

Wine country weekends

Explore Texas Hill Country by the glass with this four-day itinerary. Plus: Wine tours in Washington, Southern California, and Virginia

By David Baird | Photography Douglas Merriam

TEXAS HILL COUNTRY—the region of south-central Texas that stretches west from Austin and San Antonio—has a long history of winemaking, thanks to its unique cultural heritage. The first grapevines were brought to Texas by Spanish friars, who traveled from Mexico in the late 17th century, establishing vineyards at the missions they founded throughout the American Southwest. Those vines, cultivars of hardy Mediterranean stocks, flourished in the region's mild climate. When German settlers arrived in the 19th century, they learned from Mexican growers how to adapt their homeland's vines and techniques to the Hill Country's semi-arid climate.

Grape-growing expertise flowed backward to Europe in the

1870s. In a surprising twist, a Texan grape grower, Thomas Munson, helped save European viticulture by shipping disease-resistant rootstocks to France when vineyards there were decimated by invasive pests and fungi. The move earned him the French Legion of Honor.

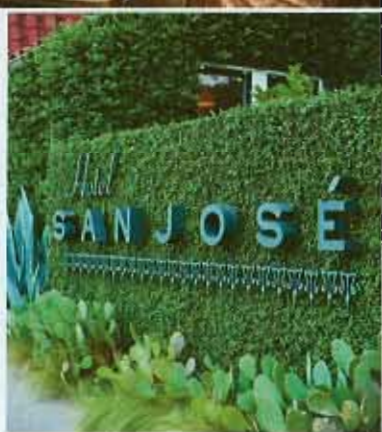
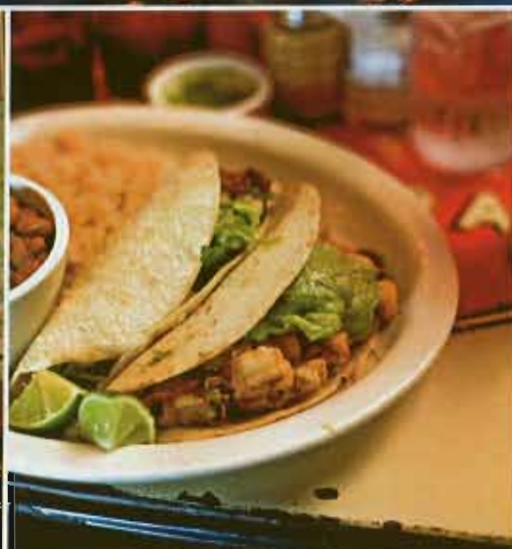
Today Texas is the fifth-largest wine-producing state in the United States. In October a waft of fresh air sweeps in from the northern plains and expels the heat and humidity coming up from the Gulf of Mexico, making it an ideal time to schedule a long-weekend tasting tour. The following four-day itinerary begins in Austin, then follows a loop through the juniper- and mesquite-covered hills south and west of the city.





Becker Vineyards (left) was among the first in the region to grow French vines. Deb Pate, of the nearby Hill Top Café (shown here), blends Greek and Cajun cuisines.

Days 1 and 2: Explore Austin before beginning your winery tours.

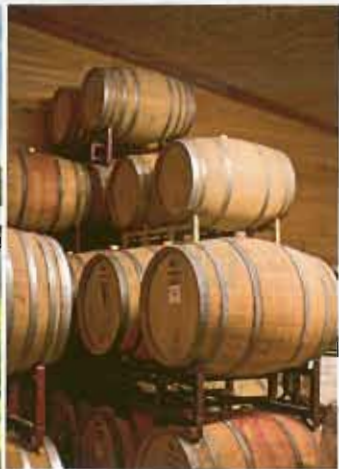


Ladybird Lake (top), Güero's taco bar (middle), and Hotel San José (bottom)

Start your journey in Austin, and discover the city's hip, healthful charms. Check into the **Hotel San José** (from \$160; 800-574-8897, www.sanjosehotel.com), a boutique, bungalow-style hotel in the pedestrian-friendly South Congress district. Some of the city's best tacos and margaritas are a block away at **Güero's** (512-447-7688, www.guerostacobar.com).

In the morning, dine at the **South Congress Café** (512-447-3905, www.southcongresscafe.com), where you can sample *migas*, an Austin standard that's a sauté of eggs, onions, tomatoes, jalapeños, julienned tortillas, and cheese. If time allows, head down South Congress 12 blocks to **Ladybird Lake** (also known as **Town Lake**), which serves as a giant reflecting pool for Austin's skyline. You'll meet plenty of Austinites running or walking along the lake's landscaped shores (a nod to its namesake, Ladybird Johnson, who was a passionate advocate of native plants).

