

# three unrushed visits TO GOLD COUNTRY

BY WENDY VAN DIVER



It's the start of another golden day  
in El Dorado County.

*Recently, I visited the Sierra Foothills, intending to do research for an article on weekend wine touring in the region. It was my first visit to the area and I was surprised by its magnitude. From top to bottom, the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains form a belt 170 miles long and range in elevation from 1,000 to 3,000 feet. That's simply too much ground to cover in one wine-touring weekend! I quickly narrowed my focus to three counties (El Dorado, Amador, and Calaveras) and discovered that each has its own unique character. There's plenty to see, do, and taste to justify spending a relaxing two- or three-day weekend in each county. So instead of one weekend, I've returned with suggestions for three!*

## Weekend One El Dorado County

Named for the fantasy land where gold and precious stones are as common as pebbles and wine flows from fountains, El Dorado County offers a mother lode of winding rivers, lakes, gold mines, historic towns, and wineries to explore. The town of Placerville (Old Hangtown) sits in its center, making it a great place to find lodging. Check into a cozy bed and breakfast, or stay at the Cary House Hotel on Main Street, where the second oldest operating elevator west of the Mississippi still transports guests to their rooms. Placerville's Main Street is rich in Old West history, with antique shops, historic buildings, art galleries, and intriguing restaurants. Don't miss Placerville Hardware, the Bell Tower, and Fountain Tallman Soda Works, now a museum. When you're ready to head out to wine country, you don't have far to go. Drive just north of town to Apple Hill, home to over 25 wineries, plus orchards, Christmas tree farms, and scenic picnic areas. The narrow farm roads are lined with plenty of friendly wineries to stop, shop, or just say "hello" for an entire afternoon. But that's only the half of it. To the south of Placerville lies another delightful wine trail in the Fair Play area, with another 20 plus wineries! There aren't many restaurants along this trail, but who needs quantity when you find quality? The Fair Play Bistro is renowned for its French fare and D'Agostini's Delights for its baked goods. In the evenings, head back to "Old Hangtown" and enjoy a slice of fresh fruit pie.

## Weekend Two Amador County

As home to two of the deepest and richest mines in the world during the 1900s, Amador County remains rich with treasures and an ever-growing number of award-winning wineries to explore. Sutter Creek's main drag has a string of charming bed and breakfasts for your weekend retreat. Start your morning slow, with a stroll through the antique, glassware, and clothing shops you find nearby. Amador County's sun-bathed hillside vineyards are the next stop. Known especially for robust Zinfandel, Amador is now producing superb Syrah, Sangiovese, Barbera, Sauvignon Blanc, Viognier, and Port-style wines. You'll often meet the owners in the tasting rooms here. And, if you start to chat, you may even find yourself on an impromptu tour. Deciding upon which spectacular view to savor over your picnic lunch will be the toughest part of the day. Other "musts" for your Amador County weekend visit are Amador Flower Farm, with more than 800 day lily varieties, and the Kennedy Mine property. The mine is open on weekends to the public and tours are available of the surface workings. Visitors can also marvel at the impressive Kennedy Tailing Wheels an engineering marvel prompted by early 20th century environmental concerns. In Plymouth, two raved-about gourmet restaurants, Amador Vintage Market and Taste, sit across the main street from each other and proudly serve Amador County wines.

## Weekend Three Calaveras County

The main roads wind tightly around the steep mountain hills of Calaveras County. Two colorful towns, Angels Camp and Murphys, offer intriguing places to stay. The Victoria Inn on Murphys' Main Street provides European charm and a homey atmosphere, plus V Restaurant and Bar, giving guests a gourmet welcome to town. Murphys' narrow Main Street is lined with old sycamore, oak, and black locust trees. Chic shops sit right alongside laid back tasting rooms. In Murphys, it is possible to taste many of the area's wines without leaving town. But you really should venture out for a few short drives because there's so much to do and see. Golf, tennis, fishing, hiking, gold panning, white water rafting, and skiing—in the summer on New Melones Lake—and in the winter at Bear Valley—are all options. In the summer you can take in an outdoor concert or Shakespearean play on the spellbinding grounds of Stevenot Winery. There are several narrow, winding roads leading you to unique wineries with relaxing tasting rooms. And the Calaveras County Winegrape Alliance boasts 20 wineries with three traffic lights. Tempranillo is the buzz word in most of the tasting rooms because Calaveras County is emerging as an excellent producer of the big, bold, intense single varietal. And that's about as exciting as it gets here. The pace is slow. The people are friendly. And don't be surprised if you want to linger an extra day. 🍷

The counties of the El Dorado, Amador, and Calaveras are located roughly 1 hour east of Sacramento, 1 hour west of South Lake Tahoe, and 2.5 hours east of San Francisco.