

NAPA INSIDER

IS NAPA VALLEY SUFFERING FROM ADD?

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It's starting to feel like we live in a land where sharks swallow guppies and guppies slurp down tadpoles. Or is it the tadpoles that are doing the biting?

The dwindling days of summer signal an end to the season of swilling, yet our valley refuses to stand still. The ease in which businesses wax open and closed in these parts has me wondering if our valley suffers from a strain of attention deficit disorder of the Wine Country varietal?

Calistoga dining darling 1226 Washington opened in December 2013, only to close in May. I'm not sure what's worse: The fact that this spot will cease to serve this summer or that it was gobbled up by what's starting to look like the gluttonous group at Solage. Earlier this year, it refashioned St. Helena's French Blue as Archetype. The swinging door syndrome could've stopped there, but didn't. Auberge Resorts sold its interest in Solage Calistoga, which then became part of the new Solage Hotels & Resorts, an entity that has eyes on extending the *concept* to other locations. Solage scooped up the vacant 1226 Washington space (which it vied for and lost last year) with plans to open a new restaurant early next year.

It's starting to feel like we live in a land where sharks swallow guppies and guppies slurp down tadpoles. Or is it the tadpoles that are doing the biting? Regardless, it's a feeding frenzy. We saw the reincarnation of the Napa Valley Opera House as City Winery. BottleRock could have easily bit-it due to a legion of bad debt, but thanks to Latitude 38 (a collective of monied Napans), who ponied up pounds of loot to make good on debts to the city and Expo, the show could go on, and with it continues a rendition of wine and food tasting on steroids—with music as the main attraction.

But back to other college tries that didn't make it. Cindy Pawlcyn's Wood Grill and Wine Bar closed. She gave it her all at this space, first with Go Fish, which morphed into Brassica until it sang its last song as CP's in 2012 where it closed for good in December. The folks at Clif Family Winery temporarily poached the space for a one-night pop-up in June to showcase could-be food from their Bruschetteria food truck that will perch outside the Velo Vino tasting room (and elsewhere around town) starting this month. Chef John McConnell (formerly of Terra restaurant and Taj Hotels, Resorts and Palaces) will stir up an assortment of garden fresh antipasti, bruschetta and spitini along with other Clif wine and food pairings served straight from the truck.

In Downtown Napa, summers that were once synonymous with Chefs' Market, are no more. The event failed to celebrate its 20-year anniversary, replaced by "other" happenings like NASCAR Night. Exactly what comes to mind when you think of Wine Country respite.

But just when I think all is lost, things swing in other directions. Thanks to Napa Valley Vintners, Napa Valley Grapegrowers and Visit Napa Valley, which each infused millions into the Vine Trail, another stretch of the bike and pedestrian path will connect American Canyon to Yountville and give us locals something to do besides eating and drinking.

JAX diner opened downtown, perhaps to rekindle the illusion of small town life—or was it to offer wine tasters a hangover fix? Regardless, it's good to know there's still room for comfort food and beer bars. St. Helena's newest breed of the latter, The

Farmer & the Fox, presents a Northern California spin on a British gastropub. This posh take goes beyond staid pub fare with Chef Joseph Humphrey (formerly of Meadowood) at the helm. Scotch eggs and game pie have never looked and tasted so swell. Humphrey is executive chef for the entire Cairdean Estate where the Fox and the new Butterscots bakery sit.

Perhaps one of the best testaments of our running to standstill times was the Stags Leap District Vineyard to Vintner 25th Anniversary seminar, called "Looking Back, Leaping Forward," hosted at Shafer Vineyard in April. Veterans John Shafer and Richard Steltzner swapped stories alongside newbies in the neighborhood. Panelists spoke of the hurdles to form the sub-AVA in 1989, the first to be defined solely by soil, climate and natural barriers. This reminds me that no matter how much growth descends upon us, Napa Valley will always reign when it comes to wine. It was a point that crystalized over sips of a 1988 Shafer, 1977 Stag's Leap and a 1980 Steltzner that were served at the seminar.

Technology is king. Change is eminent. Restaurants and resorts come and go. But it will always be the vines, and the fruit they bear, that stand still among the chatter of our times.

