

**NAPA:**  
FOUR TOWNS,

# ONE UNIQUE VALLEY.

A peaceful spot  
for winetasting  
at Joseph Phelps  
Vineyards in St.  
Helena.

## THE BEST PLACES TO STAY, EAT, VISIT AND TASTE FINE FERMENTED GRAPE JUICE IN NAPA.

BY **Chris Colin** 🍷 PHOTOS BY **Robin Jolin**

**N**apa Valley is pretentious. Also: expensive, ostentatious and crowded.

OK, got that stuff out of the way. If you're going to visit California's 30-mile wine mecca—and there's never been a better time—it's best to get those hang-ups out of the way right off the bat. Because, of the many surprises awaiting you here, one of the most gratifying is discovering just how wrong you were.

Indeed, there are a thousand memorable things to do in the valley, and the secret is doing as few as possible. Avoid the impulse to hit every tasting, every perfect vista. Don't even aim for everything on this list. At its heart, Napa is a place devoted to the senses, and awakening yours requires a spinning-down of the engines, decelerating enough to notice the sights and sounds and tastes we otherwise move too fast to detect and savor. Find one memorable conversation, one exquisite bite, one terrific glass in a lovely place, and you've conquered Napa Valley. Wine might be complex, but enjoying it should be simple. Steer clear of crowded tasting rooms. Make appointments in advance. Eat outside. Drink outside.

And understand where you are. Napa is defined by two modest mountain ranges, the Mayacamas and Vaca, running parallel to each other an hour north of San Francisco. The narrow ribbon of earth in between is where it all happens: a few incorporated towns, about 400 wineries, a surreally dense cluster of superstar restaurants and some of the state's prettiest nooks for reflecting on absolutely nothing.

A note on timing: The recession spawned a great many deals throughout the region, and they're still out there. Throw in the uncertainty of threatening climate change—even a slight temperature shift can upend a fragile microclimate—and there's a strong argument for hitting the wine trail soon. What's more, Napa is an idea as much as a destination.

You've no doubt heard wine compared to poetry, and in one sense that's accurate: Few of us think we're capable of understanding it, and too often we leave it to the experts to enjoy. Ridiculous! Wine is a bunch of grapes that took a left turn on their way into a pretty bottle. If it tastes good and the conversation is lively and you find yourself in a reverie over, say, an early Talking Heads album—you should go buy another bottle. Bring it home and remember that time you sat on that pretty terrace in that pretty valley.

# {1} NAPA

Heading north from the Bay Area, you'll hit the city of Napa first—it's the only urban-ish zone, really, for the rest of your trip. Long neglected, not to mention sleepy, Napa has enjoyed a renaissance in recent years: a revitalized waterfront jammed with good restaurants, the restoration of the old Uptown Theatre and the general emergence of an alternative to the dressier scene farther north. Stick around for a while.



## TASTE

**CEJA VINEYARDS:** The valley doesn't have a lot of mom-and-pop wineries—with an acre of earth going for as much as \$300,000, the moms and pops tend to step aside for larger corporations. But there are fond exceptions, such as the Ceja family. Once vineyard workers, this Mexican-American immigrant family slowly climbed the grapevine until they owned their own winery—quite a good one, in fact. Pop into the tasting room in downtown Napa, a lively and informal spot that has given rise to Salsa Saturdays, a hot—and free—weekly dance party the winery cohosts at nearby Bistro Sabor.

**DARIOUSH:** The thrill of a Napa tour is, in part, the delightfully absurd mix of architectural feats. Just 10 miles from the sedate Hess Collection is Darioush, a 22,000-square-foot Persian temple of a winery. Whereas the original Persepolis was founded by King Darius I of Persia, this one was the doing of Darioush Khaledi, the Iranian-American king of a California grocery chain. Tastings happen within the spacious and modern interior; with special arrangements, you can enjoy a more elaborate one in the cellar, surrounded by cool casks.

**HESS COLLECTION:** That hazy connection between wine and art becomes crystal clear at the impressive Hess Collection, the winery and contemporary art museum of Swiss millionaire, art mogul and entrepreneur Donald Hess. Tucked in the hills west of Napa, it pairs wine's contemplative properties with a terrific supply of Motherwells, Stellas, Bacons and more. The permanent addition of a 10-foot-tall piece by sculptor Andy Goldsworthy is just the latest reason to enjoy a mountain cabernet and stroll through the free gallery.



Darioush

## EAT

**UBUNTU:** An all-vegetarian restaurant combined with a yoga studio? Ubuntu sounded like a bad *SNL* skit, until people tried it. Instantly the airy, modern experiment in downtown Napa was a sensation. Sure, the green credentials are appealing—much is organic, much comes from Ubuntu's own local garden. But the uncannily inventive and delicious food is the thing. The most strident meat-lovers marvel at the steam bun with burrata, the grits with goat's-milk whey and carrot juice. And, no, totally veggie doesn't mean leaving totally hungry. You leave trying to figure out when you can return.

