

# Valley

magazine

## High School Musical

Local music students take the stage at the Paul Green School of Rock.

## Best of the Valley

Discover some of the neighborhood's coolest haunts and hangouts.

## pamper yourself

From basic massages to signature treatments, Valley day spas indulge those in need.

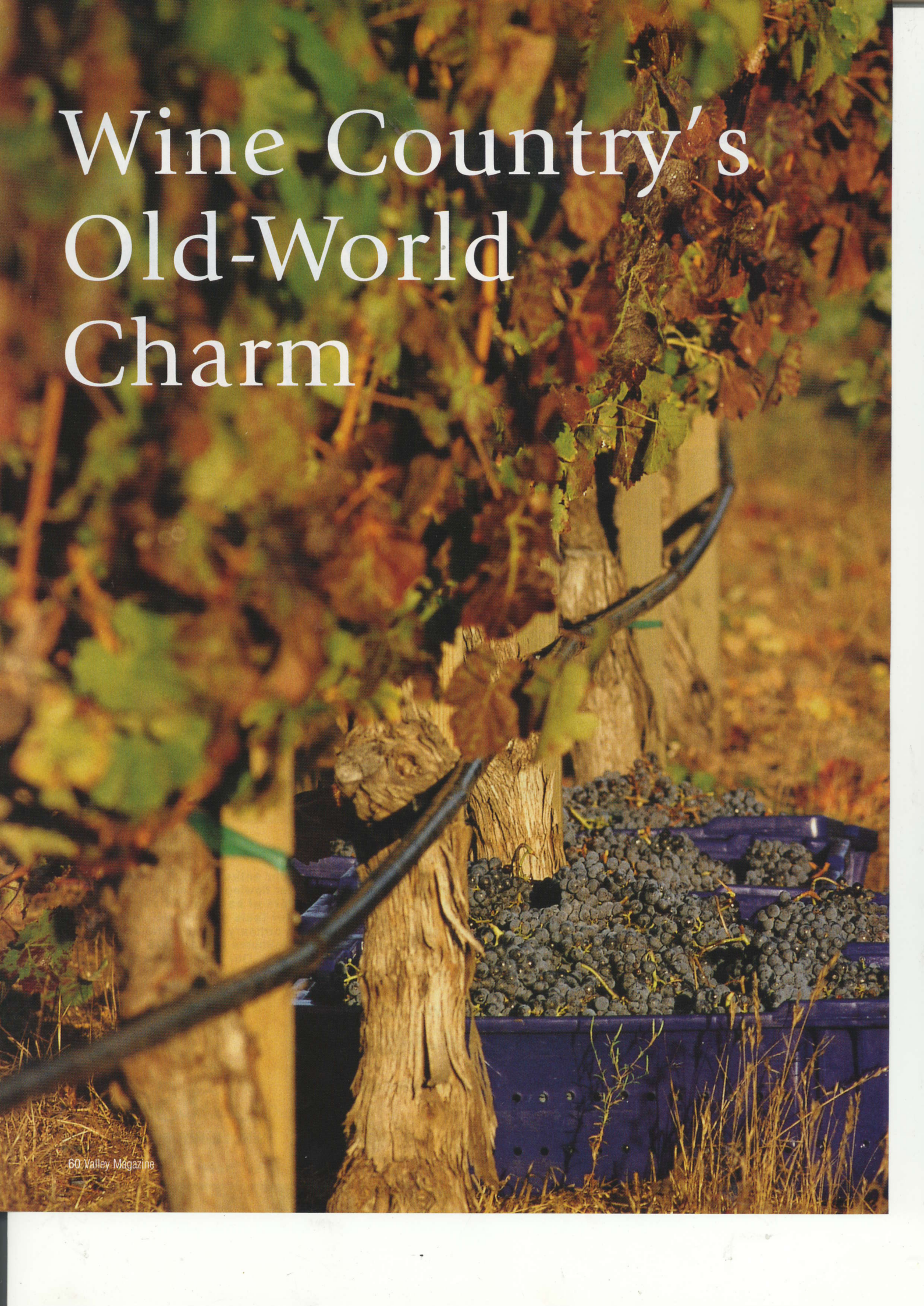
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# McPhee

The future looks bright for this "American Idol," as her recently released debut album climbs the charts.

