

Where You Actually Are

A primer for northern Sonoma County — enough to hold a conversation

What follows is the context you would want if you ended up talking to a stranger in the supermarket line in Healdsburg or at the bar in Geyserville. Verified where verifiable, sourced at the end, and it argues with a few of the clichés.

Start with the people who were here first

The **Dry Creek Rancheria Band of Pomo Indians** call themselves **Mihilakawna** — "people of the west." Pomo people have been in this valley for **more than 10,000 years**. Federal recognition came in **1915**.

Their language is **Southern Pomo**, one of seven distinct Pomoan languages — not dialects, separate languages. **The last fluent speaker died in 2014**. The tribe now runs an active revitalization program: structured classes with audio, a pronunciation guide, and an iOS app. Southern Pomo has distinct words for individual oak species and verb suffixes that encode direction across the landscape — a language built for exactly this terrain.

The lake you are floating on is a wound, not a scenic feature. This is the thing visitors never know.

Warm Springs Dam flooded roughly **8,765 acres** of ancestral Dry Creek Valley, destroying **65 prehistoric and 45 historic Pomo sites** — house pits, hunting blinds, chert quarries, petroglyphs. It drowned the sedge and willow beds used for basketry, including the specific gathering grounds of **Elsie Allen** and **Mabel McKay**, two of the most important California Indian basketmakers of the twentieth century.

The Corps transplanted 39,000 plants downstream in 1979. The tribe received **ten acres** for sedge preservation. Set against the arithmetic that actually matters: **the tribe lost roughly 88,000 acres and received a 75-acre rancheria**. When advocates proposed naming the reservoir "**Lake Pomo**," officials declined.

Present tense, because they are not a historical footnote: the tribe's ~75 acres are held communally, with offices in Santa Rosa. Chairman **Chris Wright**. They run **River Rock Casino**, a tribally owned wine label called **Bellacana Vineyards**, and **DCR Fire** — their own fire service. In **August 2025** they broke ground with Caesars Entertainment on **Caesars Republic Sonoma County**, a 100-room hotel and casino replacing River Rock, opening **summer 2027**.

Where you are, in three nested frames

The county. Sonoma County is **1,768 square miles** holding about a dozen distinct growing regions, a coastline, redwoods, dairy country and the largest geothermal field on Earth. It is not a valley. That matters for the next paragraph.

The town. Healdsburg: population **11,340, 34.6% Latino**, founded by an Ohio businessman named **Harmon Heald** who bought part of Rancho Sotoyome in 1857; incorporated 1867. It sits at the junction of **three different AVAs** — Dry Creek Valley, Alexander Valley and Russian River Valley — which are three climates growing three different things. Confusing them reads exactly like confusing neighborhoods in someone's hometown.

Geyserville is smaller and more Latino than Healdsburg: population **861, 39.7% Latino**, unincorporated, 302 households.

The water. Lake Sonoma plus Lake Mendocino supply drinking water to **over 600,000 people** across Sonoma and northern Marin. Sonoma Water does not pump from the lake — it runs six collector wells in the Russian River aquifer at Wohler Bridge and Mirabel. **Lake Sonoma is the deep savings account; Lake Mendocino is the checking account**, and it is the one everyone watches, because it depends on water diverted from the Eel River through the Potter Valley Project, which PG&E is decommissioning.

What is actually happening right now

Harvest started in late July — one of the earliest ever — and the crop is tiny. Alexander Valley growers are reporting reds and Sauvignon Blanc at **50–60% of historical averages** after cool, wet weather during bloom. If you say one thing to a stranger this week, that is the thing. It is a weather story, an economic story and a mood all at once.

The sophisticated part: **the small crop is being welcomed, not mourned.** Sonoma County Winegrowers framed it as helping burn off an oversupply. Knowing that is the tell that you have been paying attention.

The challenge, with numbers instead of vibes

The Bohemian's cover story on newsstands right now is *"Bottle Shock: Sonoma County's Wine Industry Enters Fifth Year of Decline."* The data behind the headline:

	2018 peak	2025
Tons crushed	275,977	185,500 (–33%)
Harvest value	\$777M	~\$523M
Vineyard acres pulled	—	~2,700 removed Oct 2024–Aug 2025
Grapes left unsold	—	~30% in 2025
Tasting room traffic	—	down 8% in 2025

Silicon Valley Bank puts total California wine revenue down **\$19.7 billion** across 2020–2025. **Kenwood Vineyards** closed after 56 years in March 2026, all 14 staff gone. Jackson Family closed its Carneros Hills winery. Constellation is shutting the former Ravenswood. The county's two wine trade groups are **merging into one in January 2027** after layoffs.

