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Escape to the Napa Valley

STARTED THINKING ABOUT YOUR 2006 TRIP TO CALIFORNIA'S PREMIER WINE COUNTRY?
HERE'S EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW BEFORE YOU GO.

By Anthony Head

One of the most significant events in Napa Valley history took place in 1976. And it happened in Paris. There was a tasting that matched California wines against spectacular world-class offerings from Burgundy and Bordeaux. But—and this is the significant part—this was a *blind* tasting; the judges didn't know which wines were in their glasses. When the tasting was over, the French judges, who were certain that they were praising their own country's wines, had actually chosen a Chardonnay and a Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa Valley as the best in show. The world of wine has never been the same.

Since then the area just north of San Francisco has developed quite rapidly, with hundreds of wineries dotting the numerous towns, and acres upon acres of vineyards carpeting the gentle contours of the valleys. While some attention has

recently turned toward other California appellations (like those in Paso Robles or Santa Barbara), Napa Valley remains the place with the most recognition. There are good reasons, too. While I could go into great detail about topography, *terroir*, and tannins—not to mention microclimates, meso-climates, and an apparent unlimited number of soil types—I don't want to intimidate you from going. Wine is meant to be enjoyed, so just remember there's a real sweet spot here for Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay grapes.

This special travel section contains the kind of information you need to finally put together that wine country getaway you've been just thinking about for too long. We found some wonderful wineries to visit, restaurants to indulge in, and places to lay your head after a long and enjoyable outing. It's *805 Living's* guide to the Napa Valley. (Corkscrew not included.)



Visitors to Meadowood are never more than a few steps from the beautiful woods that surround the resort. The rooms are as cozy inside as the grounds are spacious outside.

Where to Stay

Even though the wineries are the main draw to Napa Valley, there are many properties in the area that set the bar very high for accommodations. Since you can't taste wines in your sleep, you might as well find a great place to lay your head until the sun comes up.

Meadowood

Meadowood is one of the best properties for wine country excursions. This prestigious estate is part of the Relais & Châteaux group, which represents luxury hotels around the world. Meadowood is their Napa Valley gem, surrounding visitors with an exclusive and sophisticated style of pampering.

After pulling off the Silverado Trail, it's just a short winding drive past vineyards to the reception area. The road allows guests to see the pool and tennis courts as well as some other features on the property, but mostly the drive just seems to initiate the decompression phase. Housed in a low-slung wood and stone lodge with a roaring fireplace and large comfortable sofas that look especially inviting after a long drive, guests can spread out and enjoy fresh coffee and tea before heading to their rooms. The lodge is also the location for regular afternoon wine tastings.

With well-manicured areas blending into the forested surroundings, Meadowood's grounds are gorgeous all year long. The New England-style cottages are hidden away in small, secluded clusters around the hilly 250-acre property, where serenity and quiet seem to just pour forth from the woods. Rooms are spacious with high, exposed-beam ceilings while large windows and French doors open out onto the trees. Most have fireplaces and large balconies and all have understated country elegance.

Meadowood's full-service spa is an indulgent destination for relaxation. There's a team of personal trainers and yoga instructors, as well as spa specialists who can lead guests through such treatments as the Cabernet Crush, with warm Cabernet grapeseed polish used to exfoliate the skin, followed by a light massage and

application of grapeseed oil; or the Cascading Stone Massage, in which a pair of therapists uses warm basalt and cool marble stones in a relaxation therapy session.

