

Take a Wine Tour In Style!



It's a moveable celebration on wheels! A limousine tour of the wine country combines convivial friends, great vintages—possibly a gourmet meal—and the mellow, sun-kissed hills and valleys of Temecula.

The Temecula Valley wine region is growing up—has grown until there are now 28 wineries, some of which produce reds and whites that compete with the best that the Napa Valley produces.

And, as we all know, California has been competing more or less as an equal with France for some time in the vintage sweepstakes—although those snooty French will never admit it, will they?

So, it's no wonder that wine tasting tours have come into their own in the last few years in Temecula. And why not? It's a relaxing, worry-free way to visit top wineries, or those out-of-the-way boutique wineries you have heard so much about, and let someone else drive.

It's a celebration! Which is how many people who take such tours view it. The most common tours are put together to celebrate weddings, birthdays or anniversaries. Sometimes customers are visitors from out-of-town who want to experience the vintages that the Temecula Valley has to offer.

Wendy Adame, who manages Sterling Price Limousines in Temecula, moved to the area five years ago. During that time she has noticed how dramatically the number of wineries has grown.

Several companies provide wine tours. There's Louis Derosa of Esquire Limousine Service, who did the first wine tour in the Valley. There's Executive VIP Shuttle, which provides a variety of wine country tours (see our list of companies at the end of the article).

Although individual wineries also provide shuttles to their venues, private limo services do the bulk of tours of the Valley.

According to Adame, you have four ways of taking a tour:

1) You hire a limousine and tell them what wineries you want to visit and they take you there. The vehicles Sterling Rose offers hold up to about 28 people. Typically this is a private party.

2) You arrive as a visitor and say, "I've never been to the wine country. I want you to do the planning, including providing wine tickets and a catered lunch." In such a case Sterling Rose works with a caterer to provide a picnic lunch that you choose from a menu. The limousine provides winery vouchers so you don't stand in line and can go straight to the tasting.

An average such tour takes 4–5 hours and visits four wineries. It will run you about \$445 for two people in a Town Car. The price per person goes down dramatically with more people. For example, for eight people, your cost goes down to about \$120 per person.

Sterling Rose has deals with some of the bigger, most popular wineries, such as South Coast Winery.

3) A third way is to take the tour and partway through, stop for a sit down lunch at a winery restaurant, such as Pinnacle Restaurant at the Falkner Winery. That brings the time on the tour up to six hours.

4) A fourth option is just to take the wine tour without the catered picnic. You can bring your own picnic and your own snacks. For that experience, expect to pay about \$350 for two people visiting four wineries. Here also, the price per person goes down dramatically the more people in the group. So, for eight people you would spend about \$585.

Prices vary depending on which limo service you choose, but they are all pretty competitive.

Sterling Rose offers tours seven days a week, although Adame recommends a day other than Saturday, because that's when everyone else is taking tours!

"You are so much more relaxed, and you are not rushed," she says. "Fridays are good but Sundays are wonderful!" So are weekdays.

The best times of year are spring and



fall. It can get up into the 100°s in the summer in Temecula, and drinking wine when it's that warm can make you a little drowsy!

Sterling Rose will take you to any of the 28 wineries, although some don't provide vouchers. All that means is that you have to stand in line.

For groups of more than eight, almost all wineries require reservations—they don't have the staffs to serve large numbers of people at once without some warning.

If you find a wine that you really like and want to drink it in the car—that's allowed. The limo company also provides water, soft drinks and champagne. Hard liquor is NOT allowed. Neither is drunkenness or rowdy behavior. Hey, it's not THAT kind of party, OK?

"Sometimes people do overindulge, and we can't bring intoxicated guests to a winery," says Adame. "Wineries have strict regulations. They can't overserve."

"Of course, you can get a buzz, but not so much that you become obnoxious. That's when it's over."

Wineries don't encourage a "party" atmosphere. The majority of people who visit are not there to get drunk. They are there to sample the wines and get educated. They want the wine "experience."

All of Sterling Rose's dozen drivers are professionals, rigorously screened and tested for drugs and alcohol. They are background checked, have current DMV print-outs and are over 25 years old.

The wineries requested the most often are the South Coast Winery, Falkner, Leonesse and Wiens, and, of course, the oldest winery in the Valley, Bella Vista. Wilson Creek, which makes an almond champagne, is also popular and provides a beautiful area for a picnic.

"Temecula is becoming a little Napa Valley," says Adame. "A lot of the wineries have won awards and beaten Napa."

It has started to dawn on people that Temecula Valley is a major player in the vintage game. "They are elegant. They are not producing swill. The level of tasting is going up tremendously," she says.

If you are considering calling a limousine service, Adame has some advice. "Do some research to make sure that they are legal. Visit the California Public Utilities Commission's Web site: www.cpuc.ca.gov and look under transportation. Put in the name of the company that you are considering and make sure that they have an active business number, carry insurance and if they have workers' comp."

Do your homework on Temecula's wineries by visiting www.temeculawines.org. This site lists all of the valley's wineries. Whichever ones you visit, you are likely to have an unforgettable experience.

"In the last five years, Temecula's wineries have become a force to be reckoned with!" says Adame.

To help you put together a wine tasting tour, try the follow limousine services:

Destination Temecula:
www.destem.com

Esquire Limousine Service:
www.winetourcentral.com, 951-696-8333

Executive VIP Shuttle: www.execvip-shuttle.com, 951-304-0412

Going Grape: www.goinggrape.com, 951-852-1923

Grapeline Wine Country Shuttle:
www.gogrape.com, 951-693-5755

Sterling Rose Transportation:
www.sterlingroselimo.com, 951-699-9151

West Coast Chauffeur and Transportation: www.wctrans.com, 951-926-1902

Wine Country Trails By Horseback, Inc.: www.winecountrytrailsbyhorseback.com, 951-795-1444

For more information visit the Temecula Valley Winegrowers Assn.'s Web site at www.temeculawines.org.