

California

Napa Valley: vintage journey

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McCLATCHY-TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

YOUNTVILLE, Calif. — If vineyards at harvest time

call to you — grapes plump on the vines, leaves turning red and gold — consider a visit to Yountville, in the heart of California's famed Napa Valley.

Yountville is tiny: about 12 blocks long and four blocks wide, an island lapped by rolling vineyards. Washington Street, the main drag, bisects the town of 3,480 residents.

Almost everything a wine-searcher could want is right there, from lodging to dining, a 10-minute walk from end to end.

"You don't need a car at all," said the bellboy at the Vintage Inn. "Just park it over there beyond the flower beds. You can walk everywhere."

So walk we did, passing a half-dozen tasting rooms (outposts of distant wineries), fashion emporiums, art galleries, Napa Style (a must-see kitchen and comestibles shop on the Vintage Estate), a flourishing vegetable garden and the Villagio Inn & Spa, next door.

More notable than any of these, however, was Yountville's culinary scene. From Bouchon, the bistro and bakery, to the French Laundry, and from Redd Wood (pasta

and pizza), Bodega (steaks and Italian specialties) to Bistro Jeanty (pure French), they offered a bountiful cornucopia of fine — and expensive — dining surprises.

We booked rooms in the Vintage Inn, built in 1985 on the Vintage Estate's 23 centrally located acres.

Other lodging choices are available in Yountville. But the Vintage Inn met our first concern: a central location. It also won points with a large swimming pool and hot tub, both open into the evening for an after-dinner soak.

The deal-maker was a no-charge breakfast (included in the room price): a buffet with fruit, cereals, sliced meats, bread, cheese, tomatoes and a chef-manned omelet station.

But our plans for touring the wine estates hit a snag.

"Most of these wineries don't allow drop-in customers," said Christina Richardson, the hotel's concierge. "You have to have appointments."

Handing us a map of the 199 wineries in the Napa Valley, she explained that better wineries not only require a reservation but also charge a fee for a tasting, typically \$25 (or more) per person. That seems pricey, but the fee pays for two hours with a wine connoisseur who leads the tour, then presides over a flight of five or six wines, guiding you through a comparison and evaluation.

So, with four appointments in hand, we retrieved the car and were off, to Hess (on rustic Mount Veeder); Nickel & Nickel (exclusive, organized, welcoming); Frogs Leap (casual, fun); and Cakebread (join a group and wait your turn).

At some wineries, such as

Frog's Leap, a drop-in is more casual. You can sit all afternoon on the porch or on the lawn, drink in the rumpled hills beyond, inspect the vegetable and flower gardens or play bean-bag horseshoes with your kids.

Richardson, whose courtesy and professional know-how made our mission a success, booked "his and her" aroma therapy massages with bath treatments at the Villagio Spa next door — a 90-minute marathon of kneading and oiling, finishing with an open-air soak in bubbly bath water.

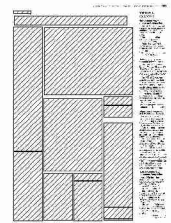
Richardson also made dinner reservations for us at Bodega (good food, annoyingly pompous waiter), and Redd Wood (fresh veggies, scrumptious sauce, lively atmosphere).

Why didn't we eat at the celebrated French Laundry? It was booked for the next five months.

But Bouchon had a lunch cancellation, a meal that became the trip's culinary highlight. Onion soup (the genuine article) whetted my appetite, followed by salade maraichere au chevre chaud (green salad), truit amandine (trout), fresh bread and Bouchon's famous pomme frites (french fries). A sommelier-chosen dry white wine enhanced the flavors.

Did we weigh down the car with a trunk full of wine? Not quite, but we did buy select labels, complex in the nose and smooth on the tongue. A few were reputed to improve with age, the sort of vintage years you store in the cellar and crack open when your toddler graduates from college.

Inspired by Richardson, we realized that there was much more to learn. We envisaged a new-found hobby, something



akin to bird-watching; calling for a distant trip, a guidebook, a checklist.

We've checked off nine Napa wineries. Just 190 to go. An

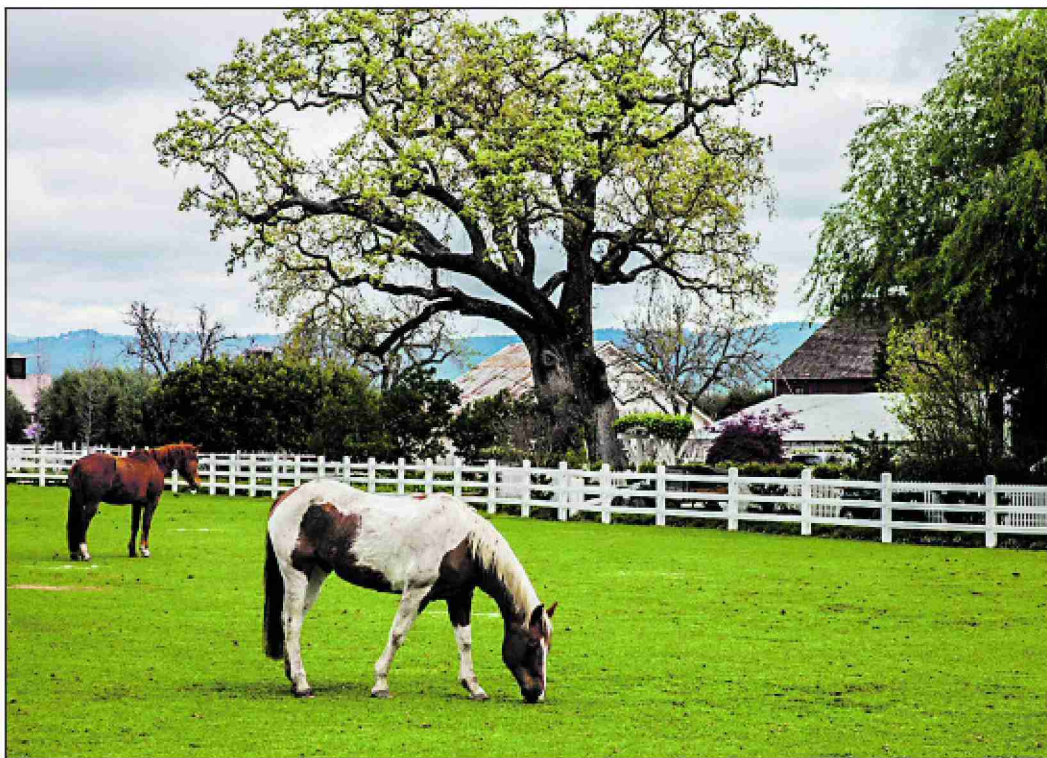
epic journey begins.

IF YOU GO

Yountville, Calif.

A center of wine-tasting and culinary delights, Yountville has a bit of everything.

For Napa Valley information, visit napavalley.com.



STEVE HAGGERTY | McCLATCHY-TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Classic country pastures are part of the landscape at Nickel & Nickel winery in the Napa Valley.



Wine samples are always popular at the Napa Style marketplace on the Vintage Estate.