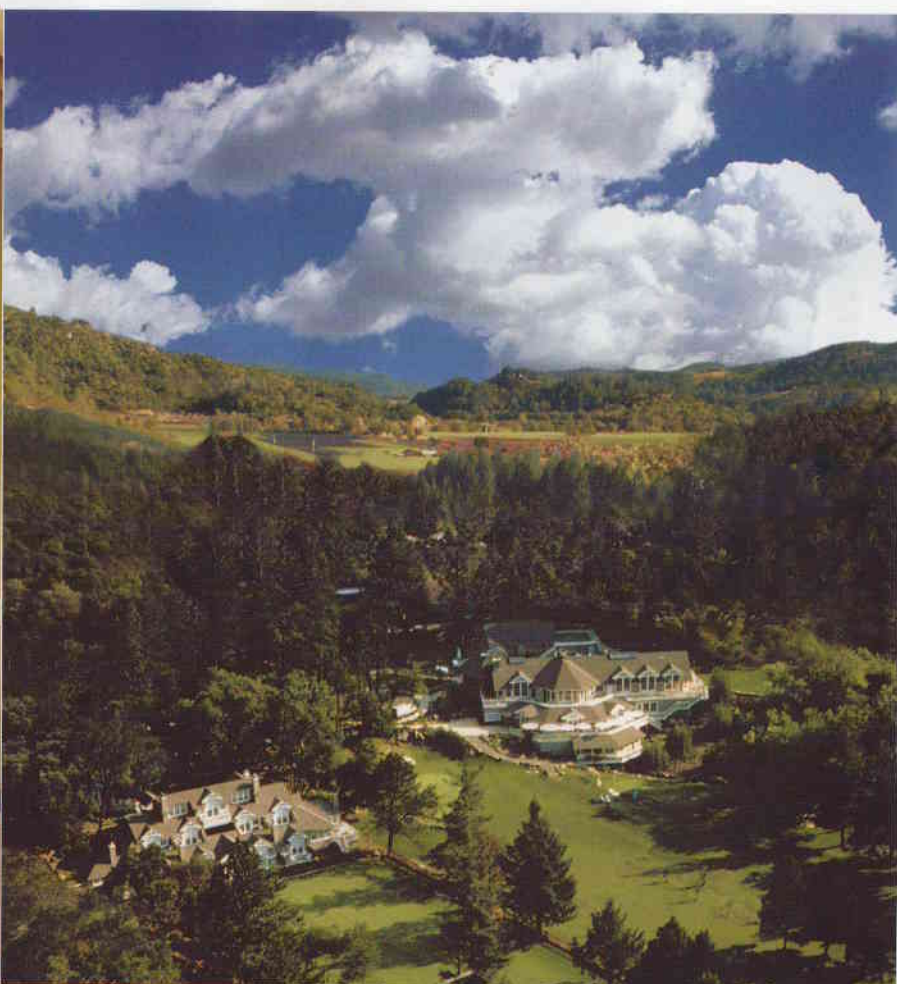
More active vacationers can hike in the surrounding forest, play a round of golf on Meadowood's nine-hole course, or take a run at the wickets on the croquet field.

Staying in step with Napa Valley's wonderful culinary reputation, there are two dining rooms on the property. While The Grill serves casual meals and a selection of entrées for room service, The Restaurant prepares more sophisticated dishes like tuna tartare, oysters on the half shell, and pan-seared prawns with citrus pearl couscous. When paired with a wine from Meadowood's very well-endowed cellar, such fare makes dressing up for dinner truly a special occasion.

If you're not careful, you might find yourself on the last day of your vacation having never left Meadowood. And yet, somehow, you will still have experienced some of the best of the Napa Valley. *Meadowood is located in St. Helena; call 800-458-8080 or visit www.meadowood.com.*

Poetry Inn

One of the newest properties in the Napa Valley represents some of the most sublime accommodations to be found in any wine country. The Poetry Inn opened in early 2005 in the revered Stags Leap district. It boasts the only public accommodations in this area, and it is a perfect place to call home while undertaking your tasting adventures. There are only three rooms in this hillside inn, and all feature exquisite views of the vineyards below. Each is named for a famous poet—Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, and





Poet in residence (clockwise from left): Rooms at the Poetry Inn have private balconies; the Robert Frost room is eloquently appointed with some of the best views in Stags Leap; guests enjoy great breakfasts and afternoon wine in the front room.



Robert Louis Stevenson—and each is appointed with a king bed and other amenities that will excite your inner muse.

Rooms have fireplaces and flat-screen televisions as well as private terraces with lots of space to spread out your newly acquired bottled treasures. There are massive marble bathrooms that house enormous soaking tubs, indoor and outdoor showers, and full-size double vanity areas.

Perhaps most special is the service; the innkeeper will contact you before your arrival to ensure that the tiny personalized details, for example food concerns or fabric allergies, are already taken care of. In the mornings, enjoy a warming three-course breakfast, and in the afternoons, the front balcony is the place for al fresco wine and cheese. One last thing: Ask to poke around the wine room. You'll find bottles there that are only rumored to exist—and you can purchase them. *Poetry Inn is located in Napa; call 707-944-0646 or visit www.poetryinn.com.*

Bordeaux House

Bordeaux House is an inviting red brick inn with charming British and French influences. Conveniently located in the center of Yountville, guests have easy access to nearby wineries and restaurants. Yountville's central valley location also places visitors in a great position to easily explore any area of the surrounding wine country. There are six guest rooms in the main building featuring California king beds with down comforters, arched windows overlooking the gardens, and air conditioning. You can ask for one of the two rooms in the Water Tower for a bit more privacy. *Bordeaux House is located in Yountville; call 800-677-6370 or visit www.bordeauxhouse.com.*

Blackbird Inn

If you love California's signature style of home, then book yourself into this century-old Craftsman. It is a rustic but elegant inn with eight rooms. (Many have gas fireplaces and spa tubs.) The Blackbird is in a great location for exploring the town of Napa and it's also close to the COPIA center for food, wine, and arts. *Blackbird Inn is located in Napa; call 888-567-9811 or visit www.blackbirdinnnapa.com.*

Affordable, convenient accommodations can also be found at **River Terrace Inn** (in Napa, 707-320-9000 or www.riverterrace-inn.com); **EuroSpa & Inn** (in Calistoga, 707-942-6829 or www.eurospa.com); and **Chien Blanc** (in Calistoga, 800-676-4205 or www.chienblanc.com).



