

(vin voyage)



This article by *The World of Fine Wine* may not be sold, altered in any way, or circulated without this statement.

Every issue of *The World of Fine Wine* features coverage of the world's finest wines in their historical and cultural context, along with news, reviews, interviews and comprehensive international auction results. For further information, and to subscribe to *The World of Fine Wine*, please visit www.finewinemag.com or call +44 (0)1795 414681



Photography courtesy of Auberge du Soleil

AMERICA'S FOOD-AND-WINE PLAYGROUND THE BEST OF NAPA

The most highly regarded wine region in the United States may be picture perfect, but there is far more there than meets the eye. **Bruce Schoenfeld** looks beyond the common stereotypes and surveys the pleasures in store for those who take the valley on its own terms

The Napa Valley AVA is 28 years old, includes 43,000 acres (17,500ha) of grapevines and more than 300 wineries, and can absorb all the body blows you can throw at it.

Commercialized? Well, sure, the late Robert Mondavi pioneered the marketing of Napa wine tourism in the 1970s, and the rest of the industry fell in line with alacrity, charging tasting fees, hawking sports shirts, and renting space to conventioners. Despite regulations put into place since to save the valley from becoming a giant wine theme park, you still can't drive a mile on a main road without seeing a tasting room advertisement on a large roadside sign. Crowded? You bet! Some 5 million visitors sniff and swirl in Napa Valley each year, which makes it California's second most popular tourist attraction after Disneyland. By car, that mile between tasting rooms can take a half-hour or even longer on some busy weekends. And if you're unlucky enough to arrive without restaurant reservations during peak season... well, let's hope you get hungry very early or very late.

Instant gratification

Then there are Napa's wines, which are often characterized by Europeans as beefy and unsubtle, much like the Americans who drink them. And in terms of the wines, at least, the characterization is largely true. If an Old World wine drinker shows up at a random Napa Valley winery and asks for a splash from the first bottle he sees,

he's likely to end up with something he'd turn down at a wedding. If he decides to buy it, it'll probably cost him double what he'd pay for such a wine anywhere else. And he'd better drink it fast, maybe on the way to the car. Only a few Napa wines are built to last, a chicken-and-egg proposition that can be traced back to Americans' relationship with (a) wine and (b) everything else. Most of us demand instant gratification most of the time, and we prefer to spend rather than save. At the same time,

the idea of hoarding wines in a cellar is anathema to upwardly mobile Americans who typically pack up and move every few years. So we drink first and ask questions later, and many of even our most prestigious wines have been crafted with that in mind.

So, that's Napa. If your idea of wine travel is rapping on the unmarked door of your favorite producer, then standing in a frigid cellar with the

proprietor tasting barrel samples, or pulling into a dirt driveway where you're greeted by three generations of the winemaking family and end up staying for dinner, you'll hate it. If you've already crossed the Golden Gate Bridge (the more scenic route) or the Bay Bridge (the faster way), braved the stop-and-go traffic to Highway 29, and pointed the car north, turn around. Redirect your visit to Anderson Valley, the Santa Cruz Mountains, or another of California's lesser-known, more remote appellations. You don't need Napa, and Napa doesn't need you.

Some 5 million visitors sniff and swirl in Napa Valley each year, which makes it California's second most popular tourist attraction after Disneyland. If you arrive without restaurant reservations... well, let's hope you get hungry very early or very late



Go Fish offers a huge range of beautifully prepared and presented dishes



Part oyster bar, sushi bar, and seafood house, Go Fish attracts the smart set

Vast and multifarious

But wait. Before you leave, look around for just a moment. It is beautiful, you must admit—far more fetching than most wine regions around the world. Champagne? Cold and grim. Ribera del Duero? Monotonous and brown. Bordeaux? Please... Pinched by steep hills, covered with neatly tended vines and looming pines and redwoods, and dotted with architecturally significant wineries and homes, Napa is a picture-perfect wine region, a Hollywood set for the industry, from cultivation to consumption. And, in a sense, that's the point of the place. Think of Napa not so much as one of the world's great wine regions but as wine's manifestation of American culture, and it begins to make sense.

