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California may be the anti-Washington, but I think I found some common ground

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Every time I go to California, I wonder why we don't all live there. The weather is nice. The landscape is beautiful. The people are laid-back.

Then I remember I'm none of those things. I'm mean, ugly and tense.

Still, California is a great place to visit. We possibly crammed a little too much into our recent vacation — Sonoma and Napa valleys, Yosemite, Hearst Castle *and* San Francisco — but since the state is in perpetual danger of calving from the mainland and falling into the sea, it's a good idea to go now, before it's too late.

My Lovely Wife and I are not big Wine People. We drink a lot of the stuff, but we do not know much about it. I suppose it's like prescription medicine that way: I don't know what goes into my cholesterol pill, but I swallow one every night, believing it will do some good.

This trip was an attempt to rectify our oeno-ignorance. We would visit some wineries and learn about wine. Unfortunately, the first thing we learned is that we don't care for the wine that is going gangbusters right now in Sonoma: pinot noir.

We ambled into our first tasting room — in Sebastopol — and the guy asked us what kind of wine we liked.

“Wet,” I said.

“Tannic, dry, like Barolo and Brunello,” said My Lovely Wife, who has always been better than me at delineating her desires.

“Ah, we don't make anything like that,” the wine ambassador said good-naturedly. Still, he served us a half-dozen mouthfuls of different Pinots and we bought a bottle of the least distasteful to fob off at the next dinner party.

I found those tasting rooms fascinating. We spent a couple of nights in Healdsburg, a funky town where every other storefront is a well-appointed room just for drinking little samples of wine and

deciding whether to join a wine club. These rooms were a cross between a bar and a therapist's office — if a therapist's office had silver buckets to spit into.

Each tasting room — Cartograph, Selby, Seghesio — had a different vibe, just as each wine had a different flavor. That is because of the microclimates that produce a wine's distinctive characteristics. In California, everyone is a terroirist.

It made me wonder what the Washington equivalent of a winery tasting room would be. We don't have rolling hills covered in grape vines. But we do have city streets full of another type of mood-altering operation: the think tank. The greatest political minds in the country are eager for you to drink their brand.

I envisioned a scenario where vacationers might stop by, say, the Cato Institute on Massachusetts Avenue NW to tickle the palates of their brains.

"Try this idea," the guy would say. "It's redolent of free markets and individual liberty, with hints of raspberries and leather."

"Mmmm, libertarian," tourists might respond. "And I bet it would pair well with legalized drugs."

Or head over to a think tank on the other side of the Capitol.

"What sort of ideas do you like?" the political concierge would ask as you took your place at the bar.

"Oh, you know, single-payer health system, gun control, reproductive choice and strong consumer protections."

"Ah, this is the Heritage Foundation. We don't make anything like that. But try our trickle-down economics."

Halfway through our vacation we headed to Yosemite, a half-dozen wine bottles clinking in the back of the rental car. I had been obsessing about the national park, not because of its history or its grandeur, but because of its weather.

Winter can be tenacious in the High Sierra. There are parts of the park that don't even open until July, so deep is the snow. We were not going to any of those places, but even the warmer valley is subject to what are called "chain restrictions." Several times a day I would call the recorded telephone line that announced whether tire chains were necessary.

Usually they weren't, but you still had to have a set, just to show the park rangers you were prepared. We tracked down the last chains in Napa. I hoped merely having them in the car would serve as a talisman, like a St. Christopher medal.

That didn't work. We woke up the morning after we had arrived at our lodge to news that chains were required. When we reached the parking lot just inside the park entrance we were greeted by a tableau of confusion.

We had all bought chains, but none of us knew how to put them on. Tourists from China, Germany, Mexico and, um, Maryland knelt by their vehicles while their families shouted helpful advice at them.

We finally got our chains on. The drive through the snowy switchbacks into the valley was terrifying. At the end of the day, I really needed a drink. Fortunately, I had something for that.