



How the West Was Wined

Napa's knack for producing world-class vintages has spilled across the Left Coast. Raise a toast to five getaways that mix bucolic adventure by day with fine wine by night.

NAPA VALLEY: The Benchmark

Taking stock of the classic wine-country getaway

It's a late-fall afternoon two weeks past the wine harvest, and I'm pedaling with a few local cyclists to the top of Mount Veeder, home of some of Napa Valley's steepest cabernet vineyards. The turning grape leaves are a kaleidoscope of color—gold, mustard, red, and rust, with a hint of leftover green. From the summit, we roll along the ridge line, then dip down through valleys of oak and olive groves, breathing in air ripe with crushed grapes, wild sage, and smoke from wood fires. That's when the sensation hits me: I feel like I'm in Italy—in Umbria, to be exact, on the back side of Mount Subasio. I became enamored with the forest-covered hills laced with ribbons of quiet asphalt in that corner of central Italy while leading bike tours there in the late

1990s for a Berkeley-based adventure travel company. Now, I feel like I'm tracing those same roads again.

Napa Valley, which stretches 30 miles from Carneros in the south to Calistoga in the north, is the closest Americans will come to a European wine region without crossing the Atlantic. Although only 4 percent of California's wines come from the estimated 600 vineyards in Napa, the region is home to most of the country's ultra-premium labels—a fact that has transformed the valley into one of the nation's best-known and poshest wine destinations. Accordingly, traffic is often heavy on Highway 29, the major artery through the area, and the sipping occasionally comes with some attitude. But for most, these are slight inconveniences compared with the breadth of wines on offer. The valley's startling range of Mediterranean-like microclimates is ideal for growing several varieties of grapes: Napa's cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay are legendary, and the region has been producing pinot noir since the 1870s. As winemakers better understand the nuances of grape growing on each hillside, additional varietals—like sangiovese and malbec—are taking root.

I'm quite particular about chardonnay—the rich, buttery varietals are definitely not my thing. With that in mind, I head up to Stony Hill Vineyard, on the flanks of Spring Mountain, where owner Peter McCrea shows me to the tasting room, a terrace overlooking a garden brimming with zinnias. McCrea pours me a glass of his straw-colored chardonnay, which his father began producing in the 1950s. I stick my nose in

the glass and am pleasantly surprised to breathe in a burst of ripe pear fragrance: This is a chardonnay I could learn to love. I take a swallow, savoring the mineral and citrus flavors that linger on my tongue.

Napa winemakers are rightfully proud of their creations. Robert Sinskey, whose three-decades-old vineyard bears his name, was once a guest on a walking trip I led in Liguria, a region in Italy known for its wine, especially the whites. Sinskey showed up with his suitcase

stuffed full of his own wines, which we drank before dinner each night. By trip's end, everyone on the tour agreed: Sinskey's jammy pinot noir was as good as any Italian bottle we'd uncorked. Likewise, Pat Kuleto's Napa winery, spread across 97 hilly acres above Lake Hennessy, squeezes out a coral-colored sangiovese that screams fresh strawberries, and a syrah with a blueberry aroma and peppery taste—a glass of each in the tasting room brought all good intentions of an afternoon hike to a premature end. And Plumlack, a 50-acre estate

PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 116

growing grapes since the 1880s, produced a black, inky, fruit-forward '02 cab that sold out in less than four months.

But Napa serves up its indulgence in more than just liquid form. Over the years, the valley has continued to refine itself with decadent dining, lodging, and spa treatments. The best spot for dinner in Napa is ZuZu, a tiny Spanish tapas joint, or Terra (in nearby St. Helena), where the setting feels Tuscan villa (a fieldstone building with arched windows), while the dishes stick to California cuisine (grilled quail on caramelized endive). Afterwards, head down the street to the Bounty Hunter wine bar for a slice of persimmon pie with pomegranate molasses and a nightcap. After a moonlit swim in the lay pool at the new Calistoga Ranch, I return to my creekside cedar-and-stone abode to find the fireplace aflame, a bottle of champagne on ice, jazz on the stereo, and a tiny chocolate wine bottle on my pillow. A few weeks later, when I make reservations at the recently opened Poetry Inn, a three-room California Craftsman enclave perched high on a hill in the Stags Leap district, the innkeeper phones back to ask my music preferences and preferred pillow type, then greets me in person at check-in with a flute of sparkling wine.

The best part about Napa, however, is the way sophistication and the natural environment merge—there's a hint of romance and a heady mix of elegance and rustic mystery. During an afternoon mountain-bike ride on the forested flanks of the Howell Mountains, 1,400 feet above the valley, I come face to face with this bucolic side of Napa. I've been riding singletrack for about two hours without seeing a soul, and the sun is sinking fast. Just when I think I might be lost, I hear branches crackling and my mind skips ahead: Rattlesnake? Black bear? Mountain lion?! Instead, a local mushroom collector appears out of the woods, finishing up an afternoon out rustling for chanterelles. Dressed in a fleece against the gathering evening chill and carrying a large wicker basket, he reminds me of a mushroom gatherer I bumped into in the forested hills of Italy's northwestern Piedmont region. After a quick chat, he tells me the fastest way back to the trailhead—but he won't divulge where to find the best mushrooms. Known and overblown as it is, even Napa still guards a few secrets.

—AMY MARR



THE TIPPING POINT:
Post-faste repose at
Napa's Carneros Inn.