Highway 29 **Revisited**

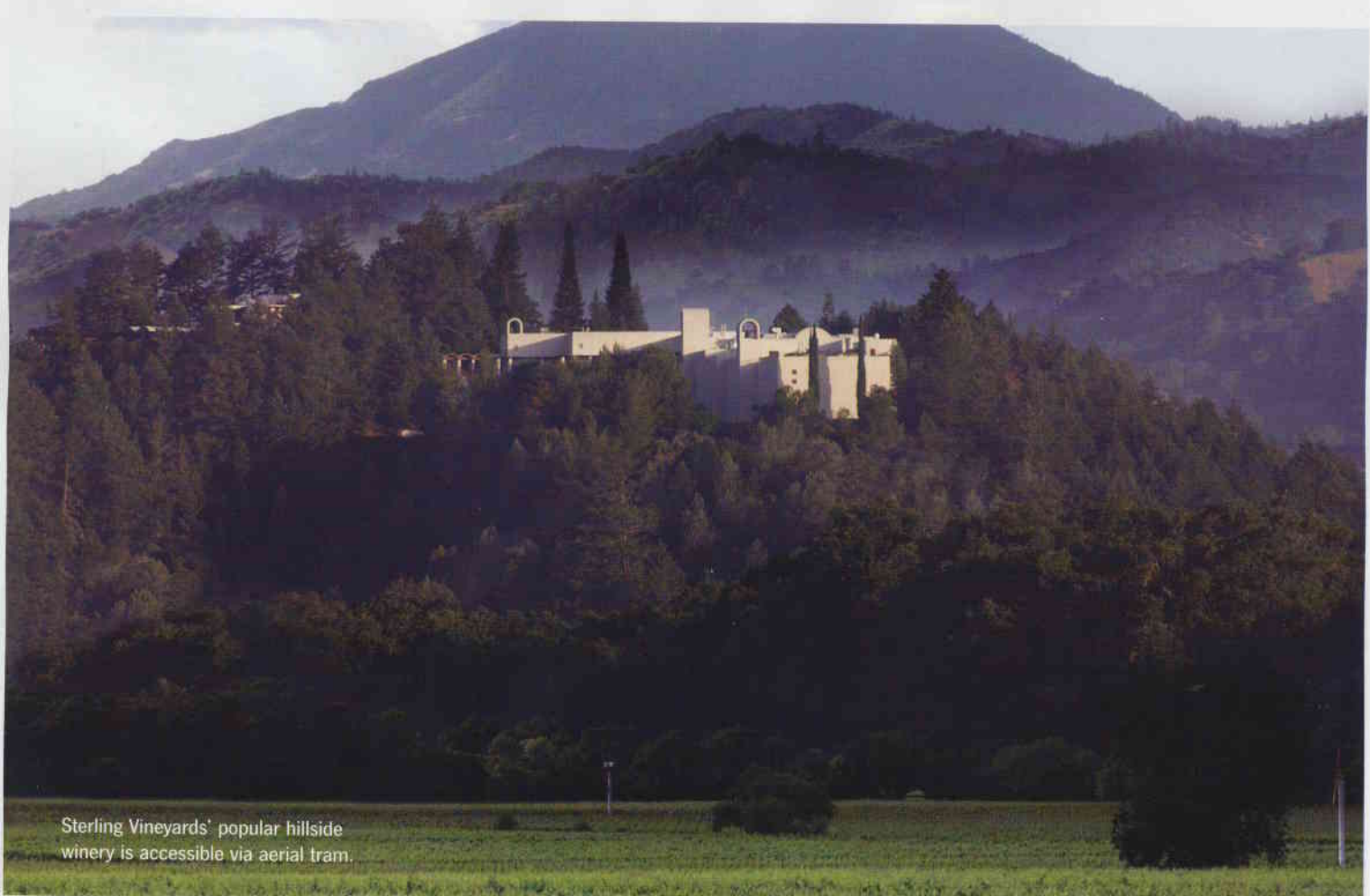
There are so many wineries in the Napa Valley that it's impossible to toss a Chardonnay grape down Highway 29—the main artery that's lined with dozens of tasting rooms—and not hit a world-class bottle of wine. While 29 used to be the only road that visitors cared about, there are also great tasting adventures awaiting those who get a little (or a lot) off the beaten path searching out some of the area's other treasures. Even after a dozen visits, it's impossible to taste all of the Napa Valley, but we keep trying. Here are some wonderful wineries that produce lovingly crafted wines. Some of the following have been around a while; others are newer faces in wine country. None are to be missed.