Like America, Napa is vast and multifarious. While you'd be challenged to find a bottle of good Burgundy in all of Barbaresco, for example, Napa exists as a food-and-wine playground that's ready to receive you on whatever level you choose. If you want to taste through Stags Leap District wines and lunch on locally sourced meat and produce, that's easily done. But you can also visit Cindy Pawlcyn's remarkable Go Fish and have world-class sushi while drinking from one of America's best sake lists. You can eat house-made *tortellini in brodo*, accompanied by a Vietti Dolcetto or Sandrone Nebbiolo d'Alba, at Michael Chiarello's new Bottega, or celebrate a 16-course feast at the French Laundry with wines sourced from around the world. You can visit the Hess Collection for its world-class paintings, Rauschenbergs and Bacons, Stellas and Kiefers, or stop in at Cliff Lede to see the Jim Dine

sculptures. You can dress up and rub shoulders with famous winemakers and celebrities who own wineries, or dress down and gobble a hamburger with a simple village Burgundy.

New balance

And if you know where to look, you can find Napa wines that are subtle and nuanced, engaging and intriguing, yet retain that essential sense of place that gives them a reason to exist in this wine-saturated world. These come from boutique producers such as Ladera, which makes just a few hundred cases of mountain Cabernet Sauvignon and doesn't send them far from home, but others are hidden in the portfolios of big-volume producers such as Beringer. In fact, if you haven't tasted Napa wines in a few years, you might be surprised. The pursuit of mega-ripeness has started to wane, and the top winemakers are now just as resolute in their zeal to achieve balance. Alcohol levels currently in favor will allow you to drink wine with dinner and not have it finish the evening. ("It's 16.3%, but you'd never know it," was formerly the mantra up and down the valley, and although that might have been the case occasionally thanks to some nifty winemaking, you certainly knew it when you tried to get up from the table.) Napa's wines are still dark and oversized and often strident, make no mistake: The area is hot and it's only getting hotter, and a Texas mentality of "bigger is better" has been hard to shake. But those who like to tar the appellation with a single brush forget that elevations can vary by close to 2,000ft (600m), and—as with nearly

Photography courtesy of Go Fish and The French Laundry (photograph by Deborah Jones)



At Go Fish, the sake sommelier will find a perfect match for the superb sushi

all of the world's great wine regions—the grapes grown on the hillsides have little to do with those from the valley floor. On a recent visit, I drank my way from Howell Mountain in the northeast of the appellation to Mt Veeder in the southeast. I found wines to like and respect all along the way. Accept Napa for what it is, and it will provide you with richly rewarding experiences.

WHERE TO EAT

BOTTEGA

Restaurateur-turned-impresario Michael Chiarello has built an entire brand—NapaStyle—as well as an Emmy-winning television show and flavored olive oils around the wine-country ethos. So when he opened a huge new restaurant down the street from the French Laundry in Yountville, expectations among the cognoscenti weren't high. With his name, Chiarello could fill the place serving middling Italian food, much like he has for years at Tra Vigne. He doesn't. The dishes that emerge from Bottega's open kitchen are well conceived and well executed, though not particularly authentic tasting. Garganelli and rabbit is oversauced compared to how you'd find it in Bologna, but the sauce itself is rich and flavorful, and the dish succeeds admirably on its own terms, much like the valley itself.

6525 Washington Street, Yountville
Tel: +1 707 945 1050
www.botteganapavalley.com



The French Laundry has long been one of the world's greatest restaurants

THE FRENCH LAUNDRY

The French Laundry isn't cutting-edge anymore, just superb. In 1994 Thomas Keller bought the nine-decade-old structure that had housed a saloon, a steam laundry, and a restaurant and recast it to his personal vision. His nine-course meals and the waves of *amuses* that preceded them seemed an avant-garde way to eat, and trompe l'oeil constructions such as "Oysters and Pearls," which juxtaposed oysters, caviar, and tapioca custard, thrilled with their novelty as much as their flavor. These days, Ferran Adrià imitators abound, every mid-sized city has a restaurant or two serving multiple courses of surprising little bites, and molecular gastronomy has rendered Keller's cooking tame by comparison. In my opinion, he's all the better for it. Freed from the need to startle, he can concentrate on turning out perfect renditions of his imaginative dishes, served nightly in two tasting menus (one vegetarian) that succeed because of a playwright's sense of pacing and a staff skilled enough to pull it off. Don't be dismayed by the prices on the magisterial wine list, by the way: A 20 percent service charge is included.