How to talk about it without being a jerk: do not ask "isn't the wine business struggling?" of someone who works in it. Locals discuss it structurally — the 2010s planting boom, younger people drinking less, export chaos, and a \$30 bottle of Dry Creek Zin competing with \$12 from somewhere with cheaper land.

Fire, and how to not put your foot in it

Kincade (October 2019) is the north-county fire: **77,758 acres**, 374 structures, and at its peak an evacuation covering roughly **190,000 people** — the largest in county history. Cal Fire determined a failed **230,000-volt PG&E transmission line** at The Geysers started it, during an extreme wind event, *while the utility was preparing to shut the power off*. PG&E was fined \$125 million and settled with five county governments for \$31 million.

Did the lake burn? No — but it was bracketed. Kincade burned to the east, through Alexander Valley and toward Windsor. **Walbridge** (August 2020) burned to the west, and evacuation orders ran along **Stewarts Point–Skaggs Springs Road to the lake's eastern edge** — the road you drove in on. The valley floor was spared.

"Did you lose your house?" is not small talk. Let people raise it. If they do, "what are you paying for insurance" is the acceptable follow-up — the insurance crisis is the live grievance, not the fires themselves.

Three clichés, checked against data

"Sonoma is the unpretentious one." This was true and is now itself a marketing line locals are tired of. Healdsburg has a three-Michelin-star restaurant, \$3.50-an-hour parking and a \$7.8 million penthouse. Nobody living there thinks of it as the humble alternative. Saying it to a Healdsburg resident is a tourist tell.

"Locals resent the tourists." Not what the data says. A January 2026 survey of 898 residents found **85% agreed tourism provides economic value** and **60% said visitors are generally respectful**. There is no anti-tourism majority. What people object to is specific: **hotels that add traffic without adding housing**, and workers who cannot afford to live in the town they serve. Roughly half want traffic and infrastructure improvements *required* of new hotel projects.

"It's all wine here." Wine is about \$8B of a roughly \$30B county economy and shrinking. Plenty of people work in health care, education, county government and construction. "So do you work in wine?" lands about as well as you would expect.

Culture, and it is better than you would guess

Little Saint in Healdsburg — capacity about **270**, a stage "no bigger than a large area rug" — has hosted **Beck, Rufus Wainwright, boygenius, Jenny Lewis, Lucius and Dawes**. St. Vincent played there in **March 2026**. Sonoma Magazine has argued it may be the best small music venue in the country, and the argument is not silly.

Healdsburg Jazz, founded 1999, ran its 28th festival in June 2026. The SF Chronicle called it one of the best small jazz festivals in the world; DownBeat said "All Killer, No Filler." **Chico Pinheiro Trio plays August 23**; Ravi Coltrane, September 20.

Tuesdays in the Plaza is free every Tuesday, May through August, and the 2026 lineup is a better demographic map of the town than any census table: a banda act, two Spanish-language acts, an Indian-American blues harmonica player, a Grateful Dead tribute and a Neil Diamond tribute, all on the same public square.

On screen

Wes Craven shot *Scream* (1996) in Healdsburg — the Plaza, City Hall, the Center Street buildings and the old police station, now the Oakville Grocery building. You will walk through it. *So I Married an Axe Murderer* used Cloverdale Airport. Down the road, **Petaluma is *American Graffiti*** and still looks it; Eastwood filmed *True Crime* at the 1859 Washoe House; Hitchcock shot *Shadow of a Doubt* in Santa Rosa and *The Birds* at Bodega.

Things that will actually land in a bar

- **Lemon pepper was invented in Healdsburg** — the first commercial lemon pepper seasoning, 1967. This is the best fact in this document.
- **Healdsburg runs its own electric utility**, one of a handful of California cities that does. In practice PG&E's public safety shutoffs do not hit the city the way they hit the county around it.
- **The Geysers is the largest geothermal field in the world** — 13 plants, 725 megawatts, about 45 square miles, powering roughly 725,000 homes. Santa Rosa's treated wastewater is pumped uphill and injected back into the ground to keep the steam going. The city's sewage becomes electricity.
- **Santa Rosa is the unofficial Snoopy capital of the world.** Charles Schulz lived and worked there; the county airport is named for him and has Snoopy on the signage.
- **John and Zeke's, 420 Healdsburg Ave** — described by Sonoma Magazine as where the locals go to escape the tourists. That is the dive bar.

One posture note. Tom Waits is widely believed to live in western Sonoma County. Locals know and do not discuss it, which is the correct posture. Do not ask where.

Sources

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- [Resident tourism sentiment survey](#)
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