Sterling Vineyards offers a unique perspective on the area by offering an aerial tram ride (\$15) to its Mediterranean-style winery. Perched high in Calistoga, Sterling's hilltop location provides panoramic views and three tasting rooms. The reserve Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot are always exceptional here. The self-guided winery tour is an educational way to see the winemaking process at a leisurely pace. This is a popular destination, so consider making it the first stop of the day. *Call 800-726-6136 or visit www.sterlingvineyards.com.*

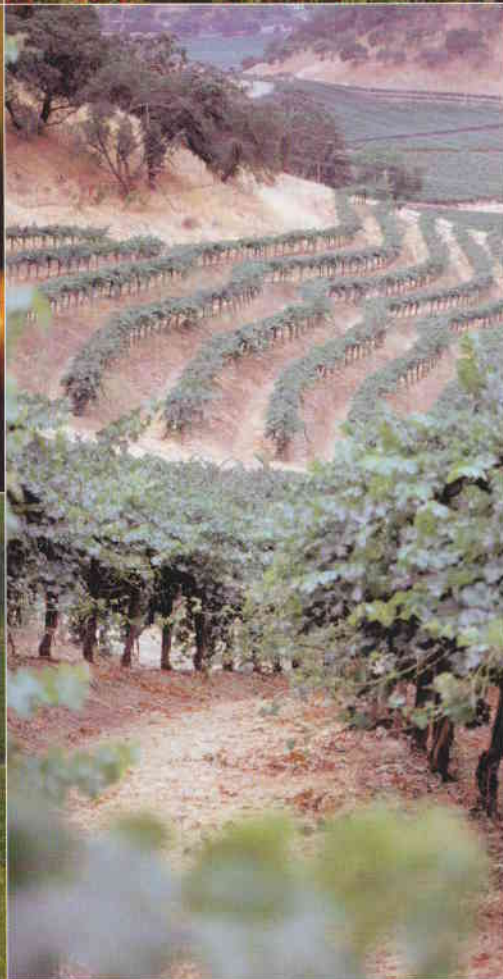
Bennett Lane was founded in 2003 in Calistoga, a peaceful region of the Napa Valley that lies in the shadow of Mount St. Helena. Producing only about 10,000 cases per year, Bennett Lane offers wonderful versions of Cabernet Sauvignon and

Chardonnay. Their Maximus (what they call a “feasting wine”) is a non-traditional blend of Cabernet, Syrah, and Merlot. They also have a great interactive program, Put a Cork in It, where groups of six to 10 wanna-be winemakers blend and bottle their own wine. Phone ahead to make a reservation for blending. *Call 707-942-6482 or visit www.bennettlane.com.*

Grgich Hills is a true piece of Napa Valley history. Remember that monumental 1976 tasting in Paris? Mike Grgich was the winemaker who crafted the 1973 Chateau Montelena Chardonnay that beat the best French whites and brought unprecedented attention to California wines. You can taste Grgich's current Chardonnay and much more at his Rutherford tasting room.



Sterling Vineyards' popular hillside winery is accessible via aerial tram.



The look of Napa Valley (clockwise from top left): a contemporary sculpture from the outdoor pavilion at Cliff Lede Vineyards; Frank Family Vineyards historic winery; Bennett Lane welcomes guests to Calistoga; the Stags Leap hillside vineyards of Cliff Lede; great views from the Sterling Vineyards outdoor tasting area; (center) oak barrels age Cabernet in the caves at Pine Ridge.

Armchair Oenophile

Can't get to the Napa Valley soon enough? Here are 15 bottles to buy right now.

D.R. Stephens Estate 2002 Moose Valley Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (\$100)

For a real splurge, it's hard to beat this red's dark chocolate, toasted oak, and blueberries. Buy it now and cellar it for a few years.

Blackbird Vineyards 2003 Oak Knoll Merlot (\$70)
You'll have to hurry and get to their web site (www.blackbirdvineyards.com) to reserve a bottle before they all fly away. But you'll thank me when you pull the cork.

