

Exploring Napa Valley

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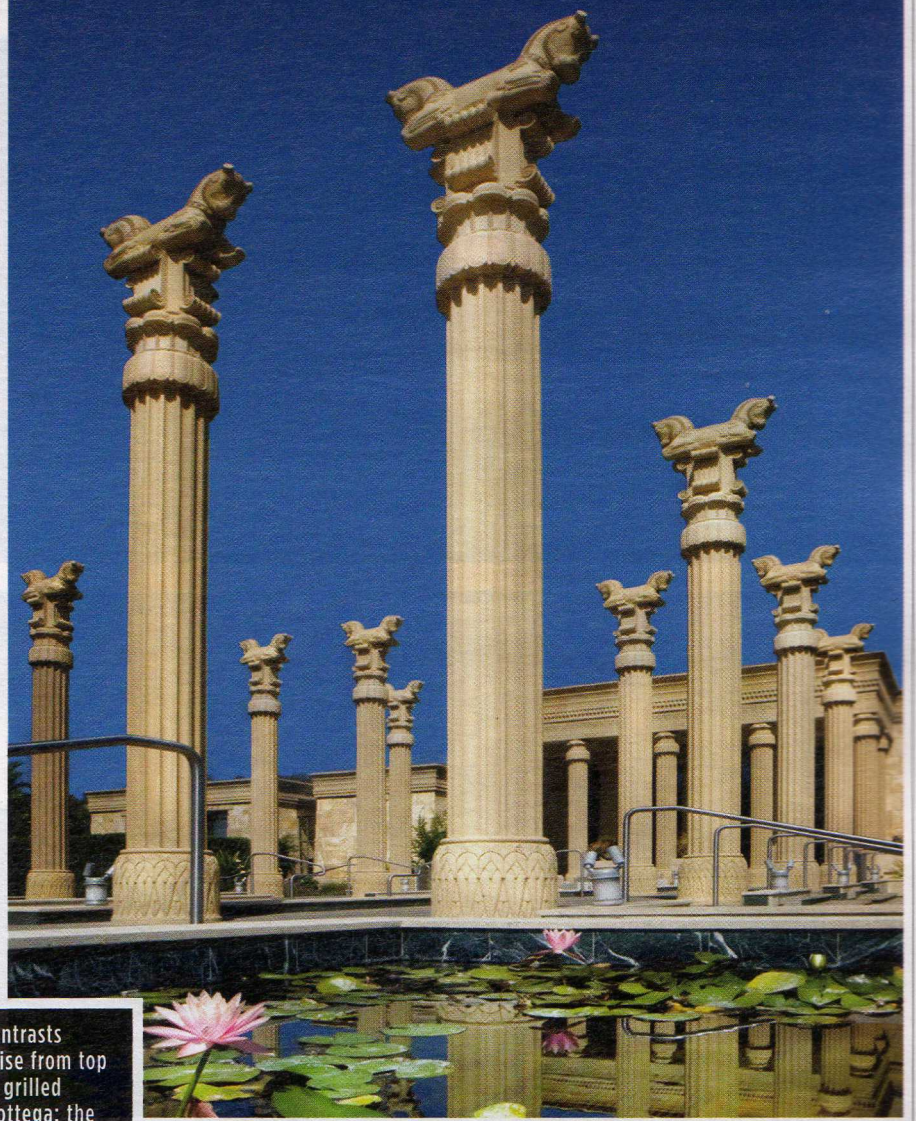
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Napa Valley has it all. Beautiful scenery, great weather, world-class wineries, restful accommodations and mouthwatering meals for visitors seeking the hospitality of wine country. This year, our guide to California wine country travel takes a two-pronged approach.

In "Touring at the Top," we detail the best of the best for those who want to go all out in Napa Valley. But that's not all. California's premier wine region is pretty down-to-earth. Just because the bottle is great or the cooking sophisticated doesn't mean you have to don jacket and tie for dinner. Or maybe you don't want to spend extra money for a resort with a spa you won't use. In "Visiting on a Budget," we point you to the best of the more affordable options.

