Oh, the Wine You Will Find in Temecula!

Once upon a time, there was a sleepy little town called Temecula, a blink's worth of gas stations and a diner or two. But at some point in the 1980s, people started noticing Temecula's wide open spaces and affordability, and it grew by leaps and bounds, with homes and businesses along either side of Interstate 15.

There is beautiful country on both sides of the freeway in Temecula, but if you exit Rancho California Road, you'll discover one of the highlights — acre after acre of twisting vineyards dotted with more than 20 wineries.Most of the vineyards are fairly young by winery standards, but the oldest vines in all of California hail from this region, and there are a few prime stops along Rancho California Road, the main Temecula thoroughfare.

Wine tasting is subjective, of course. If you're up for collecting a carload of wine glasses and sips from as many vendors as possible, take a designated driver and enjoy the ride. However, if you'd prefer to focus on a few wineries with premium choices, the following recommendations may serve you well.

Listed as location number eight on the Wine Country Temecula map (www.temeculawines.org), Mount Palomar Winery has one of the better selections of premium wines in the region, including its 2003 Castelletto Travato, and the Solera Cream Sherry, rich and sweet with a surprise finish of hazelnut and caramel. There are two stations for wine tasting, in addition to a little shop filled with fresh bread and deli fare, and indoor and outdoor seating.

Palumbo Winery, number 18 on the map, features red wines and because of its small size, may be crowded. Leonesse Cellars, number 20, emerged in 2003, but founders Mike Rennie and Gary Winder, have almost 50 years of wine-growing experience between them. They have a nice selection of reds and whites, with an excellent 2003 Sangiovese and a very good 2003 Merlot and 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon.

Keyways is one of the few woman-owned wineries in California and shows great promise with its 2002 Barbera and 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon. Owner Terri Pebly is a Temecula businesswoman who purchased the winery in 2004 and overhauled the tasting room and production rooms in addition to revamping the grounds.

For wine tasting, weekdays will always be less crowded than weekends.While hotels abound in Temecula, consider a short jaunt south on Interstate 15 to Fallbrook, a beautiful, quaint town in the midst of avocado orchards and lazy willows. The Fallbrook Country Inn is an older motel, but very clean, reasonably priced and quiet. They host a continental breakfast near the pool, but if you like hotcakes and eggs made to order, the Wayside Café on Main Street has great food and atmosphere too. Dinner in Fallbrook is limited, but you can try Scampi's Simply Italian Restaurant which is located at the Inn or local favorite, J.J. "Purty" Landers Irish Pub & Restaurant on Main Street.Mexican food is also plentiful in Fallbrook. POINTS OF INTEREST Mount Palomar Winery • 33820 Rancho California Road • 951-676-5047 ACCOMMODATIONS Fallbrook Country Inn • 1425 South Mission Road • 760-728-1114 RESTAURANTS Wayside Café • 507 South Main Avenue • 760-723-9633 • J.J."Purty" Landers Irish Pub & Restaurant • 125 South Main Avenue • 760-731-0839 • Scampi's Simply Italian Restaurant • 1415 South Mission Road • 760-731-0007 How to Get There From Rancho Mirage, take I-10 west to I-60 west toward Riverside. Merge onto I-215 south toward San Diego. I-215 south becomes I-15 south. In Temecula, exit Rancho California Road east toward Old Town Front Street. Turn left onto Rancho California Road.

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