

Wine, don't whine — swanky rooms abound

■ Napa-Sonoma area adds and upgrades hotels and resort properties

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KNIGHT RIDDER NEWSPAPERS

SONOMA
THE BRICK BUILDING will fool you. From across the street, it looks like some historic landmark — faded red brick, ornate railings, a stately appearance that looks like something taken from an old photograph.

"I wanted to create a building that looked like it had been here forever," said Steve Ledson, and he did. Inside and out-

side, the newly opened Ledson Hotel across from the Sonoma Plaza has a turn-of-the-last-century look and feel but with the requisite amenities.

Even as tourism continues to struggle, new hotel and resort properties in the Napa-Sonoma areas keep growing. The six-room Ledson, which includes a first-floor restaurant and wine bar, is one of several hotels that have opened, will open soon or have undergone renovations and additions since last year, giving visitors more lodging options for their weekend getaways.

Among the newer properties are the Vineyard Creek ho-

tel at historic Railroad Square in Santa Rosa, with 155 rooms and a spa and conference center, and the 19-room Inn at Sonoma, which is a short walk from the Sonoma Plaza. Both opened in 2002.

Still under construction is the Carneros Inn in Napa, which has 96 guest cottages with private patios and gardens, a full spa, landscaped grounds and magnificent views of Napa County vineyards. It's scheduled to open in late October.

No two properties are likely to offer greater contrasts than the Ledson Hotel and the Carneros Inn. The

Ledson, which opened last month, leans heavily toward a cozy, vintage look; the 27-acre Carneros aims to be a modern hideaway, where you can lounge by the pool, walk along manicured paths or stay tucked away in your own private compound.

Neither qualifies as a cheap stay. Rates start at \$350 a night at both properties, with the Ledson topping out at \$395 on weekends and the Carneros ranging up to \$1,000 a night. If your budget can handle those prices, there are reasons to visit.

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IF YOU GO

New, newer and renovated properties in the Napa-Sonoma area:

■ **Ledson Hotel**, 480 First St. East, Sonoma, 707-996-9779, www.ledsonhotel.com, opened in August with six rooms, all with balconies, and a restaurant and wine bar. Rates: \$350 Sunday-Thursday, \$395 Friday and Saturday.

■ **Carneros Inn**, 4048 Old Sonoma Highway, Napa, 707-299-4900, www.thecarnerosinn.com, is scheduled to open in October with 96 private cottages, each with private patio and garden. Resort includes full spa, Boon Fly Cafe and private dining area for guests. Rates: \$350-\$1,000 per night.

Sonoma

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The Carneros Inn, at Highway 121 and Old Sonoma Highway in the Carneros wine-growing region, seems remote by comparison. And it is, once you turn off the main road and drive up to the reception building. From there, visitors are treated to spectacular views of surrounding vineyards and hillsides.

Although far from finished during our visit, the resort — built on what used to be the site of an RV park — is clearly intended to be a spacious, upscale project with lots of privacy for its guests. Buildings and cottages resemble farmhouses, with corrugated metal roofs and fences — just the look that Keith Rogal, founder and chief executive of Carneros Partners, a San Francisco-based development company, was looking for. Although they have a cookie-cutter sameness, the agricultural design of the cottages' exteriors blends in well with the surrounding vineyards.

Outside, Rogal spent \$4 million on the resort's landscaping project. "Napa is all about agriculture," he said, so guests will be able to enjoy lavender fields, herb and vegetable gardens, an apple orchard and mulberry, olive, apricot and sycamore trees, plus rows of hedges to insure privacy.

Cottages have wood-burning fireplaces, outdoor gas heaters, showers with outdoor decks, heated bathroom floors, large-screen plasma TVs and high-speed Internet access. Rooms are open and airy, with vaulted ceilings, and furniture is contemporary. Outdoors, each patio has a wooden deck with round picnic table, umbrella and lounge chairs.

There's a public restaurant near the highway: Boon Fly Cafe — serving breakfast and lunch — and a private dining room off the reception area for guests.

The area has hiking and biking trails, and nature walks will be available to families, but the 4,000-square-foot spa, pool and in-ground hot tub are perfect for lounging away the afternoon. The pool and hot tub afford relaxing views of neighboring vineyards.