Maybe you'd rather splurge on wine tasting and dining and save on hotels or, conversely, stay at the most luxurious hotel as respite from the activities you pursue during the day. Either way, great experiences await. Have a lunchtime burger at Taylor's and maybe meet a cult winemaker at the next picnic table. Later, indulge in a marathon dinner at the French Laundry and order one of that winemaker's bottles. It's all Napa, after all.



> Napa contrasts (clockwise from top left): Tender grilled octopus at Bottega; the Persian columns of Darioush winery; Pizzeria Tra Vigne's wood-fired pies; a retro-style motel.



with private entrances, vaulted ceilings, semiprivate patios and pebble-stone showers; soaking tubs are available in some rooms. Suites take the urban-cabin feel to a new level with private patios and outdoor Jacuzzis. Solage's 20,000-square-foot spa is best-in-class and includes a geothermally heated pool, mud baths and a fitness center. There are two guest pools as well.

> Where to Eat

Auberge du Soleil Restaurant

180 Rutherford Hill Road, Rutherford **Telephone** (800) 348-5406 **Web site** www.aubergedusoleil.com/html/restaurant.shtml **Open** Breakfast, lunch and dinner, daily **Cost** Prix fixe \$105 **Corkage** \$30 **Credit cards** All major **Best of Award of Excellence**

No restaurant in Napa offers a better lookout over the valley and its patchwork of vineyards and mountains. The terrace off the bar is a prime spot for watching sunsets. Then there's the wine cellar, which has an impressive collection of more than 1,700 bottlings from around the world, including verticals of collectibles such as Mouton-Rothschild and Screaming Eagle. Prices are premium, but who can squabble with choices such as Beringer Merlot Bancroft Ranch 1997 (\$210)? The menu covers much territory, and the results are generally first-rate. Dishes like prime New York beef with smoky wild mushrooms, or crab salad with Asian pears, coconut and lime marry intense flavors with delicate textures. The dining room, done in soft pastels and accented with rough-hewn wood and a large hearth, suggests a villa in southern France. For a more casual venue, but with access to the full wine list, drop into the new Bistro & Bar for a California take on French country cuisine.

Bardessono Restaurant

6526 Yount St., Yountville, CA 94599 **Telephone** (707) 204-6030 **Web site** www.bardessono.com **Open** Breakfast and dinner, daily; Lunch, Monday to Friday **Cost** Entrées \$26-\$35 **Corkage** \$25 **Credit cards** All major

Executive chef Sean O'Toole, former group operations chef for Michael Mina's many restaurants, presents an eclectic mix of entrées drawn from California's plentiful produce. The menus for lunch and dinner overlap and feature an array of fresh, local and seasonal dishes presented in an airy dining room with an understated modern decor. A delicate, melt-in-your-mouth Petrale sole with a blanquette of winter vegetables, white mushrooms and crawfish tails was perfectly presented. Bodega Bay halibut with rose Finn potatoes, watercress and Iberico ham worked well, too, and was more appealing than a pork chop and pork belly dish. Potato gnocchi with local chanterelles was creamy-textured, a foil to the meatier shellfish à la grecque, a calamari, octopus, prawn and winter vegetable salad. The wine list of more than 100 selections has been carefully chosen to provide a taste of the locals and a cross-section of French wines. Pricing is roughly double retail. Good buys include the Robert Mondavi Napa Cabernet 2006 at \$40.

Bottega

6525 Washington St., Yountville **Telephone** (707) 945-1050 **Web site** www.botteganapavalley.com **Open** Lunch, Thursday to Saturday; dinner, daily **Cost** Entrées \$23-\$36 **Corkage** \$20 **Credit cards** All major

Michael Chiarello is back where he loves to be—behind the stove—at his new restaurant, Bottega. The cookbook author, vintner and Food Network celebrity, who describes the restaurant as his new studio, is picking up where he left off 10 years ago at Tra Vigne, exploring regional Italian themes with a California twist. You'll find a few carryovers from Tra Vigne, such as whole oven-roasted fish, wood-grilled octopus,



Chef Michael Chiarello is a culinary dynamo. The founder of Tra Vigne, he now cooks in the kitchen at his new Italian-themed hot spot Bottega, in Yountville.



