



# Swirl-in-Place: How Wine Country is Bringing the Tasting Room to Your House

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When the coronavirus and shelter-in-place first hit, Wine Country was faced with a huge challenge: What does Wine Country look like if you can't visit the tasting room?

Wineries' ability to adapt and change was made easier on March 19, when the California Alcoholic Beverage Control temporarily relaxed regulations to allow for, among other things, to-go wine sales at restaurants with takeout orders and alcoholic delivery to customers.

Suddenly, virtual wine tastings and events started to appear, especially among wineries that ordinarily rely on foot traffic to drive direct-to-consumer sales and promote memberships. With most people at home on Zoom for everything from concerts to board meetings, virtual tastings allow wineries to ship bottles and provide a tasting room experience direct to one's living room.

In the past two months, more and more wineries have turned to these livestreamed experiences to retain the customers they currently have as well as expand their reach. Virtual tastings and events have filled the void in what one winery executive calls an "absolutely essential part of the wine industry," and even after wineries reopen, it looks like they might be here to stay.

## Trying to Stand Out



The Yayoi Kusama pumpkin is part of Donum Estate's sculpture collection of about 40 pieces.

The **Donum Estate** in Carneros, famous for its sculpture garden, is just starting out in the virtual tasting space. Participants must buy a full lineup of bottles in order to join the tasting with winemaker Dan Fishman. The kits (\$325–\$600) all feature a virtual tour through the sculpture garden.

Though the price tag may seem daunting to some, Donum's vice president of sales and hospitality Michael McNeil says it actually makes Donum more accessible. “It’s about being realistic,” says McNeil. “It’s not realistic to say ‘For \$1,000, you can come taste with us.’” On a regular basis, tastings at Donum start at \$95 per person, and the winery didn’t ever anticipate having a digital experience. But, according to McNeil, he anticipates it will be a reward; the winery has seen very little attrition.

“Being in the wine industry for 21 years, direct-to-consumer is an absolutely essential part of the wine industry,” says McNeil. “It’s the most profitable. [Coronavirus] will have an impact from the direct-to-consumer perspective. Even though you’re doing this virtually, you’re not collecting tasting fees and still spending on labor. So, how do we create a foundation to say ‘thank you’ and have accessible experiences to keep building loyalty?”