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April 18, 2024

# Rail excursions through Central Coast wine country spotlight sips and scenery

BY *CHERISH WHYTE*

One unique rail journey highlights Santa Barbara County wines, while another explores a single Paso Robles producer. Connected by a love of locomotives and the Central Coast's viticultural bounty, the San Luis Obispo Railroad Museum and Halter Ranch Estate are kicking off distinct experiences in May.

### All aboard!

To book wine-inspired rail journeys from San Luis Obispo to Santa Barbara with the SLO Railroad Museum, located at 1940 Santa Barbara Ave., visit [slorrm.com](http://slorrm.com). For train experiences at Halter Ranch Estate at 8910 Adelaida Road in Paso Robles, visit [halteranch.com](http://halteranch.com).

The museum's 2024 Sunset Wine Rail Excursions, offered in collaboration with Amtrak's Pacific Surfliner and the Santa Barbara Wine Collective, will run on May 18, June 22, July 20, Aug. 17, and Sept. 21.

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Photo Courtesy Of Pacific Surfliner

**SURF AT SUNSET** Views en route aboard Amtrak's Pacific Surfliner between Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo include Surf Beach at Vandenberg Space Force Base.

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"A big highlight is the sunset ride along the Pacific and a chance to view unspoiled stretches of coastline that are only visible from the train," said museum docent and Morro Bay local David Weisman, who will accompany guests.

For May and June bookings, he added, "the hillsides ... should be vibrantly green after all the winter rains, possibly with some wildflowers also."

Priced at \$129 and limited to 24 guests, the tours depart SLO via motorcoach at 11 a.m. and arrive at the Santa Barbara Wine Collective at 1 p.m. Light snacks are served aboard the motorcoach and at the collective.

Showcasing the county's seven American Viticultural Areas and 60 grape varieties, the collective is dedicated to educating customers about its wines via tastings, maps, and displays of soil samples, Weisman explained.

"Our guests can sample the regions without having to do all that driving," he added. "The menu calls for three reds, two whites, and a rosé.

"Wines purchased can be stored at the collective for pickup when guests return to board the train, and it is only about a five-minute walk from the tasting room to the station."



click to enlarge

Photo Courtesy Of Pacific Surfliner

**SANTA BARBARA-BOUND** The San Luis Obispo Railroad Museum's seasonal wine trips whisk guests via motorcoach to Santa Barbara for wine tasting and exploring before returning to SLO aboard Amtrak's Pacific Surfliner.


Following the tasting, guests have approximately three hours to explore the Funk Zone, Stearns Wharf, or lower State Street, and enjoy a late lunch or grab takeout food for the return train trip. Weisman will provide a handout of suggested options.

The Pacific Surfliner will depart Santa Barbara Train Station at 5:45 p.m. and arrive in SLO at around 8:45 p.m.

"The return trip north is narrated by myself, highlighting historic spots, like the rocky cliff off which the tragic naval shipwreck took place off Honda Point in 1923

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and also the western spaceport where the SpaceX rockets are launched today," Weisman said.

"The train's conductor, whose grandfather worked for the railroad in the last century, may have time to add some family reminiscences and history."

During the three-hour journey, guests will be treated to a small dessert and can also purchase wine, beer, and cocktails.

"I will serve as the host in taking orders and delivering those items from the café car to the seated passengers," Weisman said.

Then sit back and enjoy the sunset.

"The 60 miles the train travels along the coastal bluffs is considered one of the [country's] top three most scenic rail routes," he added.

However, if you're more partial to Paso wines, oak-studded hills, and vintage trains, then Halter Ranch offers an equally alluring experience.

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Courtesy Photo By Robin Osgood

**WHET YOUR WHISTLE** Halter Ranch chief mechanical officer and conductor Branden Blanke of Paso Robles offers train passengers a complimentary glass of 2023 rosé prior to embarking on a 3-mile loop of the 2,700-acre Paso estate.

The winery's railroad whisks guests back in time as it meanders through 280 acres of the 2,700-acre property, with sights ranging from art installations and historic landmarks dating back to 1880 to a herd of 120 sheep.

The railroad was created by Halter Ranch proprietor Hansjörg Wyss, born in Bern, Switzerland, in 1935.

According to Halter Ranch literature, "As a young boy, Wyss dreamed of experiencing Switzerland's most prestigious locomotives—the Rhaetian Railway Krokodil No. 414 and Steam Locomotive No. 108. These locomotives journeyed among the high peaks of the Swiss Alps, the lake promenade of St. Moritz, and as far as the Italian village of Tirano."

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Photo Courtesy Of Halter Ranch Estate

**FROM SASS TO GLASS** Kevin Sass, winemaker at Halter Ranch since 2011, works his magic with grenache and 19 other certified organic grape varieties planted on the westside Paso Robles property's 256-acre vineyard.

Wyss turned his dream into reality, hiring Balson AG in Switzerland to create trains at Halter Ranch that are a 45 percent scale model of their real-life counterparts.

Offered twice a day at 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays from May 25 until Nov. 3, the winery's Swiss train tour takes place in the Krokodil No. 414.

The replica is inspired by the 1929 original that was nicknamed the "Crocodile" due to its resemblance to a crocodile snout.

The one-hour-long rides for up to 32 guests are priced at \$50 for the general public, \$35 for wine club members, and \$10 for guests 20 and younger.

For a more luxurious experience, consider booking the Yellow Caboose for up to four passengers at a rate of \$249 for the public and \$199 for club members.

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Photo Courtesy Of Halter Ranch Estate

**PARTY OF FOUR** The Halter Ranch Railroad Yellow Caboose can be attached to the main rail cars for an exclusive experience for up to four guests at the Paso Robles estate.

"Guests of our Swiss train tour are welcomed with a glass of our 2023 Estate Rosé, crafted from 100 percent organic grapes," said Halter Ranch winemaker Kevin Sass of Templeton. "Onboard, they'll explore our organic practices, including year-round sheep grazing in our 256-acre vineyard, and the terroir that defines our timeless wines."

Sass recommends combining a train tour with a tasting or meal at the property's on-site restaurant, Alice, which is open daily from 11 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Two tasting menus include current releases as well as a Silver Label reserve tier. Both feature the winery's flagship Bordeaux blend, Ancestor, named for the property's massive 700-year-old coast live oak.

Ancestor and other Halter Ranch wines took home gold and 90-plus points at the recent 2024 Monterey International Wine Competition in King City. Its 2021 petite syrah garnered platinum at 95 points.

For a deeper dive into Halter Ranch's wines and property, consider booking its Grand Train Tour with Dinner slated for July 13.

"Commencing with passed appetizers at 5 p.m., guests will board the train at 5:30 p.m. for a picturesque ride," according to the winery. "Following the tour, indulge in a four-course dinner under the twinkling stars on our Silo Patio. Inspired by Bavarian cuisine, the menu promises a culinary adventure like no other."

Tickets go on sale June 13.

Regardless of which experience guests choose, the pairing of libations and locomotives is compelling—for both wine enthusiasts and train buffs.

"The Swiss train tour gives people a sense of place when they taste the wine," Sass explained. "They better understand the soils, the climate, the landscape, the habitat surrounding the vineyard—a true farm-to-glass experience." Δ

Flavor Writer Cherish Whyte is planning her grape train escape. Reach her at [cwhyte@newtimeslo.com](mailto:cwhyte@newtimeslo.com).

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