

Toast to Yountville

Village has all a wine-searcher could want

IF YOU GO

Napa and Sonoma Valleys are located east of San Francisco, on State Route 29.

▪ For lodging at the luxury-rated Vintage Inn, call 800-351-1133; or go to vintageinn.com.

▪ For more about Yountville, go to visityountville.com.

▪ For Napa Valley information, see napavalley.com.

By Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty

McClatchy-Tribune News Service

YOUNTVILLE, CALIF. » If vineyards at harvest time call to you — grapes plump on the vines, leaves turning red and gold — consider a visit to Yountville, in the heart of California's famed Napa Valley. A country village by this city gal's standards, Yountville is tiny: about 12 blocks long and four blocks wide, an island lapped by rolling vineyards. Washington Street, the main drag, bisects the town, where 3,480 residents count themselves lucky to be making a living from tourism and the wineries that attract connoisseurs from near and far.

Somewhat of a novice regarding Northern California's secret hideaways, I headed there recently expecting to wander along winding lanes through picturesque hills and valleys, fixing the glorious fall colors for future recall.

In due time I arrived — with friends in tow — to discover that while some might call Yountville a village, it's a village on steroids, a city in miniature, depending on your definition. Nearly everything a wine-searcher could want is right there, from lodging to dining, a 10-minute walk from end to end.

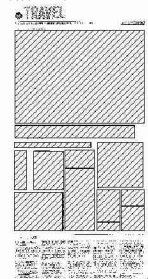
So walk we did, passing a half dozen tasting rooms (suburban outposts of distant wineries), fashion emporiums, art galleries, Napa Style (a must-see kitchen and comestibles shop on the Vintage Estate), a flourishing vegetable garden and the Villagio Inn & Spa, next door.

More notable than any of these, however, was Yountville's culinary scene, famous for cornering at least five (or maybe six) Michelin stars. From Bouchon, the bistro and bakery, to the French Laundry (three stars between just the two), and from Redd Wood (pasta and pizza), Bodega (steaks and Italian specialties) to Bistro Jeanty (pure French), they offered a bountiful cornucopia of fine (and expensive) dining surprises.

We booked rooms in the Vintage Inn, built in 1985 on the Vintage Estate's 23 centrally located acres. The Vintage Inn met our first criteria: a central location. It also won points with a large swimming pool and hot tub, both open into the evening for an after-dinner soak. The deal-maker was a no-charge breakfast: a buffet with fruit, cereals, sliced meats, bread, cheese, tomatoes and a chef-manned omelet station.

When an initial inspection of the proposed digs revealed a second-floor room with king bed, puffy quilt, shamefully large tub, two balconies, a fireplace and kitchenette, we registered. As for the wine project, we tasted and bought two cabernets at a tasting room across the street. But what to do about exploring Napa Valley's quaint country roads? Enter the concierge.

"Most of these wineries don't allow drop-in customers," said Christina Richardson, adding they also charge a fee for a tasting; typically \$25 (or more) per person. So, with four appointments in hand we retrieved the car and were off, to Hess (on rustic Mount Veeder), to Nickel & Nickel (exclusive, organized, welcoming), to Frogs Leap (casual, fun), and to Cakebread (join a group and wait



your turn). Later Richardson — whose courtesy and professional know-how made our mission a success, booked “his and her” aroma therapy massages with bath treatments at the Vilagio Spa.

Why didn't we eat at the celebrated French Laundry? It was booked up for the next five months. But Bouchon had a lunch cancellation, a meal that became the trip's culinary highlight.

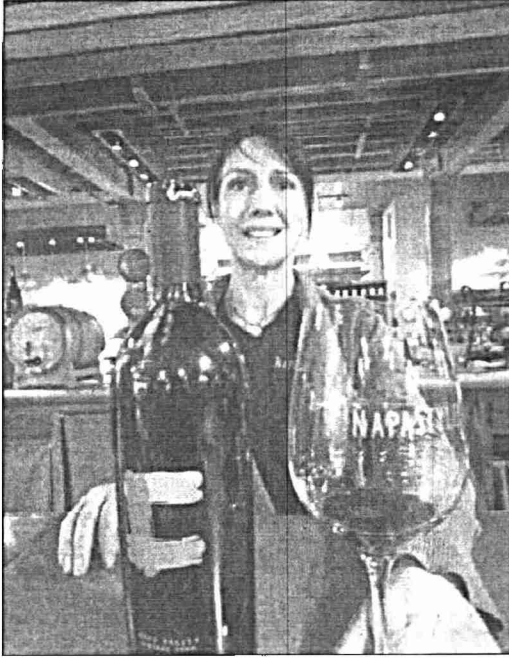
Did we weigh down the car's rear wheels with a trunk full of wine? Not quite, but we did buy select labels. A few were reputed to improve with age, the sort of vintage years you store in the cellar and crack open when your toddler graduates from college. I envisaged a new-found hobby, something akin to bird watching; calling for a distant trip, a guidebook, a checklist.

I've now checked off nine Napa wineries. Just 190 to go.

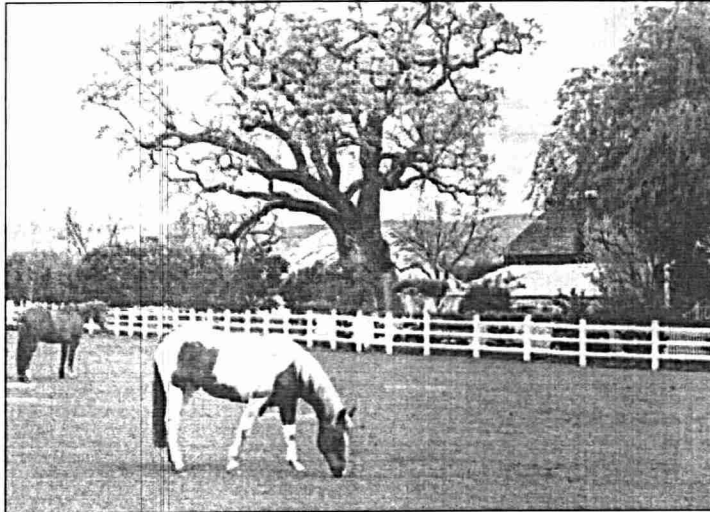


Red tulips bloom in the garden in front of the Vintage Inn in Napa Valley's Yountville, Calif.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF STEVE HAGGERTY — MCT



Classic country pastures are part of the landscape at Nickel & Nickel winery and vineyard in Napa Valley.



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