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GREAT ESCAPES

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By Jenny Peters Correspondent

Ready for a road trip? Well, buckle up and head north to the Napa Valley, where harvest season is right around the corner. Why drive when flying is so much quicker?

Ever since 9-11 and the crackdowns on carrying liquids, the main answer to that question is simple. You cannot carry on any of the wines you buy; and for most of us, a big part of the enjoyment of a trip to California's premier wine valley is bringing home those gems you find there, the ones that never see distribution beyond the Napa Valley. These aren't the vintages you can find in every SoCal Ralphs, Trader Joe's or CVS Pharmacy, or even at the Wine House or Wally's. No, these are the special discoveries that are only sold at the winery itself. And sure, you can pay to have them shipped home. But spending an extra \$10-\$15 per bottle sort of defeats the purpose of getting a great deal on a unique bottle, at least in my book.

Plus, when you add up the time and costs of flying, driving your own car just makes sense. Start with the ride to the airport, arriving at least one hour ahead of time, add in the hour flying time to San Francisco or Oakland (choose Oakland every time if Napa is your only destination for the trip, as it is never delayed by fog), plus another half hour to pick up a rental car, and yet another hour and a half to drive up to the valley, and you've come to five hours. If you start your drive near where the 101 and 405 freeways meet, it is only a five-hour trip; and when you arrive, you've got your own car, and no timetables to meet on either end of the journey. And the cost of gas is often less than the plane ticket alone, especially if there are two or more of you along for the ride.

Regardless of how you choose to get there, stay at the lovely Napa River Inn in downtown Napa, where quaint rooms boast fireplaces and views of the river rolling by, or go further north on the Silverado Trail to sleep at Meadowood, the posh resort that Napa's first families frequent as their country club. You'll be in the midst of the changing leaves there in the fall, and will feel a million miles away from SoCal.

Every winery in Napa is always welcoming, but even more so at harvest time. Picking can begin as early as late August for the white varietals like Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay, and go as late as early November for big reds like Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah. It's something of a crapshoot as to whether a specific winery will have truckloads of grapes pouring into the crusher as you pull in, but there's a good chance of seeing that on any day through September and October. So plan your trip with some of the other special things that go on in Napa during harvest, and then if you see some of the crush, it will be a bonus.

Perhaps the biggest party of the year (after the Far Niente 125th Anniversary Party, the extravaganza that was held on July 17) is the Staglin Family Vineyard Music Festival for Mental Health (www.music-festival.org), happening on Sept. 11. Now in its 16th year, the event has raised more than \$95 million so far, with a winning combo of fabulous food, over 70 first-class wines for tasting (I sipped the legendary Screaming Eagle Cabernet there, for instance) and a dance concert by Dwight Yoakam. Tickets are \$750, and the party goes all day and into the evening.

Beaulieu Vineyards celebrates 110 years of production of their benchmark Georges LaTour Private Reserve Cabernet with a massive release party on Oct. 9, while fans of Sterling Vineyard can take their scenic tram on a rare nighttime trip on Oct. 2 for the "Evening Under the Moon" party. Every Friday through October, visit Silverado Vine-

DRIVING UP TO Napa

A road trip may be
a cost-effective way to
appreciate
the wine country

yards on the Silverado Trail for their "Friday Evenings on the Terrace," combining a gorgeous view of the valley with food and wine pairings for \$25.

While on the Silverado Trail, the less-traveled road (as opposed to main drag Route 29) that winds up the valley, be sure to visit some of the best wineries in the world. Those are the ones in the Stags Leap District, the three-mile AVA where Cabernet to die for is produced. Be sure to book a tasting at legendary Shafer Vineyards (www.shafervineyards.com) for a sip of their incredible Hillside Select, then stop in to the totally charming Robinson Family Vineyards (www.robinsonfamilyvineyards.com) nearby. The newest member of that elite district, this family-run operation makes you feel right at home while pouring their delicious reds.

Just south of the SLD is Signorello Estate (www.signorelloestate.com), famed for their Zinfandels, but also producing a wide variety of their excellent varietals. They showcase a number of them (don't miss the Padrone red blend) at their daily Enoteca Signorello tastings, where they pair five wines with lovely small plates of tasty tidbits prepared

by Chef Rodger Babel, including Wagyu beef and a rabbit salad that will knock your socks off. Be sure to make an appointment for the \$65 event.

Cut back over to Route 29 on the Yountville Cross, and discover Ma(i)sonry, a combo art/antiques gallery and wine-tasting center (www.maisonry.com) on Washington Street. Sit in the back garden of their historic building and try Blackbird Vineyard's amazing Illustration, a lush Pomerol-inspired Merlot, or try a flight of one of the other 12 producers showcased here. Be careful, you might just find yourself driving home a piece of art along with your wine discoveries by the time you leave here.

When hunger strikes on Washington Street in Yountville, you can hit the French Laundry (if you've made a reservation two months ahead!) or the always-yummy Hurley's, whose wild boar is a revelation. Or head to Mustards Grill on Rte. 29, where Cindy Pawlcyn has been serving up outstanding American classics for over 25 years. The Mongolian Pork Chop is justifiably famous, and Executive Chef Dale Ray's spicy Grilled Laotian Quail and 3-Cheese Mac & Cheese are must-haves as well.

For those special wines to take back home, make your last stop in your Napa adventure the Tasting Room at Napa Wine Company, on Rte. 29 at the Oakville Cross. There you'll find more than 25 boutique wines to try (be sure to sample the Downing Family, Ghost Block and, just for fun, the Marilyn (Monroe) Merlot) and definitely a few that warrant a place of honor inside your car and in your home cellar.