Shafer 2003 Napa Valley Merlot (\$44)
Beautifully colored, this is an exquisite example of why Shafer is so respected by winemakers. There are luscious dark flavors all over this one.

Lewis 2004 Napa Valley Chardonnay (\$40)
This massive Chardonnay is totally California in its bigness. Toasted oak, honey—and was that toffee?—linger on the palate.

Napanook 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$40)
This lively Cab comes from the superb 2002 season of intense fruit. Decant this wine before serving to experience an explosion of flavor.

Miller 2002 Napa Valley Brookside Vineyard Syrah (\$38)
With its big but balanced taste, this is smooth enough to drink now—but you can cellar it for a couple years for even better stuff.

Frog's Leap 2003 Merlot (\$34)
One hundred percent Merlot brings plum and other dark fruit flavors to the table. This is a very drinkable wine right now.

Rosenblum Cellars 2003 Kenefick Vineyard Cabernet Franc (\$28)
This rich red wine, layered and complex, is a lot of fun to drink.

Hall 2004 Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$28)
If you can still find this gem, its fine mineral notes enhance pink grapefruit and melon flavors.

Jade Mountain 2003 Napa Valley Syrah (\$28)
A tiny bit of Viognier adds unexpected complexity to the cloves, dark chocolate, and black pepper here. This is a great bottle for poultry dishes, especially turkey.

Clos Pegase 2004 Mitsuko Vineyard Chardonnay (\$21)
This soft and alluring wine has hints of stone fruit and smoky oak.

Beaulieu Vineyard 2001 Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon (\$17)
Try this with grilled lamb or maybe a Tuscan Pecorino cheese.



Rutherford Hill 2004 Rosé of Merlot (\$15)
One of the underappreciated wines of our time is rosé. Lying somewhere deliciously between a red and a white, this is so refreshing when the Santa Ana winds warm up the evenings.

Solaris 2003 Napa Valley Special Release Zinfandel (\$14)
Looking for a great Zin with rich and peppery notes at this price? Grab a couple of bottles to help warm up the cooler months.

Beringer 2004 Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$12)
Lemon zest and grapefruit tartness combine with earthy and spicy freshness in this wine, a great value for such complexity.

Today, he works only with organically grown grapes to produce elegant wines that are rich and balanced. There is also a fantastic Fumé Blanc, a refreshingly light white wine that's a real pride of the winery. *Call 800-532-3057 or visit www.grgich.com.*

Cliff Lede is located in the beautiful Stags Leap district, considered by many to be the preeminent appellation of Napa Valley. To complement its spectacular vineyard surroundings, the winery has created a stunning tasting area. A large, luxurious tasting room is comfortably appointed for enjoying Cliff Lede's claret (theirs is a blend of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Cabernet Franc) and the deliciously complex Poetry (a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, and Petit Verdot). There is also an outdoor courtyard with contemporary sculptures and an art gallery that make for an exquisite afternoon stroll. *Call 707-944-8642 or visit www.cliffledevineyards.com.*

Frank Family Vineyards is certainly a great destination for champagne lovers. From their crisp Blanc de Blancs, made from 100 percent Chardonnay, to the full-flavored Rouge, made from 100 percent Pinot Noir, there are plenty of bubbles to tickle anyone's fancy. In addition to enjoying a flight of sparkling wines, don't miss their Chardonnay—one of California's best. Located in Calistoga, the facilities are among the oldest in Napa Valley. Its

tasting room is low-key, which is how they like it there: more attention is given to the wines. They also are one of the few remaining wineries offering free tastings. *Call 707-942-0859 or visit www.frankfamilyvineyards.com.*

Pine Ridge was founded in 1978 and has attained a great reputation in the Stags Leap district. Their portfolio includes award-winning Cabernet Sauvignon (try to get ahold of the 2001 if you can) as well as their Andrus Reserve, a rich, silky blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, and Malbec. Ask about cooking classes at Pine Ridge with chef Eric Maczko, a bright culinary talent and knowledgeable guide to food and wine pairing. *Call 707-253-7500 or visit www.pineridgewinery.com.*

Also keep in mind **Palmaz Vineyards** (707-226-5587 or www.palmazvineyards.com), the world's largest underground winery; **Terra Valentine** (707-967-8340 or www.terravalentine.com), a St. Helena secret with Pinot Noirs and Cabernet Sauvignons so good you won't want to tell anyone where you found them; **Mondavi** (888-766-6328 or www.robertmondaviwinery.com), because Robert Mondavi was truly an innovator in the field and his wines show it; and **Viader** (707-963-3816 or www.viader.com), with such intensely flavored wines that it's worth finding this out-of-the-way winery.