The first winery to visit, **Dry Comal Creek** (830-885-4076, www.drycomalcreek.com), lies 60 miles southwest in New Braunfels. Its Black Spanish wine is made from a grape that was first introduced into Texas in the late 16th century and has evolved into a unique varietal, with a hint of cherries and soft tannins.



From here, travel on to Sisterdale, 36 miles to the northwest through rolling hills and pastures. German immigrants founded this tiny hamlet in 1847. A cotton gin houses the tasting room for **Sister Creek Vineyards** (830-324-6704, www.sistercreekvineyards.com), where winemaker Danny Hernandez follows French methods to produce such stellar wines as “3 Cab,” a medium-bodied Meritage blend with a whisper of plum.

Just 25 miles northwest is Fredericksburg, considered the unofficial B&B capital of Texas, with so many that the tourism office has created a database specifically for visitors: www.fredtexlodging.com.

Sample Hill Country wines at Sister Creek Vineyards (top right) and cuisine at Cabernet Grill (right). Fredericksburg's Roadrunner Inn (here and top left) appeals to all ages.

.com. Since most inns require a two-night stay, use Fredericksburg as your home base for exploring the surrounding area. Plan to arrive in time for dinner at the **Cabernet Grill** (830-990-5734, www.cottonginlodging.com) for a true taste of Texas Hill Country—succulent farm-raised boneless quail stuffed with jalapeño and wrapped in bacon, grilled, and then finished with a raspberry-chipotle glaze (shown below).

Where to stay: At the **Roadrunner Inn** (from \$149; 888-559-8555, www.theroadrunnerinn.com), owner Cassell Heep blends 50's mod and industrial pieces into a stylish, comfortable mix.





Day 3: Travel through the heart of Hill Country.

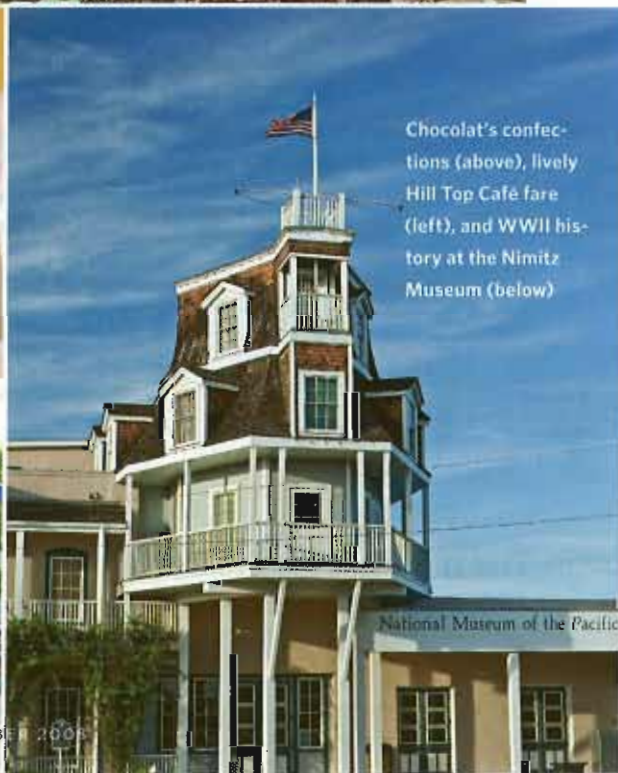
Fredericksburg native Admiral Chester Nimitz was commander of the Pacific fleet during World War II. The **Nimitz Museum** (830-997-4379, www.nimitz-museum.org), part of the National Museum of the Pacific War, occupies the mid-19th century former hotel that belonged to Nimitz's grandfather. Most exhibits highlight the admiral's career, but in one quarter, where the hotel's stables used to be, you'll find a Japanese garden created by a team of gardeners sent by the Japanese government as a gesture of gratitude for Nimitz's kindness after the war.

Devote the rest of your morning to ambling along Fredericksburg's Main Street, and stop for a sweet at **Chocolat** (830-990-9382, www.chocolat-tx.us), where architect-cum-chocolatier Lecia Duke encases alcohol—including Texas red wines—in luscious chocolate. Several receive the treatment, including sweet ports and muscats. Before leaving town for the afternoon, sample the gewürztraminer at **Fredericksburg Winery** (830-990-8747, www.fbgwinery.com). The German varietal often produces sweet wines. Here it is dry and fruity, with a flowery aroma.