## STAY

**THE RIVER TERRACE INN:** The River Terrace Inn (*below*) is both reasonably priced and thoroughly comfy—just the right level of plush anonymity after a long day of sipping. Make it a home base for your entire trip—or just for the southern half.



Top: A view of the Napa landscape—and hot air balloon—from Highway 29; Above: A tour of Yountville on two wheels.

# {2} YOUNTVILLE

Yountville isn't a town so much as a depot for some of the best restaurants in the country. There are more Michelin stars per capita in this 1.6-square-mile town than anywhere else in the world. (Ask a stranger to fry you an egg and it'll probably be incredible.) Other fine institutions have taken root, too, but make no mistake: You're here to tuck in.

## EAT

**EAT:** No sense trying to pick the best of the best—truth is, you'll be in great hands whether it's Bottega, Ad Hoc, Bouchon or the French Laundry, the "most exciting restaurant in the United States," as *The New York Times* has called it. At each, the meals you get happen simply on another plane, beyond the baseline of merely well-sourced ingredients or creative menus. These places aren't cheap. (For a less expensive but perfectly terrific meal, try nearby Mustards Grill, a beloved old institution.) But for sheer bank-breaking epicurean indulgence, you'd be hard-pressed to find a better zip code.

## RIDE

**NAPA VALLEY BIKE TOURS:** Hands down, the best way to experience the valley is on two wheels. Napa Valley Bike Tours has been offering guided bicycle tours and bike rentals for years, and it will outfit you with custom routes, high-quality gear and even box lunches delivered to wineries. Traffic moves fast on Napa's two main arteries, but you'll have good company, and there are gobs of peaceful side roads begging for exploration. Your experience in the valley will be far more intimate than in a car. (Not so much into the pedaling thing? Spiffy electric bikes are available, too.)

## STAY

**BARDESSONO:** Within walking distance of many of Yountville's finest eateries is the valley's greenest lodging. Bardessono is one of only three hotels worldwide to hold the prestigious LEED Platinum Certification, the highest standard of environmental design. And yet the efforts work in favor of comfort, not against it. Neat tech abounds, plus each room has been especially designed for receiving spa treatments right there—no venturing forth necessary. For that uncle back home who still equates sustainable with shabby, go prove him wrong, one massage at a time.

From left: Wine-tasting at the Hess Collection winery; Ubuntu executive chef Aaron Londo, left, and Steve Thornton in the Ubuntu garden in Napa; Pouring a glass at the Hess Collection; top, Wine barrels at Hess.



PHOTOS: (UBUNTU) ELIJAH WOOLERY; (DARIOUSH) DARIOUSH WINERY





Clockwise from left: Dining on the patio at Tra Vigne restaurant; A dish of tagliatelle, olive oil-poached tuna, tuna tartare, bottarga, chiles and Meyer lemon at Tra Vigne; Joseph Phelps Vineyards; Winetasting at Joseph Phelps.



## { 3 } OAKVILLE

Once this was plums. The observation is unavoidable as you make your way up the valley, into the thick of the region's wine-producing region—the boutique town of St. Helena and the unincorporated areas of Oakville and Rutherford. There are too many remarkable wineries to name here, but four stand out as uniformly wonderful—and for entirely different reasons.

### TASTE

**JOSEPH PHELPS VINEYARDS:** Too often the giants of the valley attract giant crowds, and while they might well pour some giant reds, they somehow lose sight of what a winery visit should deliver best: a nice place to taste wine. Joseph Phelps Vineyards could rest on the countless laurels it's earned since coming on the scene in the 1970s. Self-paced and informal—oh, and overlooking a private valley—the tastings lend themselves to reflection rather than hurry.

**CASA NUESTRA:** Having seen big and seamless, don't miss little and quirky. Casa Nuestra proudly waves the flag of Napa's hipie roots, as you'll notice the minute you pull up to this funky shack of a winery; in lieu of architectural fireworks, you can pet the two goats out front. The antithesis of fussy and grand, the family-owned operation fosters a

mellow vibe, but takes its winemaking seriously and offers some interesting varietals.

**HONIG:** At Honig, Kristin Belair has been creating extraordinary sauvignon blancs smack in the middle of red country, at remarkably low prices. Crunch your way down the gravel road that leads to this secluded operation, flanked by acres of grapevines. Weather permitting, enjoy the highly rated wines on the shaded terrace as the friendly, laid-back staff fills your glass as needed.