Wine Country Dining

It goes without saying that there is no shortage of fantastic restaurants in Napa Valley. There are many places to not only sample some of the area's spectacular wines, but also find an eclectic range of extraordinary edibles.

The French Laundry

Chef Thomas Keller's elegant restaurant is considered the epitome of Napa Valley dining. After experiencing one of the five- or nine-course prix-fixe menus of exquisite contemporary French/Californian cuisine, there's no doubt that the food lives up to the acclaim. Note: Reservations are taken two months to the date in advance. *The French Laundry is located in Yountville; call 707-944-2380 or visit www.frenchlaundry.com.*

Bouchon

Forgot to make your reservations at The French Laundry? You can probably score a table at Thomas Keller's less formal French bistro, located just a few blocks down. The seasonal menu almost always has leg of lamb, quiche, and roast chicken, but check out the blackboard for the day's fresh seafood and other savory items. *Bouchon is located in Yountville; call 707-944-8037 or visit www.frenchlaundry.com/bouchon/bouchon.htm.*

Martini House

Don't let the name fool you. This is a great restaurant for wine lovers. The international bottles here are among the best around—and the inventive New American dishes are, too. Specialties (like salmon paired with duxelles sauce, potato puree, and chanterelles) are prepared from a plentitude of locally produced ingredients. *Martini House is located in St. Helena; call 707-963-2233 or visit www.martinihouse.com.*

The Restaurant at Domaine Chandon

This is the best fine dining at a winery in Napa Valley. Not only is the ambiance sublime and romantic, but chef Chris Manning's innovative New Californian cuisine—like rabbit and foie gras terrine or fava bean ravioli with black truffles—is very exciting. Don't pass up the chance to pair a course or two with Domaine Chandon's sparkling and varietal wines. *The Restaurant at Domaine Chandon is located in Yountville; call 800-736-2892 or visit www.chandon.com.*



Wine Spectator Greystone Restaurant

Located on The Culinary Institute of America's stunning campus (which hosts public cooking demonstrations and other special events), the Wine Spectator Greystone Restaurant serves highly regarded Californian cuisine. Great dishes include prosciutto-wrapped trout stuffed with crab; and Pacific Rim-inspired steamed halibut with ginger, Asian greens, and black mushrooms. *The Wine Spectator Greystone Restaurant is located in St. Helena; call 707-967-1010 or visit www.ciachef.edu/restaurants/wsgr.*

Brannan's Grill

With a huge fireplace, this large, comfortable restaurant with a polished American frontier appearance serves excellent food from chef Joel Ehrlich. Hearty Western cuisine, like roast duck breast with Yukon gold potato galette or sautéed baby abalone with Meyer lemon risotto, are enough to fuel more winery outings. *Brannan's Grill is located in Calistoga; call 707-942-2233 or visit www.brannansgrill.com.*

Tra Vigne

This venerable northern Italian restaurant serves great Tuscan favorites like wood-oven roasted catch-of-the-day with lemon, parsley, and olive oil, and spicy pork sausage with charred cherry tomatoes and basil. *Tra Vigne is located in St. Helena; call 707-963-4444 or visit www.travignerestaurant.com.*

