

# Movies Come and Go, but the ‘Sideways’ Effect Seems to Last Forever



words: [JULIE TREMAINE](#)

illustration: DANIELLE GRINBERG

When you drive up California’s Highway 101, past Santa Barbara and then into the Santa Rita Hills, with the sunlight shining off the Pacific as you climb, it’s clear you’re somewhere special. On the other side of that craggy pass is the Santa Ynez Valley, a tiny pocket of California’s [Central Coast](#) that’s home to 120 wineries. It’s an enchanting place, where acres upon acres of grapes give way to lavender farms and fields of horses. It’s easy to forget you’re only two hours away from Los Angeles.

In the late 1990s, screenwriter Rex Pickett would make that drive and visit the area and sit at the bar at The Hitching Post II restaurant in Buellton, Calif., working on his latest novel, “Sideways.” (Pickett’s earlier attempt, a mystery novel called “La Purisima,” [reportedly](#) didn’t sell.)

At the time Pickett was drafting “Sideways” at The Hitching Post II, however, the Santa Ynez Valley wasn’t a popular wine destination. There were grapes, yes, and there were wines, especially [Pinot Noir](#). But even though there was a surge in wine production in the valley in the 1990s — when “Sideways” was published in 1999, Santa Ynez vineyards produced over 70,000 cases of wine — the area’s AVAs were mostly only loved by locals and L.A. day-trippers.

Then, in 2004, Pickett's novel "Sideways" became a movie. A movie that was nominated for 122 awards, taking home an Oscar for best adapted screenplay and a Golden Globe for best comedy. A movie that, more than anything, made us casual drinkers all feel a little inferior about our ability to understand the nuances of serious wine appreciation. ("They overdid it," Virginia Madsen's Maya says of a wine from Andrew Murray. "Too much alcohol.")

Maybe that's why [the "Sideways" effect](#), which is a real thing that has been [studied by universities](#) and winegrowers' associations since the year after the movie came out, created surging interest in Pinot Noir — and dinged Merlot consumption to this day.

The film continues to drive tourism, too. When travelers first started showing up in the valley, wanting to see the landmarks featured in the movie, locals assumed it would end quickly. Surely the crushing lines that formed at the wineries early in the morning, blocking out the employees who held the keys to open the tasting rooms for the day, would abate eventually.

They did, but only because the wineries expanded tasting rooms to accommodate all the people newly interested in Santa Ynez Valley wines. In less than a year after the movie's release, the Santa Ynez Valley tourism board distributed almost 40,000 maps for self-guided "Sideways" tours, [according](#) to The New York Times. Los Olivos alone added nearly 20 new tasting rooms, like Andrew Murray's E11ven Wines. Miles and Maya may have criticized Murray's wines, but the crowds still rolled in, curious to try anything mentioned in the movie.

The crowds came for the movie, but they stayed for the wine. The area is best known for its Pinot and [Chardonnay](#) production — those grapes grow best in the cooler western part of the valley — but the warmer eastern side, where Happy Canyon has only been a designated AVA for 10 years, is producing bigger reds, like Bordeaux-style blends that rival those from California's more famous Napa and Sonoma growing regions.

"Sideways" didn't just capture the essence of the area's wine, though. It captured the essence of the place itself, from the windmills in the quirky Danish town of Solvang, to the tiny main street of Los Olivos, which, without cars, looks like it's still part of the Old West.

Even 15 years later, you can see traces of the movie everywhere. [Travelers can book a stay at The Sideways Inn](#), which is how The Windmill Inn rebranded itself after the main characters, Miles and Jack, stayed there.

You can sit at the bar at The Hitching Post II, where the napkins say "forever Sideways." Need some reading materials? Pull down one of Rex Pickett's novels from the shelf to peruse as you eat a steak grilled over white oak in the Santa Maria style and have a glass of their Highliner Pinot Noir (there are also five other Hitching Post Pinots available by the glass).

Next door, in The Hitching Post's new tasting room, you can see movie stills and behind-the-scenes photos from filming, and bottles of wine made especially for the film, which are now signed by writer-director Alexander Payne and stars Paul Giamatti, Thomas Haden Church, Virginia Madsen, and Sandra Oh.

You can also sit in one particular booth at Solvang Restaurant and, under a framed movie still of Haden Church and Giamatti at that same table, talk to Lori, a manager who's been serving the restaurant's signature Danish cuisine for years, about how the actors encouraged her to audition for a speaking role.

You can even stand outside Los Olivos Wine Merchant and Cafe, kick the dirt, and yell to anyone listening that you're not drinking any f\*cking Merlot. You'd be doing yourself a disservice, though. There are some great ones coming out of the valley, especially from Happy Canyon, and from Kalyra Winery, where Oh's character Stephanie works and where she and Giamatti's Miles tear down the [Cabernet Franc](#) as "flabby."

The lasting interest in the movie is so strong that, today, the internet is rife with self-guided "Sideways" tours for people who want to create their own experiences. Local tourism offices still offer those "Sideways" maps, and tour companies offer excursions like the Sideways Wine Tour.

Earlier this month, Oct. 15 to 18, [the Santa Rita Hills Winegrowers Alliance hosted Sideways Fest](#), a three-day celebration of the 15th anniversary of the movie. The weekend included an outdoor screening of the movie with a panel discussion with "Sideways" alums, a bus tour of filming locations, and a wine festival featuring over 40 area wineries.

Today, there are more than a million cases of wine coming out of the valley every year. You don't need to go to Santa Ynez Valley to taste them, but, as 15 years' worth of "Sideways" fans can attest, it's certainly worth the trip.

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