**FROG'S LEAP:** Environmentalism isn't just a badge in Napa, and this winery is one of its pioneers. Founded on the site of a 19th-century frog farm, Frog's Leap doesn't just tread lightly on its 200 acres—it utilizes bees, chickens, ladybugs and other beasts to help sustain a balanced and healthy line of grapes.

### EAT

**EAT:** If you're staying at Auberge de Soleil, eat at the Michelin-starred restaurant, for Pete's sake—leaving the incredible premises should be avoided when possible. Otherwise, try Tra Vigne (*below*), Michael Chiarello's Tuscany-evoking old favorite and a longtime Napa classic. Or keep it simple: Head to the Oakville Grocery, a popular general store-type place where cyclists nibble better-than-average sandwiches out front and gourmet picnic supplies can be found within. Stock up and go find somewhere green and shady.



### STAY

**AUBERGE DU SOLEIL:** For those who want to splurge—like, “I invented Google” splurge—Auberge du Soleil delivers a rare and singular certainty: There is no place nicer. Whatever you're imagining in the way of tasteful, secluded, infinity-pool-overlooking-the-valley luxury, just double it. Perched on an out-of-the-way hillside dense with manzanita and olive, this Mediterranean-style resort anticipates your every need. Need plain air art supplies brought to your room? Pick up the phone. Need to borrow a Mercedes convertible for a few hours? Just sign here please.

**EL BONITA MOTEL:** You don't have to break the bank to make camp in Napa's more upmarket spots. There to prove the point is El Bonita Motel, a classic '50s art deco number. In the winter months, the perfectly respectable poolside rooms start as low as \$79.99—not bad for a town where you could spend a month's rent on a single night's sleep.

### LEARN

**CULINARY INSTITUTE OF AMERICA:** One of life's mysteries is why our species enjoys watching other people cook. Ponder the riddle in one of the country's foremost academies of deliciousness, the valley's branch of the Culinary Institute of America. No need to enroll: Every weekend at 1:30 p.m., visitors can pile into the 15,000-square-foot teaching area—the views are remarkable—and take in a cooking demo (\$20 includes a taste of its own Greystone Cellars wine). If the point of your Napa trip is to sharpen your senses, nowhere can you do it better.

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# Wines OF NAPA VALLEY



You'd have to spend weeks traveling through Europe—umbrella in hand—to take in the quality and diversity of the wine and food found in the 35-mile-long slice of heaven called Napa. *By Andrea Robinson*

### Ideal Terroir

Napa Valley owes much to France for the rapid emergence of its world wine reputation. Although Napa's wine culture took root pre-Prohibition, it took off in the 1960s, when Robert Mondavi spawned a quality movement based on classic French grapes, artisanal farming and winemaking techniques. It quickly caught fire with other pioneering vintners whose names endure on some of Napa's greatest labels—Trefethen, Chappellet, Shafer and Grgich, to name a few. They saw what he saw in Napa: glorious dirt, which, as any Frenchman will tell you, is the key to great wine, but also to distinctive wine. A diversity of climate conditions matter, too—sunlight patterns and cooling influences such as altitude and nearness to the ocean. This is where Napa simply crushes it (pardon the pun) versus the rest of the world's wine regions: Napa's long, sunny growing season, tempered by a thermal cornucopia of heat and light created by Pacific Ocean breezes and fog, means that nearly every classic grape in the world thrives here.

### Napa's “Big Six” Grapes:

#### RIESLING

Trefethen's dry riesling from the Oak Knoll District AVA has been a Napa Valley benchmark wine for decades. Its neon citrus flavors and laser acidity will cut right through a simple, winetasting-party-worthy pairing of chips and salsa or smoked salmon.

**STEAL:** Beringer dry Napa Valley riesling  
**SPLURGE:** Stony Hill white riesling



#### CHARDONNAY

Another of the Big Six white grapes is the full-bodied chardonnay, a Napa Valley signature. The style is as diverse as the AVAs of Napa, ranging from mineral-spiked and cinnamon-sprinkled yellow apples in Carneros to caramelized, buttery golden pineapple in the warmer zones. It makes an awesome pairing with buttered popcorn. **STEAL:** Beringer chardonnay Napa Valley  
**MODERATE:** Chappellet Napa Valley chardonnay  
**SPLURGE:** Ramey Hyde Vineyard, Carneros



#### CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Cabernet is the grape behind Napa's most famous wines, and it thrives all over the valley, with the greatest concentration of famous wines mid-valley in the Stags Leap District, Oakville and Rutherford AVAs. These tend to be luscious, velvety and concentrated, with dark berry, tobacco, cedar and mint notes. Many tasters are also partial to the cabs grown in Napa's mountain AVAs of Mt. Veeder, Spring Mountain, Howell Mountain and Diamond Mountain.