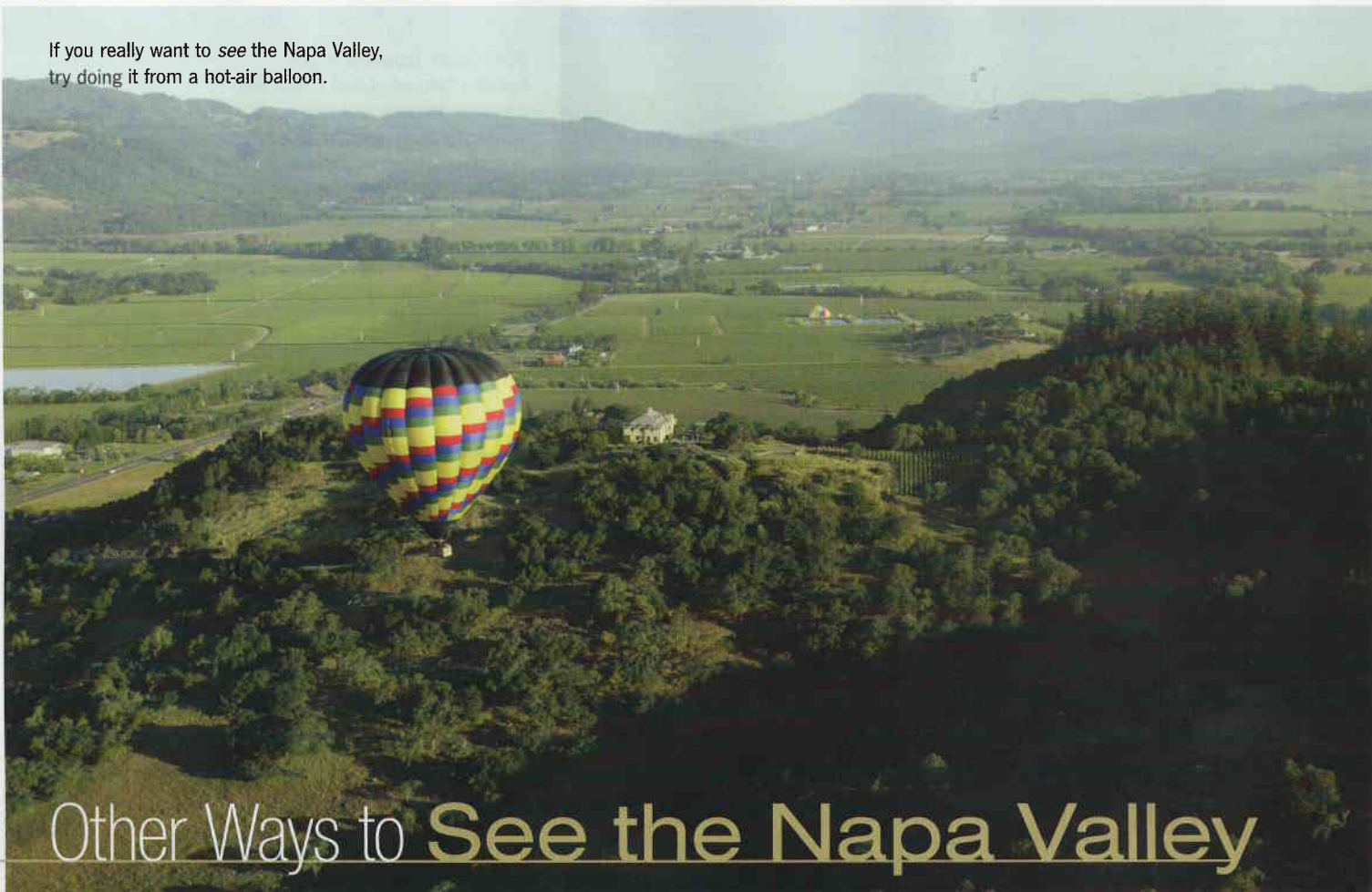
Great meals can also be found at **All Seasons Café** (in Calistoga, 707-942-9111); **Napa General Store Café** (in Napa, 707-259-0762); **Bistro Don Giovanni** (in Napa, 707-224-3300 or www.bistrodongiovanni.com); **Bistro Jeanty** (in Yountville, 707-944-0103 or www.bistrojeanty.com); and **Rutherford Grill** (in Rutherford, 707-963-1792). But if you're just craving a juicy burger or a fish taco with a milk shake, don't head home without trying **Taylor's Refresher** (in St. Helena, 707-963-3486).



Bon Appétit: (opposite page)
Roasted Colorado Lamb Chops with
Tuscan Ratatouille and Balsamic
Vinaigrette from the Wine Spectator
Greystone Restaurant; (this page,
clockwise from top left) the outdoor
terrace at Wine Spectator Greystone
Restaurant; irresistible profiteroles
from Bouchon; the saloon-type bar
at Brannan's; Domaine Chandon's
restaurant patio.



If you really want to see the Napa Valley,
try doing it from a hot-air balloon.



Other Ways to See the Napa Valley

You can always drive yourself up and down Highway 29, the Silverado Trail, and the many winding country roads. But there are other options that may be more convenient, and sometimes are just more fun.

Leave the Driving to Them

Sometimes the best way to see wine country is by letting someone else lead the way. Tour companies have great relationships with the wineries, know their way around, and won't be drinking along the way.

California Wine Tours

Don't know where to go first? This full-service company has pre-arranged itineraries that visit some of Napa Valley's well-known wineries. This is a nice option for anyone just starting out and it's a good choice if you're looking to meet other wine-lovers along the way. *Call 800-294-6386 or visit www.californiawinetours.com.*

Sonoma Wine Tours by Soussan

Don't let the name bother you: This private tour company specializes in Napa as well as Sonoma, and it helps both beginners and experts find the best wines—whether that means the big reds, the dry whites, or everything in between. They'll customize each trip according to the guests' desires. *Call 707-542-5219 or visit www.soussanswinetours.com.*

The Wine Tutor

John Thoreen is one of the most celebrated Napa Valley wine educators. His services are definitely for visitors who already know their Pinot Noir from their Pinot Meunier and are ready to elevate their knowledge to sommelier status. Thoreen can get you where you need to go, including extremely hard-to-get-into wineries. *Call 707-738-5274 or visit www.winetutor.com.*

Staying on Track

The Napa Valley Wine Train winds right through the heart of the Valley and has several enticing diversions, including stops at specific wineries for private tours and tastings. There are also dinner theater productions, concerts, and special events for holidays. *Call 800-427-4124 or visit www.winetrain.com.*

Up, Up, and Away ...

