



Napa/Sonoma

California's wine-country capital provides an unmistakably romantic vacation

Hills, vineyards, rivers, idyllic charm and a staggering number of Michelin stars: The adjacent counties of Napa and Sonoma, where the scenery is as enticing as the cuisine and the world-class wines, burst with culinary and sensory abundance. Just north of the bustling Bay Area, this region's provincial way of life makes it feel like a getaway in every sense of the term.

With all the world-class accommodations, food and wine set among verdant farmland and winding back roads, the Napa region is unquestionably romantic. It's a modern-day California ideal where "farm-to-table" isn't something to brag about—it's the norm.

There are many different ways to enjoy this famous corner of California. Here are a few standouts for a romantic weekend away.

SONOMA

Stay in a Farmhouse

The Russian River Valley, named after early 19th-century Russian trappers who settled downriver, is the pastoral yin to Napa's visitor-heavy yang. Forrestville's **Farmhouse Inn** is a quaint-meets-urbane 18-room getaway, with several units located in a beautifully renovated barn. Each room has a deck overlooking a forest—along with an inside/outside fireplace stocked with complimentary s'mores ingredients. Mixed with antique farm-equipment decorations (careful with the pitchfork hanging on the wall), modern touches like heated bathroom tile floors lend a touch of luxury. Farmhouse Inn's restaurant holds a Michelin star, and with a

heavily Sonoma wine list and dishes like Rabbit Rabbit Rabbit — applewood-smoked bacon-wrapped loin, roasted rack and confit of leg—it's easy to see why. Though the place is modernized and renovated, its roots run deep; it's owned by fifth-generation Sonoma siblings. farmhouseinn.com.

Tour with a Sommelier

Farmhouse Inn's Geoff Kruth is one of a handful of sommeliers in the valley to hold the title of Master Sommelier. If you can, accompany him to some of his favorite nearby wineries, including **Scherrer**, **Arnot-Roberts** and **Wind Gap**. No faux-French châteaux or gift shops here; just small-batch wineries in farm country run by energetic, new-generation vintners producing adventur-

ous, delicious wines amid forklifts and corrugated steel roofs. With or without a guide, it's a worthwhile experience to appreciate the pure craft of winemaking without the frills. scherrerwinery.com, arnotroberts.com, windgapwines.com.

NAPA

Stay

Tucked away on Silverado Road, just around the corner from Calistoga's picturesque main street, **Solage** hotel has a big city-meets-small town feel. It's undeniably hip—the resort's Michelin star restaurant, Solbar, would be at home in any major city—with a palm tree-lined pool deck and beautiful mountain-range vistas. The rest of the property tells a different story. Guest houses are in detached, beige bungalows connected by meandering paths, overlooking

a small forest grove. Complimentary beach cruisers, two to a room, are perfect for tooling around the property or riding into nearby Calistoga. It all adds up to a youthful, West Coast Martha's Vineyard-style experience. The spa, adorned in the same luxurious Americana aesthetic, was voted No. 1 in North America by *Condé Nast Traveler* readers in 2010. solagecalistoga.com.

Pedal Power

Napa's back roads are especially inviting for bicycles, and **Napa Valley Bike Tours** provide a unique angle on wine tasting. Starting in Yountville, ride with a guide along Silverado Road past vineyards, with tasting stops in the Stags Leap district at Chimney Rock and Robert Sinskey wineries. But stop beforehand at Thomas Keller's always-busy **Bouchon Bakery** (located next to his famous Bouchon restaurant) to fuel up in the morning with the tastiest coffees and croissants. napavalleybiketours.com, bouchonbakery.com.

Food & Wine

There are larger and more famous wineries in Napa, but St. Helena's **Ehlers Estate** is truly unique, growing certified organic wines on 43 acres. Winemaker and general manager Kevin Morrissey—he and his wife are former San Diegans—produce outstanding wines on a property where grapes have been grown since 1886 and the estate's original stone building still stands. All of the proceeds from wine sales

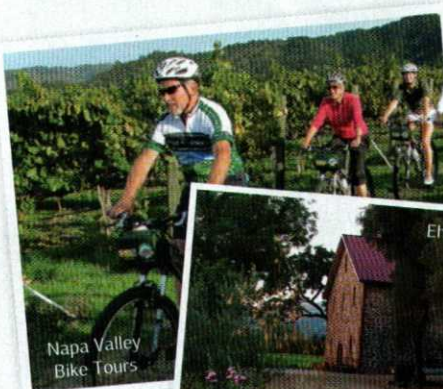
go to the Leducq Foundation (named after French entrepreneur Jean Leducq, who reconverted the land to grapes in the 1980s), which funds international cardiovascular research. Local foundation recipients include the Salk Institute and UCSD. ehlersestate.com.

Yountville and the nearby town of Napa are, of course, bursting with food options. It's not easy to get reservations at Keller's French Laundry, and the famous pan-Asian cuisine of Morimoto has made a splash since arriving last year. But you can't go wrong with any of Cindy Pawlcyn's nearby restaurants, including **Mustards Grill**. Her mini-empire has expanded all over the Bay Area, but the legendary Mustards, opened in 1983, was the first for this pioneer in wine-country cuisine. The bistro humbly and humorously labels its cuisine "deluxe truck-stop classics," which doesn't do it justice—everything on the eclectic menu, including wine pairings, is done to perfection, from heirloom tomato salad to halibut tostada, Laotian quail or locally raised rack of lamb. mustardsgrill.com.

For a pre-dinner dose of culture, check out Yountville's **Ma(i)sonry**, an upscale art gallery serving Blackbird Vineyards wine in a 19th-century two-story stone building along Washington Street, with romantically lit sculpture gardens in back. maisonry.com.

From San Diego, Napa and Sonoma counties are easily reached by plane or a day's drive north. It's well worth the effort either way—this epicurean epicenter set amid pristine natural beauty is easy to fall in love with.

—ADAM ELDER



YOUNG SUDS

Fat chance you'll ever catch Eve Sieminski pestering her 21-year-old son about what he wants to be when he grows up. That's because Brandon has already found his calling, as the brewmaster of the fledgling Iron Fist Brewing Company in Vista, a new addition to an already prospering beer region.

While you don't have to walk (stumble?) far in these parts before tripping over one sweet-tasting beer after another, Iron Fist's meteoric rise from its October opening, led by its fresh-faced brewmaster, is certainly unique.

"We've sold more beer than I thought we could have," says Brandon, who has no formal (or informal) brewing background. "We're running low on beers, which I'm told is a good problem."

Not long ago, Brandon, his father, Greg, and older brother Adrian kicked around the idea of home brewing. That eventually evolved into this 15-barrel production tucked in an industrial park.

Belgians are the beer of choice for Sieminski, and Iron Fist

pours a tasty one in its Spice of Life, which bursts with notes of orange and coriander. Others include Golden Age, Hired Hand, Dubbel Fisted and Blonde Renegade. Iron Fist, soon to offer a stout and an IPA, has about 35 store accounts and recently upped its keg capacity.

Iron Fist is truly a family affair.

Adrian handles the sales and distribution. Greg and Eve work the tasting room. If you're lucky, the adorable Polish grandparents, Les and Edith, will wait on you.

"They're a lot of help and add to the ambience of the place," Brandon says. "You really can't beat it." —COREY BROCK

