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travel



The Carneros Inn's idyllic 25-yard pool hovers above the vineyards of the Napa Valley.

## Napa Nirvana

ART GREY

While some Northern California destinations may be trendier, when it comes to truly serene escapes to stimulate the senses, nothing beats Napa Valley **BY NATHAN COOPER**

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**F**or most travelers, Napa Valley is universal shorthand for everything to do with wine, and a vacation there brings to mind days filled with back-to-back tastings, vineyard strolls and a steady diet of cheese and crackers. And yes, most times of the year, gigantic tour coaches

packed with eager oenophiles lurch up and down Route 29. There's no denying that wine is the main event for Napa Valley visitors, as it should be. But stellar vintages are but one major attraction to this pastoral sliver of California, which offers such superb amenities across the board—sublime hotels, tip-top spas and exquisite restaurants at the high and low bands of the spectrum among them—to outclass many of the world's most famous resort areas. Beaches aside, the fabled Hamptons of New York's Long Island, for example, really have nothing on this enchanting valley.

Perhaps the most captivating recent addition to the scene hovers on a hill in Carneros, set

between the Napa and Sonoma valleys, just outside of Napa town proper. A low-slung cluster of cottages, **The Carneros Inn** opened in 2004 after a crusade by the property's founder, Keith Rogal, to transform a highly prized and fiercely protected stretch of land (previously home to a trailer park) into a serene resort. The sweeping views afforded by the spot's elevated position had drawn the interest of many more established resort and hotel firms, but none was

The Carneros Inn



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up to the stiff challenge of navigating the county's iron-clad land development regulations, chief among them that any new construction would be limited to the trailer park's original footprints. Rogal's creative solution was to make 86 individual cottages, each with its own private garden and outdoor shower. And while the prevalent use of barn-grade corrugated steel on the exteriors may seem more practical than posh, the sleekly appointed rooms achieve a rare balance of soothing modern design and luxurious comfort.

A short stroll up the hill to the Inn's main buildings reveals a glorious pool—long enough for laps—that seems to extend right into the horizon. Nestled around the pool area are the resort's restaurant, living room, and small but superbly crafted spa. Under the close and careful guidance of director Jeannie Jarrot, the

spa employs many local ingredients such as soothing goat's milk in its unique menu, evading the all-too-familiar assembly line effect of more corporate (and less imaginative) spas. But Jarnot wisely dots her spa's offerings with unexpected, and not necessarily locally derived, treatments, such as a royal Thai herbal massage, which involves the vigorous application of something called a poltice—essentially a big pom pom of fresh Southeast Asian herbs bound together and steamed until piping hot.

This fall brings the second stage of Carneros' extended opening, with the addition of more cottages, partial-ownership houses, greatly expanded fitness facilities and a small collection of shops and markets, making the Inn more like a self-contained village. If there weren't so many other alluring spots to visit throughout the area, a weekend at Carneros without leaving the property would be well spent.

If Carneros Inn stands for relaxed modernity, the **Meadowood Resort**, at the Northern end of Napa Valley, represents sumptuous—and unflinching—traditionalism. Tucked away in a densely wooded valley a short drive east from St. Helena, Meadowood is something like a five-star summer camp for adults. Founded as a private club in 1964, the resort was a home-away-from-home for patrician wine-growing San Franciscans, and a decidedly upper-crust air still permeates the grounds. Each room's leather-bound guide to the property contains a lengthy list of rules for guests to observe during their stay, ranging from how loudly to speak by the lap pool to the proper shade of croquet attire. Far from draconian or scolding, these guidelines read more like the reminders of a chic, waspy aunt who simply wants to keep things civilized. Playing along is clearly part of the charm.

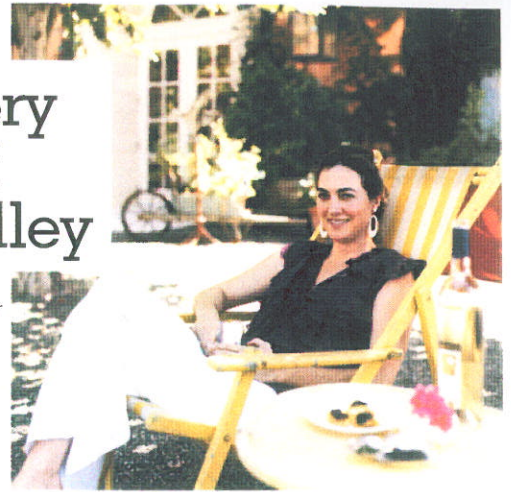
And the rich green vision of the resort's impeccable croquet court is enough to charm even the most rebellious player into crisp whites. Wearing the proper shoes on the lush tennis courts (no dark soles, thank you very much) is also part of the fun. So grand is the golf course, drifting up from the club house into the forest, players can't help but feel like champions before taking their first swing.

