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SHOUT YEAH FOR YOUNTVILLE

By Anne Z. Cooke; Photos ©Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld

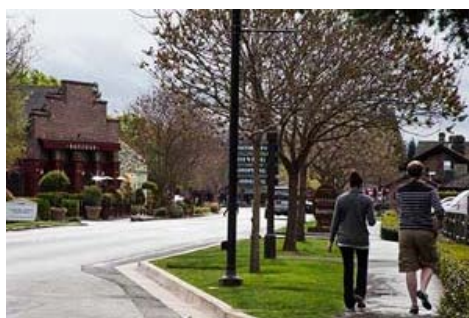
If California wines still baffle – so many labels! -- you might want to spend a weekend in Yountville, on Route 29 in Napa Valley. A village by this traveler's yardstick, it's about 12 blocks long and four blocks wide, a speck in the midst of vineyards. Washington Street bisects the town, where a population of 3,050 enjoy the good life, making a living off tourism and some of California's best wines.

A city gal, I headed there recently with friends in tow, expecting to "motor" down quaint country lanes and amongst picturesque hills and valleys. We'd stop at friendly tasting rooms, savor various vintages and carry away as many bottles as would fit into the trunk. Then we arrived to find that while the 2010 census might call Yountville a village, it's a village on steroids, or a city in miniature, depending on your point of view. Everything a wine-searcher could want is close together, within walking distance.

"You don't need a car at all," said the bell boy at the Vintage Inn, who was leaning against the reception desk enjoying a good joke. "Just park it over there, in the back and you can walk," he told us, cheerfully hefting our suitcases onto a cart and vanishing in the direction of our rooms. So walk we did to a half-dozen tasting rooms along the street tucked between a couple of Michelin-starred restaurants and their neighbors: the Villagio Hotel & Inn Spa, Bouchon Restaurant and bakery, a vegetable garden, Napa Style (a must-see kitchen and comestibles emporium), Redd Wood pasta and pizza, art galleries and fashion shops.

Our travel credo being "a peaceful night makes the next day bright," we booked rooms in the aforementioned Vintage Inn, the town's first real visitor lodgings, built in 1985 on 23 garden acres. Our main criteria was location, followed by the swimming pool and bubbling hot tub, open for late-night wallows. The deal-maker was the breakfast, included in the room price, a buffet spread and omelet station. A second-floor room with king bed, two balconies, a fireplace and a coffee nook decided the matter. As for our tasting plans, we started at several wine bars in town, all open for business. But what about the vineyards and quaint country roads? It was time to get help.

"Most of those wineries don't want drop-in customers," said Christina Richardson, who presides at a desk in the Vintage Inn's lounge. She smiling apologetically. "You need appointments. And you can't visit Far Niente at all." Far Niente, my former boss's favorite winery, was the only name I could think of. "But," she added, with a conspiratorial smile, "I



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just might be able to make a reservation for you at Nickel & Nickel. They have the same owners. Let me call them. I've been going to lots of tastings lately," she confessed. "It's my chance to learn all about wine."

Handing us a map of the 1990 wineries in the Napa Valley – most I'd never heard of -- she explained that better wineries not only require a reservation, but charge a per person fee: typically \$25. Sounds outrageous, doesn't it? But consider this: The fee is for one to two hours with an wine connoisseur who conducts a tour of the winery, then pours a "flight," of four to six wines, helping you compare and contrast the bouquet, the hints of fruit and herbs, and the earthiness. So, with four appointments in hand, we retrieved the car and were off, to Hess (on a nearby mountain!), to Nickel & Nickel (exclusive, welcoming, organized), to Frogs Leap (casual, fun), and to Cakebread (join a group and wait your turn).

Later Christina – whose expert know-how made our trip a success, booked "his and her" massages-plus-aroma bath treatments at the Spa Villagio next door, a marathon of kneading, oiling, bubbly bath water and open-air soaks. The one and one-half hour session confirmed the adage that "the couple that plays together, stays together." She also made reservations for dinner at Bottega (good food, unbearably pompous waiter), and pasta at Redd Wood (fresh veggies, lip-smacking sauce, lively atmosphere).

Why not eat at the French Laundry? You need to make a reservation three months ahead. And our most memorable meal? Lunch at Bouchon (**the** genuine article, with Salade Maraichere au Chevre Chaud (green salad), Truit Amandine (the trout), delicious fresh bread, famous Pomme Frites (French fries), heavenly wine and perfect service. Did we fill the trunk with wine? Not quite, but we did bring home a dozen unique vintages. A few were reputed to improve with age, the kind you store in the cellar and crack open when your toddler graduates from college. After a complete immersion, I could actually imagine wine collecting as a hobby, with the sort of check list that bird watchers use to record important sightings. I kept my list and have checked off nine. Just 190 in Napa to go. The journey awaits.

Call theVintage Inn at [\(800\)351-1133](tel:8003511133) .

Wine taster Anne Cooke no longer drinks Two-Buck Chuck.

Photographer courtesy of Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld.

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