6640 Washington Street, Yountville
Tel: +1 707 944 2380
www.frenchlaundry.com

GO FISH

From the sake sommelier to the Santa Barbara uni, Go Fish is like no other wine-region restaurant I've encountered. Part oyster bar, part sushi bar, part seafood house, it turns



Richard Reddington has now added his own restaurant to his glittering CV

Redd's brilliant food and quirky wine list are both compelling reasons to visit

out extraordinary food that has absolutely nothing to do with the muscular red wines being produced all around it. Chef/owner Cindy Pawlcyn's aim is to attract sophisticated diners who appreciate fish and seafood tenaciously sourced from nearby and not-so-nearby waters and cooked with the lightest of hands... and who have the resources to pay for it. With just the slightest lapse of restraint—a tasting platter of shellfish, or a maki of broiled lobster—an informal weekday lunch for two can touch \$200. The wine list tries hard, but the wide selection of Junmai, Ginjo, Daiginjo and unfiltered Nigori sake shouldn't be resisted.

641 Main Street, St Helena
Tel: +1 707 953 0700
www.gofishrestaurant.net

REDD

Form follows function at Richard Reddington's sophisticated New American restaurant. The hardwood floors and spare, light-colored decor are harbingers of clean, unfussy cooking. Reddington's résumé has to be one of the most impressive of any chef extant; it includes Arpège (Paris); Roger Verge's Le Moulin de Mougins (Côte d'Azur); Wolfgang Puck's Spago (Beverly Hills); Daniel Boulud's Daniel (New York); Rubicon, Masa's, Postrio, and Jardiniere (all San Francisco); and Napa's own Auberge du Soleil (*see below*). But it is at Redd, which opened in late 2005, that he has come of age as a creative force. Pork belly is glazed and served with apple purée; crêpes of duck breast and Swiss chard are paired with semi-sweet

chocolate sauce. All of it is direct, precise, and accomplished. The quirky and extensive wine list includes verticals of the house's favorite producers (definitely not the usual suspects), several pages of half-bottles, and special depth in Burgundy, the Rhône, and California.

6480 Washington Street, Yountville
Tel: +1 707 944 2222
www.reddnapavalley.com

TERRA

The overwhelming sensation at this stone house on a St Helena side street is tranquility. For two decades, Hiro Sone and Lissa Doumani have served European-based food with Asian accents in gentle, unhurried fashion to a loyal clientele that includes most of the big-name winemakers and winery owners in the area. I've sampled abalone in escargot butter sauce, tripe stew with tomatoes and butterbeans, the signature black cod and shrimp dumplings in shiso broth, pan-roasted sweetbreads with braised cardoons and gobo root, pork chops with blood sausage, and a half-dozen other dishes that manage to be simultaneously earthy and ethereal, delicate yet robust. The wine list isn't vast but the attitude to wine is enlightened: Half-bottles are literally half-bottles, poured from 75os, and every server is a de facto sommelier.

1345 Railroad Avenue, St Helena
Tel: +1 707 963 8931
www.terrarestaurant.com

Photography courtesy of Redd (photograph by Andy Katz) and Auberge du Soleil



Auberge du Soleil boasts recently renovated, sumptuously appointed rooms



One of the cottages at the sprawling hillside resort of Auberge du Soleil

WHERE TO SLEEP

AUBERGE DU SOLEIL

This quintessential Napa resort of cottages scattered down a hillside opened almost a quarter-century ago, but recent renovations have left it looking better than ever. The rooms are gorgeously appointed and include signature touches such as five varieties of single-source chocolates, decks with panoramic views of the valley, working fireplaces, and bathtubs the size of Lincoln Continentals. The impressive restaurant has employed a string of chefs headed for fame and fortune, including Masataka Kobayashi, Andrew Sutton, Reddington, and the current toque Robert Curry.

180 Rutherford Hill Road, Rutherford
Tel: +1 707 963 1211
www.aubergedusoleil.com

EL BONITA

A funky 41-room motel right on Highway 29, this is the best choice for bargain accommodation between the city of Napa and Calistoga. Rooms feature refrigerators, microwaves, wine glasses, and corkscrews. Rates (often about \$100) include breakfast, Internet, and steam room, and you couldn't be better positioned to tour the area.

195 Main Street, St Helena
Tel: +1 707 963 3216
www.elbonita.com

POETRY INN

If you really want to make a statement and show that you're refusing to participate in the ongoing economic meltdown, why not splurge on a \$60,000, three-night package at this five-room lodge in the Stags Leap District? It includes a private dinner for ten people cooked by Thomas Keller of The French Laundry (*see above*) and a first-growth Bordeaux from your birth year. More discreetly, and a lot more affordably, quietly check in on a weekday afternoon, then luxuriate in an outdoor massage, a glass of Cabernet on a private terrace with a view that stretches across the valley, and a three-course gourmet breakfast. Innkeepers on duty will tend to specific needs and book winery visits.

