

DRINK IN THE SCENERY

One of the beauties of San Diego County is that you can enjoy wine festivals year-round



JOEY HERNANDEZ PHOTOGRAPHY

The San Diego Bay Wine & Food Festival's Grand Tasting takes place at Embarcadero Marina Park North. The 12th annual festival runs Nov. 15-22.

If your interest in wine extends to the finer points of corks and other bottle closures, how various types of soil affect the taste of wine or preventive measures that guard against protein instability and tartrates, this is your month. If you just like trying different wines and don't care how they're made, this is your month.

If you fall somewhere between those two camps, guess what? This is your month too.

The 12th annual **San Diego Bay Wine & Food Festival** (Nov. 15-22) has taken on an ambitious plan, running an inaugural, multiday, concurrent (Nov. 18-21) event called **SommCon**. Held at the Manchester Grand Hyatt, **SommCon** is an educational conference for wine industry professionals — but with some of the 50 sessions open to the public.

An ambitious plan within the festival itself is a 16-hour, guided trip to Baja's Valle de Guadalupe for winery visits and dining.

Before recrossing the border, tour-goers will enjoy dinner at **Mision 19**, the Tijuana restaurant of Chef Javier Plascencia, who also hosts a wine fest dinner with Chicago-based celebrity chef Rick Bayless at his **Bracero Cocina de Raiz** restaurant in Little Italy. The Baja spotlight continues with an expanded build-out of a Baja Pavilion at the Grand Tasting on Nov. 21.

The festival has two more new aspects to it: a tasting of medal wines from the **Sommelier Challenge** in September, in partnership with **San Diego International Wine Competition**, and a golf tournament at **Maderas Golf Club** in Poway — with wine, spirits and food offered at holes throughout the course.

With more than 10,000 attendees over the course of the week and more than 5,000 at the Grand Tasting in Embarcadero Marina Park North, the **San Diego Bay Wine & Food Festival** (which funds culinary and enology

scholarships) is the largest local wine event. But it's far from the only annual opportunity for large-scale tasting experiences that typically include food, live music and seminars or cooking demonstrations.

Also this month, on Nov. 7, is the **Ramona Art & Wine Festival** at Highland Valley Ranch. In addition to featuring only Ramona wineries, this event has a distinct element: wine barrels painted by artists and offered for sale on-site, along with other artwork. Proceeds benefit the **Ramona H.E.A.R.T. Mural Project**.

On April 2, 2016, **VinDiego** returns for its fourth iteration. The outdoor grand tasting at **NTC Liberty Station** includes more than 75 wineries pouring more than 325 wines. A tasting of high-end Pinot Noir and reserve Chardonnays in the **McMillin Event Center** takes place the preceding evening.

"VinDiego is all about fine wine, not beer or spirits," Executive Producer David Frascchetti says. "The wines poured are truly the crème de la crème from award-winning wineries. Some are library selections; others are proprietor's reserves and end-of-vintage wines."

Among last year's wineries from Oregon and California was a collective of Paso Robles vintners that produce Cabernet Sauvignon and Bordeaux-style wines. "The CAB has 28 members, and 19 of them chose to showcase their wines at VinDiego," David notes.

The **Jacobs & Cushman San Diego Food Bank** receives all proceeds from a silent auction and a percentage of ticket sales.

Also in April, also in its fourth year, also a fundraising event and also created by someone of Italian descent, the **San Diego International Wine Show** takes place at the **Del Mar Fairgrounds**. Executive Director **Donato Santarsieri's** two-day event presents mostly California wines (including some that are locally produced), but last year also featured wine from Baja, Europe and South America. The expanded event included an exhibition of art and educational seminars.

Donato's love of nature led him to choose the **San Dieguito River Valley Conservancy**



CHRIS BRAKE PHOTOGRAPHY

VinDiego at NTC Liberty Station focuses exclusively on premier wines and gourmet food.

as the event's beneficiary. "I want to support a nonprofit that helps maintain the outdoors that all of us can enjoy as a community," he says. "They get a percentage of proceeds from ticket sales, but they are guaranteed \$5,000."

This May marked the 20th anniversary of the **San Diego County Vintners Association Wine & Food Festival**, presenting only local wineries at **Bernardo Winery** in Rancho Bernardo. In August, the winery hosted **Rancho Bernardo Historical Society's** fifth annual **Rancho Bernardo Tasting Festival and Classic Car Show**, which also focused on local wines.

One of the longest-running San Diego County wine-tasting events is the annual **Wine & Roses**, which in June marked 32 years in operation and its second year at **The Grand Del Mar** (now **Fairmont Grand Del Mar**). The one-day event raises money to send children from disadvantaged households to summer camp. Unlike most wine festivals, it includes an opportunity to taste and to purchase wines that garnered platinum, gold and silver awards in **Robert Whitley's San Diego International Wine Competition**.

A June event at the **Del Mar Fairgrounds** gives attendees something other festivals don't: admittance into the concurrent **San Diego County Fair** (though you might not want to hop on a whirlybirdish ride if you've been swallowing the wine you taste). As its name suggests, **The Toast of the Coast** features wineries (more than 80) along the Pacific Coast — from Baja to Eureka. The bonus of this festival is getting landscaping ideas in the **Paul Ecke Jr. Garden Show** venue while sipping wine. Like **Wine & Roses**, **The Toast of the Coast** is tied to a professionally judged competition and offers the award-winning wines for sale.

The **USD Wine Classic** in July has a singular niche — featuring 30 wineries whose owners and vintners are affiliated with the school. Proceeds from the event benefit scholarship funds.

For 13 years, **The Lodge at Torrey Pines** has hosted **Celebrate the Craft**, with an emphasis on regionally grown ingredients, California wines and craft beers. The October event benefits **Slow Food Urban San Diego**.

As the county's viticultural presence expands, so do tasting opportunities. ❖