Next head 10 miles east on Highway 290 to visit **Becker Vineyards** (830-644-2681, www.beckervineyards.com), one of the largest in the area, where the clove-scented Cabernet Reserve is excellent.

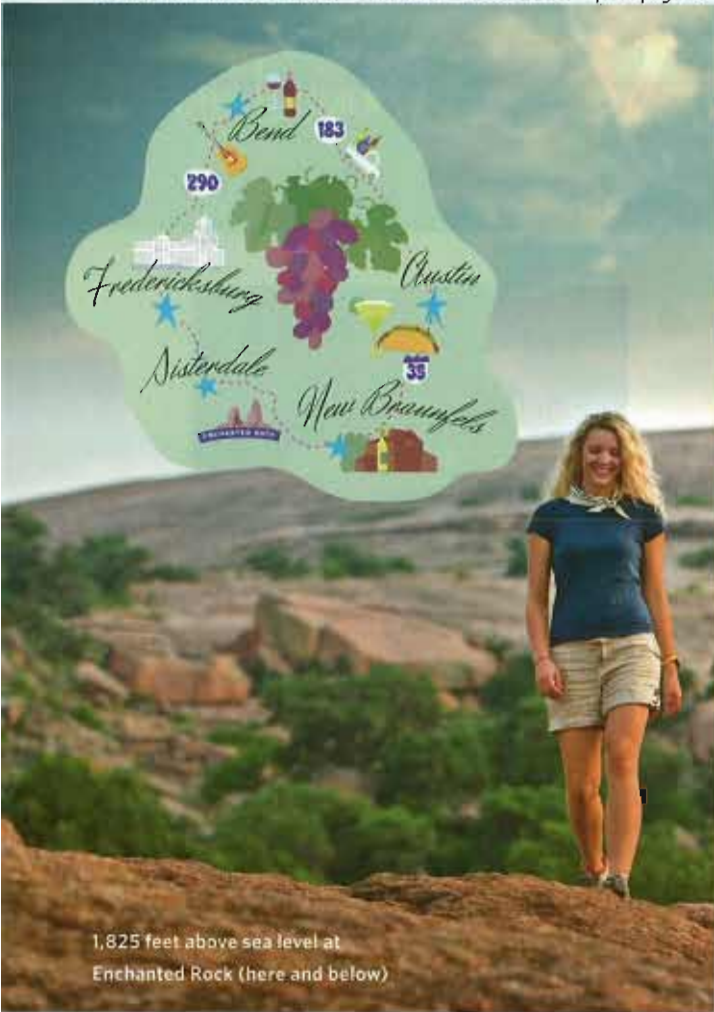
For dinner and music, drive back through town, then northwest 10 miles on Highway 87 to the **Hill Top Café** (830-997-8922, www.hilltopcafe.com), a one-time gas station now owned by John and Brenda Nicholas. She's of Cajun background, he's of Greek, and both influences show on the menu, as in Gulf shrimp sautéed in olive oil, garlic, and bay leaves, finished with sherry. Sometimes on weekends, John, a former member of Austin band Asleep at the Wheel, provides the entertainment with acoustic guitar or piano.

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Chocolat's confections (above), lively Hill Top Café fare (left), and WWII history at the Nimitz Museum (below)





1,825 feet above sea level at Enchanted Rock (here and below)



Day 4: Finish your trip on a high note atop Enchanted Rock.

Before leaving Fredericksburg, stop at Hilda's Tortilla Factory (830-997-6105) for takeout breakfast tacos on fresh-made flour tortillas. *El especial* features poblano, eggs, beans, bacon, and tomatoes. Then drive north 17 miles on Rural Route 965 to Enchanted Rock, a dome of solid pink granite that's one of Texas's best-known natural landmarks. The half-mile hike to the summit offers panoramic views of the surrounding hills.

Continue on the same open-range ranch road (watch out for livestock and cattle guard crossings) to Alamosa Wine Cellars (325-628-3313, www.alamosawinecellars.com), located

outside of Bend, which specializes in varietals best acclimated for hot weather, including tempranillo, sangiovese, and viognier. Pillar Bluff Vineyards (512-556-4078, www.pillarbluff.com) lies 27 miles east, just outside of Lampasas. The cabernet here is beautifully balanced, while the white merlot—a blend of 85 percent merlot and 15 percent chenin blanc—uses yeasts to bring out full fruit flavors.

Once the trunk of your car is fully stocked with souvenir bottles, be sure to point the wheel southeast. Austin is an easy 68-mile drive via Highway 183.