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# Wine Country's Old-World Charm





Photos courtesy of Meadowood resort

Amid the country club-like surroundings of Meadowood resort in Napa Valley, follow one writer as he spends the weekend living the “good life.”

**By Rubin Carson**

It's a chilly late November morning in wine country, and my significant other, Marilyn, and I are luxuriating at the doyenne of local resorts—Meadowood. Think Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald kicking back in some rustic cottage plunked in the middle of a private estate that's a no-go for commoners. We are talking gray clapboard exterior, high gabled ceiling, stone fireplace, king-sized bed and comfy couches with easy access to a sheltered porch. Wine? Oceans of it, but later. Room service has just delivered breakfast, and there's a “*New York Times*” and “*San Francisco Chronicle*” to plough through. In sum: heaven.

But Napa Valley hasn't always been all luxe resorts and wine tours. During the late 1800s, Meadowood Valley was farmed by Chinese laborers who grew rice where the swanky resort's golf course sits today. Later, these hard-working immigrants built railroads, mined quicksilver on Mt. St. Helena and worked in vineyards and wineries. An extra dollar on their one day off could be earned by hand-chiseling wine caves in local hills. Even today, some of the rustic moss-covered stone walls at the resort remind you of this region's Chinese heritage.

The fact that Meadowood has the feel of a Gatsby-like retreat is no accident. The 250-acre Napa Valley spread was reborn in 1960 as a private country club offering all earthly delights in a forest setting. Besides 85 private

cottages, amenities include a rambling main lodge housing a formal and not-so-formal restaurant, an equally rambling full-service spa and wellness center, tennis courts, a nine-hole golf course, professional croquet lawn, children's programs, bird-watching walks, wine education, music events, culinary demonstrations, hiking, biking, mountain biking and horseback riding. In other words, you won't go bored here. The service is attentive, and staff appears appropriately shocked when tipped.

No point in being at a Relais & Chateaux pleasure dome without fine dining. The first night of our stay, we made a reservation at The Restaurant at Meadowood. The space had been shut down for remodeling but reopened this year to oak-beamed elegance. We sat at an ultra romantic table with a view of the golf course disappearing into a forested terra incognita.

Marilynn immediately got pre-emptive tab shock when she saw the elaborate table setting of three wine glasses lined up next to gorgeous Spode china you'd love to have at home. The menu arrived, and I said, “Let's order something you don't make at home all the time. Like Wolfe Ranch quail smothered in truffles.” It was no use reminding Marilyn that wine country cuisine is up there with the world's best. Even visiting French chefs agree. And no matter what you pay, the experience is worth it. Ergo, I ordered for both of us, so as not to increase her guilt.



We started with roasted foie gras in rye bread crust in a persimmon-whisky and baby mustard reduction. It was unbelievably rich and delicious. Next came Half Moon Bay petrale sole with grilled squid in a toasted garlic-saffron emulsion. Petrale is a local fish that tastes like a cross between Dover sole and sand dabs (though it is actually a flounder), and you'll often see it on Northern California menus. I've asked a few San Francisco chefs where the name petrale comes from, but it seems I can never get a satisfactory answer. No matter. Due to its mild taste, petrale is perfect for those, like Marilyn, who rarely order fish. She raved. Point Reyes grass-fed beef in cabernet sauce with trumpet mushrooms was next and equally delicious.

My recipe for a perfect resort is a place you can stay on property during your whole visit and not have a desire to stir. Meadowood has more than enough delights that you could spend a lifetime not stirring here. You don't have to walk either. A phone call brings a chauffeured golf cart to your door in five minutes max and from there, it's whatever you dream. Marilyn was carted off to the full-service spa every day (I've never seen a spa that was half-serviced), where she was massaged and decouped for hours. Me? I'm spa phobic. Years ago, I visited a spa in Calistoga. With wind chimes tingling in the background, I was buried up to my neck in heated cedar chips—the treatment du jour from Japan. After five minutes, I screamed so loud to get out, it set off the burglar alarm.

