

NAPA VALLEY

Yountville's shadings are tasted more than seen

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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 the 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, where 3,480 residents count themselves lucky to be making a living from tourism and the wineries that attract connoisseurs from near and far.

Somewhat of a novice regarding Northern California's secret hideaways, I expected to wander along winding lanes through picturesque hills and valleys, fixing the glorious fall colors for future recall. To add purpose to pleasure, I hoped to stop wherever a sign announced "Tasting Room," suggesting of a winery tour and a chance to buy a recent vintage at the source, a taste of Napa sunshine to warm a chilly evening.

I arrived to discover that while some might call Yountville a village, it's a village on steroids, a city in miniature, depending on your definition. Nearly 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, who was leaning against the reception desk smiling, sharing a joke with the clerk. "Just park it over there beyond the flower beds. You can walk everywhere," he told us, piling our suitcases onto a rolling cart and disappearing out the rear toward a distant fountain.

So walk we did, passing a half-dozen tasting rooms, fashion emporiums, art galleries, a flourishing vegetable garden and the Villagio Inn & Spa, next door.

More notable than any of these was Yountville's culinary scene, famous for cornering at least five Michelin stars. From Bouchon, the bistro and bakery, to French Laundry, and from Redd Wood (pasta and pizza), Bodega (steaks and Italian special-

ties) to Bistro Jeanty (pure French), they offered a bountiful cornucopia of fine-dining surprises.

We booked rooms in the Vintage Inn, built in 1985 on the Vintage Estate's 23 centrally located acres. There are other lodging choices in Yountville. But the Vintage Inn met our first criterion: 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 an included breakfast: a buffet with fruit, cereals, sliced meats, bread, cheese, tomatoes and a chef-manned omelet station.

When an initial inspection of the proposed digs revealed a second-floor room with king bed, puffy quilt, shamefully large tub, two balconies, a fireplace and kitchenette nook, we registered. As for the wine project, we tasted and bought two cabernets at a tasting room across the street. But what to do about exploring Napa Valley's quaint country roads? Enter the concierge.

"Most of these wineries don't allow drop-in customers," said Christina Richardson, presiding over a desk in the

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hotel's lounge. "You have to have appointments," she said. "And you can't visit Far Niente at all."

Far Niente, my former boss's favorite wine, was the only label I could think of.

"But," she added, with a conspiratorial smile, "I just might be able to make a reservation for you at Nickel & Nickel. They're the owners of Far Niente. Let me call them." She then confessed, "I've been going to lots of tastings lately. It's my chance to learn about wine."

Handing us a map of the 199 wineries in the Napa



Valley, she said many wineries not only require a reservation, they also charge a fee for a tasting, typically \$25 (or more) per person. That fee pays for two hours with a wine connoisseur who leads the tour, then presides over a flight of five or six wines. At some wineries, like 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.

With four appointments in hand, we retrieved the car and were off, to Hess (on rustic Mount Veeder), to Nickel & Nickel (exclusive, organized, welcoming), to Frog's Leap (casual, fun), and to Cakebread (join a group and wait your turn). We had dinner at Bodega (good food, annoyingly pompous waiter) and at 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. 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. I realized there was much more to learn. I envisaged a newfound hobby, something akin to bird watching, calling for a distant trip, a guidebook, a checklist.

I've now checked off nine Napa wineries.

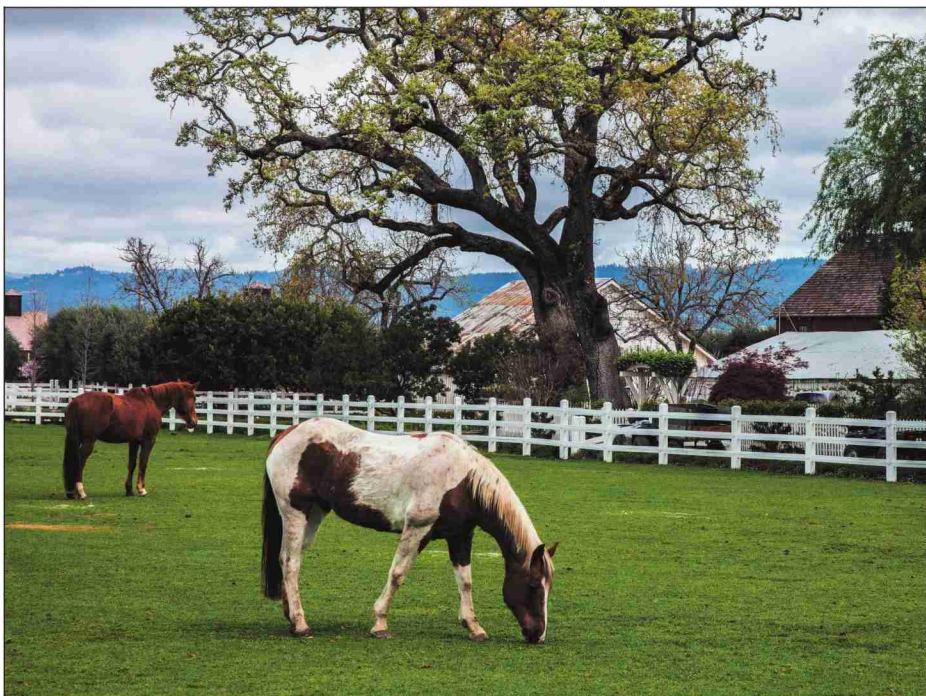
Just 190 to go. An epic journey begins.

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STEVE HAGGERTY, MCCLATCHY-TRIBUNE

Guests enjoy a tasting flight at Hess Estate's cellar in California's Napa Valley.



PHOTOS: STEVE HAGGERTY, MCCLATCHY-TRIBUNE

Classic country pastures are part of the landscape at the Nickel & Nickel winery and vineyard near Yountville in California's Napa Valley.