6380 Silverado Trail, Napa
Tel: +1 707 944 0646
www.poetryinn.com

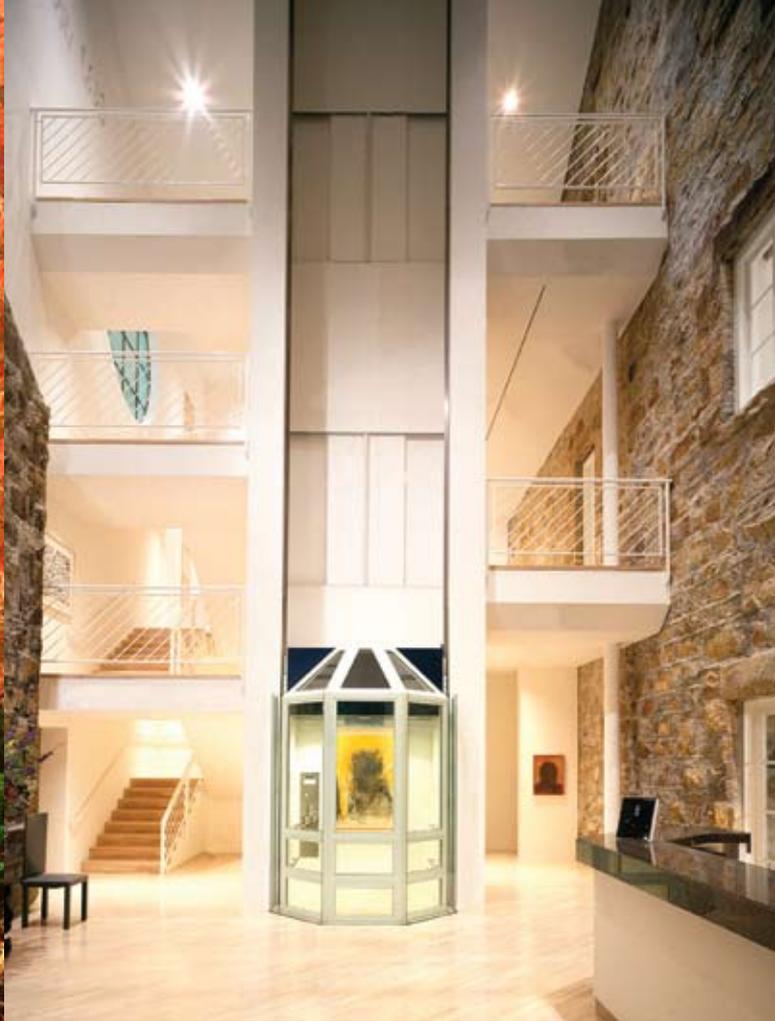
WHERE TO TASTE

BARNETT VINEYARDS

Barnett makes a few hundred cases of Merlot, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, and Sauvignon Blanc, but all of that is a sideshow to the firm, structured, Cabernet Sauvignons that have been its specialty since 1989. The winery is set on Spring Mountain, accessible by a couple of quick turns off Highway 29 and then ten minutes of winding uphill. A tasting session, available by appointment, typically means standing at the bar in the semi-outdoor winery



Beringer's meticulously restored Rhine House is among its many attractions



The Hess Collection includes some serious wines, as well as art and sculpture

with winemaker David Tate or Fiona or Hal Barnett, the proprietors, followed by a tour of the barrel caves that the Barnetts have dug beneath Rattlesnake Hill, the property's highest point. The single-vineyard Rattlesnake Hill Cabernet Sauvignon (\$120), Barnett's finest wine, is dark-hued and filled with plum, blackberry, and black-cherry notes. It often outperforms its better-known neighbors Pride and Philip Togni, slotting somewhere between Pride's flashy opulence and Togni's almost ascetic restraint.

4070 Spring Mountain Road, St Helena
Tel: +1 707 963 7075
www.barnettvineyards.com

BERINGER VINEYARDS

Founded in 1876, Beringer is the oldest continuously operating winery in Napa Valley. A multimillion-dollar renovation of its Rhine House—the 17-room home built for Frederick Beringer when he moved to Napa from New York in the 1880s—was completed earlier this year, and it serves as a reminder of how much history exists in the region. Much of that history is Italian, featuring grape-growing families such as the Sebastianis, the Gallos, and the Martinis on through to the Mondavis, but there's a German strain, too—the Schramms and the Krugs, the Gundlachs and the Grimms—and for a big chunk of the 19th century, German varieties predominated in Napa.

