per person; 5007 Fulton Road, Santa Rosa, Calif.; 800-769-3649*)



At Beltane Ranch's cozy six-room inn, you'll get up close and personal with the weed-eating sheep, pop over to the retro camper that serves as the chicken coop and hop in a four-wheel drive. Credit...Jason Henry for The New York Times

FARM STAY

Beltane Ranch

To get a peek of what life is like at a small, all-hands-on-deck working vineyard, book a stay at Beltane Ranch's cozy six-room inn. You'll get up close and personal with the weed-eating sheep (not too close, or the guard dog will treat you as a predator), pop over to the retro camper that serves as the chicken coop and hop in a four-wheel drive to check out the donkeys, longhorn cattle and horses whose eating habits function to reduce the weeds that fuel fires. The bucolic setting also includes a horseshoe pit, a preserved 19th-century "roadhouse" festooned in ivy, and slightly wayward flower gardens and various chill-out areas ideal for drinking the estate's crisp sauvignon blanc. A stay comes with a ranch-sourced breakfast served under ancient oak trees. And, yes, the scraps are used for chicken feed and compost. *(Room rates start at \$425, 11775 Sonoma Highway, Glen Ellen, Calif.; 707-833-4233)*



Medlock Ames in Healdsburg has created a self-guided audio tour to illustrate what a year of winemaking sounds like. Credit...Jason Henry for The New York Times

VINEYARD AUDIO TOUR

[Medlock Ames](#)

To help wine enthusiasts gain a better understanding of what goes into that bottle of regeneratively farmed organic wine they are about to enjoy, Medlock Ames has created a self-guided audio tour to illustrate what a year of winemaking sounds like.

At the vineyard, pop in earbuds, download the geo-targeted app and listen to the back story on cutting-edge farming practices. The tour is accompanied by sound effects:

When visiting vineyards blanketed in sweet alyssum and Queen Anne's lace, insects buzz as you learn how cover crops attract beneficial insects and control predators. When visitors approach solar arrays, owl boxes and the drip lines that provide irrigation, they'll hear explanations interspersed with the snip of pruning shears, the chirp of birds and the clank of bottles. A guided wine-and-cheese tasting completes the experience. (*\$75 per person, by appointment only, 13414 Chalk Hill Road, Healdsburg, Calif.; 707-431-8845*)



Guests on Bohemian Highway wine tours receive a tutorial in soil types, grape varieties and the differences between artisanal wine and what you would find in a supermarket. Credit...Jason Henry for The New York Times

CUSTOMIZED TASTINGS

[Bohemian Highway Travel Co.](#)

Nigel and Allyson Weekes design [day tours](#) that focus on tastings at the type of groovy micro-wineries that you would never find on your own — those low-yield, high-quality vineyards that only traffic in direct-to-consumer sales. You'll be fetched from your accommodation in a Land Rover and, as you pass through Sonoma's various microclimates, you'll receive a tutorial in soil types, grape varieties and the stark differences between artisanal wine and what you would find in a supermarket. Itineraries for their new tour, Sustainable Sonoma, reflect the region's makeup of small farms that produce fewer than 10,000 cases. After strolling the vineyards and sampling wines at tucked-away spots like [Littorai](#) (single lot wines), [Davero](#) (Italian varieties)

and [Preston Farms and Winery](#) (Zinfandel), you walk away feeling a special connection to the place and the people working the land. The full-day experience includes a bento-box picnic featuring local, regeneratively farmed ingredients. (*\$475 per person; 707-204-9660; go@bohohwy.com*)



A four-mile hike offered seasonally by Jordan Winery moves through different elevations and microclimates. Credit...Jason Henry for The New York Times

VINEYARD HIKE

[Jordan Winery](#)

An increased interest in sustainability and wellness in general inspired Jordan Winery to develop an experience for visitors to interact with nature and get a workout — before diving into a lunch-and-wine pairing. The [four-mile hike](#), offered seasonally, moves through different elevations and microclimates, from young Malbec vineyards to new plantings of cabernet sauvignon grapes. There’s also a break for an olive oil tasting high on a ridge overlooking the Alexander, Russian River and Dry Creek valleys. The trek continues past pollinator sanctuaries, across olive groves and over to the chef’s garden where guests can pluck and eat produce like figs and late-season heirloom tomatoes. Finally, the fruits of the land are enjoyed in the form of a harvest lunch paired with the estate’s Cabernet and chardonnay. (*\$110 per person; 1474 Alexander Valley Road, Healdsburg, Calif.; 707-431-5250*)



Single Thread runs its own 24-acre, no-till regenerative farm producing 80 percent of the restaurant's produce, along with eggs, honey, olive oil and flowers. Credit...Jason Henry for The New York Times

TASTING MENU

[Single Thread Farm](#)

At their restaurant, Single Thread, the husband-and-wife team Kyle and Katina Connaughton offer both standout flavors and a commitment to sustainability. Kyle (a chef) and Katina (a farmer) are members of the [Zero Foodprint Program](#), food businesses focused on turning “bad” carbon into “good” carbon, and run their own 24-acre, no-till regenerative farm producing 80 percent of the restaurant's produce, along with eggs, honey, olive oil and flowers. On top of the three stars it received from the Michelin Guide this year, in 2020 Single Thread was also awarded a green clover, [the organization's new designation for sustainable gastronomy](#).

Years spent in Japan have shaped Mr. Connaughton's cuisine. The 11-course, kaiseki-style menu melds bright California-grown produce with sashimi and other proteins like local duck and marbled Sonoma-raised Wagyu beef, seasoned with umami-rich ingredients such as Saikyo miso. (*\$375 without beverages; 131 North St, Healdsburg, Calif; 707-723-4646*)