**CABS TO TRY:** Mt. Veeder, Robert Mondavi “Oakville,” BV Rutherford and Ladera Howell Mountain cabernet sauvignons

#### PINOT NOIR

With reds, the lightest of the classic red grapes is pinot noir, which you may have already tasted as a bubbly. As a red wine, it seduces wine lovers with a lingerie-for-your-tongue texture and tangy cranberry, sweet cherry, black tea and spice notes. Pair it with a mild cheese such as Manchego or Gouda to let the wine's subtleties shine.

**STEAL:** Castle Rock Carneros pinot noir  
**MODERATE:** Saintsbury Carneros pinot noir  
**SPLURGE:** Etude Car-



#### SAUVIGNON BLANC

After the light-bodied riesling, sauvignon blanc is a medium-bodied grape that I consider Napa's “banker” white because it grows well all over the valley and offers amazing quality for the price. The neon flavors range from lemongrass to passion fruit to sweet fig, sometimes kissed with an oaky creaminess and a grassy “perfumé.” **STEAL:** Robert Mondavi fumé blanc  
**MODERATE:** Cliff Lede sauvignon blanc  
**SPLURGE:** Grgich Hills Cellar fumé blanc

#### SYRAH

The final red grape of the Big Six, syrah is native to France's Rhone Valley and under the name shiraz is Australia's signature red. Napa's syrah specialists know how to tease out this grape's gamey, black pepper and sweet spice notes and luxurious raspberry fruit.  
**MY FAVORITES:** La Diligence by Miner Family, Lewis Cellars, Spencer Roloson and La Herradura Vineyard



Now that you've gotten a taste of the amazing quality and diversity of Napa Valley wines, plan a visit! November 17-20, 2011, will be the first-ever Flavor! Napa Valley food and wine festival, featuring seminars by yours truly and other Napa wine pros and vintners, as well as demos and dinners by our rock star chefs, including luminaries such as Thomas Keller and Michael Chiarello and Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto.



Clockwise from left: JoLé restaurant; A cocktail at Solage; Local arts and crafts at the Calistoga Depot Railroad Station; Going for a bike ride at Solage.

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## { 4 } CALISTOGA

The sight of a muddy kid in a T-ball uniform can be just the thing after your 15th marble fountain. Refreshingly normal (or at least normal for a place where humans come to sit in hot volcanic mud), Calistoga is a reminder that regular people live in these parts and can be seen strolling on the main drag of Lincoln Avenue. Take a stroll there yourself—bookstore, bike shop, bakery, etc.—before taking the mud plunge.



In keeping with Calistoga's anticyclic vibe, the **Wine Garage**—yes, it occupies a former filling station—has a cap on its wares: No wine over \$25. The selection is good and the buyers' notes reliable. By rights, the store's motto should extend over the entire valley: "Have fun... it's only fermented grape juice."

### TASTE

● **CASTELLO DI AMOROSA:** There should be a word for choosing to visit an elaborate—and elaborately out-of-place—medieval replica castle even though you know it'll be cheesy. Castello di Amorosa is perhaps the closest thing the valley has to Disneyland: a huge, touristy beacon that, incidentally, is sort of fun in spite of the lurking silliness of it. Moat. Drawbridge. Torture chamber. Imported brick. More than 100 rooms. You'd be remiss if you didn't see the corniness. You'd also be remiss if you didn't admit you were curious.

### EAT

● **JOLÉ:** Calistoga may be the valley's relaxed corner, but that doesn't mean they can't cook here. From lamb-neck *poutine* to chicken-fried quail, the menu at JoLé has given the town a new level of foodie cred. A husband-and-wife team is behind the restaurant, and the love that goes into the small dishes is clear.



### STAY

● **SOLAGE CALISTOGA:** What Auberge du Soleil is to the pampered couple, Solage Calistoga is to the couple with kids in Pampers. Kids aren't mandatory at this luxurious resort, but if you have 'em, you'll be extra grateful for the attentiveness on display here. Pedal your free bike down to one of the pools, take a free yoga class and mosey over to the serene outdoor patio for a meal worthy of its Michelin star. Even the kids' menu is inspired.

● **INDIAN SPRINGS RESORT AND SPA:** Some claim the volcanic ash and geothermally heated water rejuvenate the pores; others find relief from aches and pains. At a minimum, it's fun and weird to float in hot goop with cucumbers on your eyes. With its manicured lawn and assortment of tidy white cottages, the gorgeous Indian Springs Resort and Spa resembles a colonial hill town under the British raj—and it claims the title of the oldest continually operating spa in California. If you're coming to a town famous for its mud, you might as well get a vintage batch. //