Located off Highway 29, just north of downtown St Helena, Beringer is well worth visiting for a whiff of

that history and a glance at its immaculate grounds. These days, chief enologist Laurie Hook is crafting some exceptional wines from the broad range of Beringer fruit. Even the best of them may still be higher-octane than dedicated Old World drinkers would normally desire, but bottlings such as the admirably structured, recently released 2005 Howell Mountain Steinhauer Ranch Cabernet Sauvignon (\$90) have a minerality and even a slight herbaceousness that belies the winery's popular reputation for all ripeness all the time.

2000 Main Street, St Helena
Tel: +1 707 967 4412
www.beringer.com

CLIFF LEDE VINEYARDS

Cliff Lede, a Canadian developer who decided to name his vineyard blocks after rock songs, has David Abreu tending his vines, former Colgin winemaker Michelle Edwards handling the enology, and consultant Michel Rolland contributing his unique *je ne sais quoi*. Their Sauvignon Blanc has an appealing tang, and the 925-case Poetry proprietary wine offers more nuance than the typical foursquare Napa Valley Bordeaux blend. Even more interesting is the first of Lede's "Rock Block" series, which will be blended annually from specific hillside vineyard blocks on the 60-acre (24ha) estate and sold at the winery and to mailing-list customers. The first of them is called Cinnamon Stardust (Neil Young's "Cinnamon Girl" combined with David Bowie's "Ziggy Stardust"; \$90).

Photography courtesy of Beringer, The Hess Collection, and Ladera



Anne and Pat Stotesbury who moved from their Montana ranch to Ladera

Mostly Cabernet Sauvignon, along with Merlot, Cabernet Franc, and a touch of Petit Verdot, it shows clove and rosemary on the nose—hardly typical Napa aromas—and the dark fruits taper to a long and harmonious finish.

1473 Yountville Cross Road, Yountville
Tel: +1 707 944 8642
www.cliffledevineyards.com

THE HESS COLLECTION

Donald Hess is a Swiss businessman with a collector's mentality. He collects art and has amassed one of the better private hordes in the United States. He also collects wineries, and now has them in South Africa, Australia, and Argentina, as well as in Napa. This one, on the site of the legendary Christian Brothers facility on Napa's Mt Veeder, is his flagship. The wines may have waxed and waned through the years, but the property has always merited a visit—for the sake of the setting (in the midst of a forest of 100-year-old redwoods), the sculpture garden and koi-stocked fish pond, and Leopoldo Maler's *Flaming Typewriter*, among other compelling works. Winemaker Dave Guffy has worked at Hess for a decade now, and his efforts are beginning to show. While rather too many of Hess's lesser-priced wines still reveal no real character, progress has been made with Malbec, small-block Syrah, and the Mt Veeder Cabernet Sauvignon. The 2005 version of the latter (\$50) tastes like the kinds of wines that were emerging from Napa in the late 1980s, when Hess was hitting its stride:



Ladera's Howell Mountain wines reflect the superior quality of its vineyards

those Stags Leaps and Montelenas stuffed with firm tannins and notes of licorice and dark chocolate that were winning awards and establishing the valley as a world-class wine region.

4411 Redwood Road, Napa
Tel: +1 707 255 1144
www.hesscollection.com

LADERA VINEYARDS

Montana rancher Pat Stotesbury sunk a lot of money into retro-fitting a thick-walled Howell Mountain winery from the 19th century. He planted some fruit and bought some more, hired the esteemed Karen Culler as a winemaker, and started producing ripe Napa Cabernets like the ones he loved to drink—except that Stotesbury's taste is better than most, and his vineyard sites rank among Napa's finest. His wines, such as the 2005 Howell Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon (\$65), have a stateliness and a breeding that must be inherent in the terroir, because it obviously does not come from centuries of continued cultivation. I taste St-Julien in the Cabernets, maybe Léoville-Las-Cases in the best, but also the unmistakable grip of mountain fruit, reminiscent of Syrahs from Tulbagh in South Africa, or Alvaro Palacios's layered creations from the Priorat, or Randy Dunn's Cabernets from just around the corner.

150 White Cottage Road South, Angwin
Tel: +1 707 965 2445
www.laderavineyards.com