The vigors of a typical day spent at Meadowood make the easy comfort of its rooms that much more satisfying. Spread throughout small bunches of cottages, the chambers, all with calming views of the grounds and some with their

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## The Very Best of the Valley

Swanson  
Vineyards director  
of marketing  
and tastemaker  
extraordinaire  
**Alexis Swanson**  
shares what  
not to miss:



■ The espresso bean shake at **Taylor's Refresher**.  
933 Main St., St. Helena, 707-963-3486.

■ Tomato soup at **Bistro Jeanty**. 6510 Washington St., Yountville, 707-944-0103.



■ "Coffee and Donuts" at **French Laundry**.  
6640 Washington St., Yountville, 707-944-2380.



■ **Napa Valley Olive Oil Factory**. 835 Charter Oak St., Helena, 707-963-4173.



■ Outdoor shower at the **Carneros Inn**. 4048 Sonoma Hwy., Napa, 707-299-4900.

■ Tennis at **Meadowood**.  
900 Meadowood Ln., St. Helena, 707-963-3646.

■ Lettuce cups at **Redd**.  
6480 Washington St., Yountville, 707-944-2222.

■ **Dean & DeLuca's** cheese department. 607 S. St. Helena Hwy., St. Helena, 707-967-9980.

■ Flapjacks at **Butter Cream Bakery & Café**. 2297 Jefferson St., Napa, 707-255-6700.

■ Cocktails on the patio at **Auberge du Soleil**.  
180 Rutherford Hill Rd., Rutherford, 707-963-1211.

■ Ribs at **Rutherford Grill**.  
1180 Rutherford Rd., Rutherford, 707-963-1792.



■ Macarons at **Bouchon Bakery**. 6540 Washington St., Yountville, 707-944-2253.

own porches or terraces, dispense with high-minded concerns of cutting edge design in favor of unabashed coziness, albeit chic and restrained in a 1960s New England mode. Beds sprawl, sofas squish, and you don't need a degree in engineering to work the TV.

No matter where one stays on a Napa visit, the big question hanging in the air most of the time seems to be, "Are you going to the **French Laundry**?" Thomas Keller's culinary temple has influenced kitchens and dining rooms around the world, but its impact in and around its Yountville seat is absolutely palpable. From tasting rooms to hotel lobbies, chatter buzzes about who's going, when, what they'll love the most, and, most crucially, how they got their reservation. The good news, for everyone who can in fact secure one of the restaurant's 16 tables, is that the myth of the French Laundry is very much a reality. The truly exceptional food, the uniquely professional but unfussy service, the magically urbane country setting—the restaurant delivers on every count.

Despite the French Laundry's long shadow, it's far from the only culinary show in town. One noteworthy newcomer to the scene, also in Yountville,

is **Redd**, perhaps the most modern restaurant in the area. Chef and owner Richard Reddington, while hardly a radical in the Ferran Adrià school of garlic ice cream and frozen powdered Parmesan, is unconcerned with cooking conventions and prefers to offer an inspired mix of what he calls, "Napa Valley food." This can mean anything from hamachi sashimi to monkfish "saltimbocca," and as far-reaching as the menu's references may be, each item is so well-prepared that it all hangs together beautifully.

It would be a shame to glide between restaurants and resorts throughout Napa without enjoying the fruits of what makes this CONTINUED ON PAGE 158 agricultural mecca shine—namely, winemaking. And since the dizzying roster of wineries in the region surely includes enough fabulous cabs and syrahs to sip for a lifetime, one route is to pick a gold-standard spot and really do it up. Tastings hit a delightful high note at the **Swanson Vineyards** in Rutherford, for example. Named the

"Harvey" after one of the proprietors' dogs, the afternoon tasting in the Swanson's art-filled tasting room starts with a scoop of the house caviar on a Yukon gold potato chip and, after five or so rounds of wine and perfectly paired cheeses, ends with a signature spiced chocolate truffle. In many ways, Swanson represents the most perfect nexus of everything Napa has to offer: food, indulgence, refinement. Of course, it's all about the wine. But then again, it's not just all about the wine.

**THE CARNEROS INN**, 4048 Sonoma Hwy., Napa, 707-299-4900; [thecarnerosinn.com](http://thecarnerosinn.com). **MEADOWOOD RESORT**, 900 Meadowood Ln., St. Helena, 707-963-3646; [meadowood.com](http://meadowood.com). **FRENCH LAUNDRY**, 6640 Washington St., Yountville, 707-944-2380; [frenchlaundry.com](http://frenchlaundry.com). **REDD**, 6480 Washington St., Yountville, 707-944-2222; [reddnapavalley.com](http://reddnapavalley.com). **SWANSON VINEYARDS**, 1271 Manley Ln., Rutherford, 707-967-3500; [swansonvineyards.com](http://swansonvineyards.com). ●