If your goal is to really *see* the Napa Valley, then don't miss your chance to take it all in from the air. Hot air ballooning is a great way to see the fabled vineyards, hills, and scenery while gently floating on the winds 2,000 feet up. Check out **Balloons Above The Valley** (800-464-6824 or www.balloonrides.com) and **Bonaventura Balloon Company** (800-359-6272 or www.bonaventuraballoons.com).

On the Calendar

Whether the grapevines are hanging with fruit in the summer or the leaves on the trees are turning gold and red in the fall, the Napa Valley is beautiful all year round. According to Mike Richards of www.besttimetogo.com, weather is certainly a factor to consider for a Northern California excursion. "Comfortable weather: That's how I plan my own vacation," says Richards. "If the weather's lousy the rest of the day tends to be downhill." His web site can help determine what time of the year has a comfortable temperature range for the trip.

There are other things to consider, such as how many other people you'll want around you. Once a sleepy little farming community, Napa Valley is quite popular now and the crowds can reflect that. Sometimes the off-season (January to April) is the best time to go. But if you're the type who loves a big party, you can always find plenty of action taking place. Check out www.napavalley.com and www.napachamber.org for upcoming events; here are just a few special 2006 dates to keep in mind.

January 28: St. Helena Wine Auction

Celebrity chefs and winemakers join together for this event at Trinchero Family Estates to raise money for St. Helena public schools. *Call 707-967-2712, ext. 155.*

January 28-April 1: Napa Valley Mustard Festival

Experience the Napa Valley Mustard Festival's 13th annual season of food, wine, and art, which celebrates the richness of the area. Vineyards and hillsides are vibrant with blooming wild mustard. *Call 707-944-1133 or visit www.mustardfestival.org.*

January 28: Mustard Magic

The Culinary Institute of America (CIA) at Greystone hosts Mustard Magic, the grand opening event of the Mustard Festival. This year's Mustard Magic is held in honor of New Orleans. There's a gourmet buffet in the CIA's impressive teaching kitchen and a live auction. *Call 707-944-1133 or visit www.mustardfestival.org.*

February 11: Kissed by an Angel Gala

The Napa Valley Museum hosts its annual Angel Gala at Niebaum-Coppola Estate Winery with music, a wine reception, dinner, and live and silent auctions. *Call 707-944-0500, ext. 100.*

February 11: Savor St. Helena

This St. Helena Chamber of Commerce annual event is held in downtown St. Helena and features the bounty from local restaurants and wineries. *Call 707-963-4456.*

March 1: Dinner is Served

The Napa Valley Opera House League Dinner is served at more than 30 participating restaurants around the valley. Proceeds benefit the Napa Valley Opera House. *Call 707-254-8040 or visit www.napavalleyoperahouse.org.*

March 5: 28th Annual Kaiser Permanente Napa Valley Marathon

Runners enjoy one of the most beautiful courses in the world, stretching the length of the Napa Valley wine-growing region. *Call 707-255-2609 or visit www.napavalleymarathon.org.*

March 25: A Taste of Yountville

Yountville showcases delicious samplings of restaurant fare, wines, olive oils, and microbrews. *Call 707-944-0904.*

May 6: Celebrate the Napa River

An entertaining and educational afternoon celebration includes river walks along the River Trail, electric boats trips, and live music. *Call 707-254-8520 or visit www.friendsofthenapariver.org.*

May 20-21: La Strada dell'Arte Napa Valley

This Italian Street Painting Festival is held at COPIA: The American Center for Wine, Food & the Arts. Professional and nonprofessional street painters create chalk art to benefit New Tech High School. *Call 707-224-8735.*

June 1-4: Auction Napa Valley

One of the most impressive and influential wine charity fundraisers is held every year on the beautiful grounds of Meadowood. *Call 707-963-3388 or visit www.napavintners.com/auctions/wineauction.asp.*

August 3: 16th Annual River Festival

This day by the water features the Napa Valley Symphony, gourmet food, wine, and fireworks. *Call 707-254-8520 or visit www.friendsofthenapariver.org.*

Event information is subject to change without notice.