The eclectic and well-executed menu at Bardessono includes entrées such as this and curry-braised lamb with coconut basmati rice, pineapple and quince.

polenta with caramelized wild mushrooms, garganelli with balsamic rabbit sugo and chanterelles, and a daily mix of other pastas and gnocchi. The warm interior (reflecting Chiarello's taste as founder of Napa-Style, a California kitchen accessory and home furnishings retail chain) provides a comfortable setting in which to muse over the solid wine list whose 150 choices are designed to appeal to the pocketbook. A price markup of about twice wholesale means that a bottle that would cost \$20 at retail goes for around \$25 at Bottega.

Farm

Carneros Inn, 4048 Sonoma Highway, Napa **Telephone** (707) 299-4880 **Web site** www.thecarnerosinn.com/thecarnerosinn/restaurant_farm.aspx **Open** Dinner, daily **Cost** Entrées \$22-\$44 **Corkage** \$25 **Credit cards** All major

Here's a restaurant that wears its name seriously. Situated in a barnlike structure with exposed rafters, Farm sets a casual but elegant contemporary tone. The menu relies on local, seasonal ingredients, some of which are grown on-site at Carneros Inn. The wine list emphasizes artisanal producers in Napa and Carneros. There are about 325 wines in the collection, and the markup is modest: Castello di Volpaia Chianti Classico 2006 is a steal at \$34. If you're in the mood to splurge, however, there's Marcassin Pinot Noir Estate 2006 for \$325. The kitchen employs a light touch, producing delicate yet flavorful dishes such as pan-roasted veal sweetbreads with white asparagus.

The French Laundry

6640 Washington St., Yountville **Telephone** (707) 944-2380 **Web site** www.frenchlaundry.com **Open** Lunch, Friday to Sunday; dinner, daily **Cost** Prix fixe \$240 **Corkage** \$50 **Credit cards** All major **Grand Award**

"Resting on your laurels" is not an idea that chef Thomas Keller appears to support. After 17 years at French Laundry, and after opening additional restaurants in Yountville, New York and Las Vegas, Keller continues to raise the bar. The Grand Award-winning wine list of more than 1,800 selections takes in Bordeaux first-growth verticals, top Burgundies from the likes of Henri Jay and Romanée-Conti, and verticals of leading California Cabernets such as Bryant Family and Colgin. The list is now on par with the restaurant's exceptional service and refined atmosphere, not to mention Keller's exquisite cuisine. His menu is as extensive as it is theatrical, with a series of elaborate courses. A savory white truffle custard comes in an egg-shell cup, and a plume of applewood smoke rises from it after a tiny covered dish is opened to reveal a delicate filet of Pacific kahala. While the menu and wine list are expensive, service is included, and for those who can manage the check, it is a meal to remember.

Solbar

Solage Calistoga, 755 Silverado Trail, Calistoga **Telephone** (707) 226-0850 **Web site** www.solagecalistoga.com/dining/index.shtml **Open** Breakfast, lunch and dinner, daily **Cost** Entrées \$19-\$33 **Corkage** \$20 **Credit cards** All major



With an outdoor lounge and seasonal menu, Farm sets a rustic tone. The 300-plus-selection wine list er sought-after local producers along with some well-chosen bottles from around the world.

items not to be missed include mini-burgers stacked with bacardar and onions, and "lucky pig," a small build-it-yourself buffet roasted pork, lettuce cups and sesame crepes with pickled pir and Mongolian peanuts. The cavernous dining room has a chic feel and can get a bit noisy at times. The wine list has a modest ferings of mostly California wines, but they're wisely selected. are variable; Lewis Merlot 2005 is a reasonable \$123, but Scare Cabernet Sauvignon 2005 is a luxury at \$550.

Terra

1345 Railroad Ave., St. Helena **Telephone** (707) 963-8931 **Web** www.terrarestaurant.com **Open** Dinner, Wednesday to Monday **Co** **Entrées** \$30-\$36 **Corkage** \$20 **Credit cards** All major

Restaurants come and go, but after 20 years Terra continues: tain a high standard in the valley. The setting is the historic Hatc Building, with its high ceilings, arched windows and fieldstone. Service is precise and attentive. The wine list of 300 selections picks some great choices from California, France and Italy. Mar reasonable, and there are many older vintages and verticals. Sp