You have to leave Meadowood for at least a day because it's located in the middle of Napa's Stag's Leap District, a region known for producing cabernet sauvignon of power and elegance. When I mentioned our itinerary of three recommended wineries,

Marilynn was not that excited. "Doesn't red wine keep you up all night and give you hives?"

"Who's going to drink it?" I replied. "I'll just sip and spit. That's what my wine aficionado friends do."

"Is that why most of them graduated with honors from Betty Ford's?" she retorted.

The truth is that I'm not that much of a wine buff. After a lifetime of travel, I've learned that wine regions are the most beautiful destinations to visit any time of year—especially in the late autumn. That's when the grapes have been harvested and places like Napa turn into an almost medieval tapestry of gold and rust. It's better than any New England fall leaf trip—not to mention that vintners are America's version of the Sun King. They spend most of their time surrounded by the best wine, best scenery, best food, and the women are not that bad either. Here's a little recap of our wine tour:

### **Baldacci Vineyards**

This very welcoming small vineyard run by the grandsons of Italian immigrants is known for homemade wines. A visit to their operation is memorable for its funkiness and lack of ostentation and technical lectures. Winemaker Rolando Herrera has been making wines in Stag's Leap District for 20 years and recently gave up a wine consulting business to work for the Baldaccis. "My philosophy of winemaking," he states, "is to make wines with a silky, velvety texture and subtle taste—no monster tannins. I'm proud that 2002 Baldacci Cabernet Sauvignon received 90 points in *Wine Enthusiast*."

Upon departing, Marilyn asked, "What are tannins?" I



explained that they were organic acids from grape seeds and skins that give wine its bite. The word comes from the word tannic acid that used to tan leather. Judging from her "yuck" reaction, I told her more than she needed to know.

#### Clos du Val

This ivy-covered winery is located in a wooden grove, and the tasting room looks like it was done by a Hollywood art director, with lofty Gothic ceilings, tile floors, humongous wooden wine barrels and whimsical Ronald Searle prints. High windows allow views of the working winery.

We lunched with the chief of operations, John Clews, who learned the wine business in South Africa. I asked him what you have to do to take part in the annual wine crush, which has always been a secret desire of mine. He explained that you are only invited if you join the winery's Loyal Cellar Club, which offers discounts throughout the year. Members divide into three teams. They pick the remaining merlot grapes from the vineyard, stomp and smash them for 10 minutes and race back and forth to team barrels. Winners take home magnums of 2002 Ronald Searle Syrah. Noting my enthusiasm, Clews kindly invited us to join in the 2007 stomp. I was about to

accept, but Marilynn's no-no kick under the table stopped me.

#### Signorella Vineyards

Our final winery experience was at family-owned Signorella Vineyards, where we took a cooking class. I usually give culinary classes wide berth due to inherent boredom. Surprisingly, Signorella's course was different, probably due to lots of wine nipping. The handsome Italian instructor with a slight Tuscan accent made the recipes seem almost coherent.

We learned to make a dish with Snake River Idaho Farms Kobe beef, which brought back memories of a visit to a barn in Japan where the calves were kept for a whole year—gorged and massaged. They even piped in soothing Mozart music. Jay Theiler, president of Snake Farms, explained his company's variety are not confined. They are allowed to roam free and fed high-quality grain. Theiler thought the piped-in music was a good idea, and said he would confer with partners about my idea. While I think Japanese Kobe is very marbled and often too fatty to enjoy, this Idaho Kobe beef was more like a normal rib eye. It was also delicious when paired with Signorello 2003 Estate. It could use a dash of Schubert to tenderize further. Or, maybe, Marilynn just overcooked it. **VM**

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