

Napa Valley village offers good taste

Many come for the wine but stay for the food and more in Yountville

BY ANNE Z. COOKE
 McCLATCHY-TRIBUNE

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.

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.

Somewhat of a novice regarding Northern California's secret hideaways, I headed there recently. To add purpose to pleasure, I also hoped to stop wherever a friendly sign said Tasting Room, suggesting of a winery tour and a chance to buy a recent vintage at the source.

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.

Yountville's culinary scene is 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.

Our travel credo being, as some guidebook wag described it, "a peaceful night makes the next day bright," we booked rooms in the Vintage Inn, built in 1985.

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, presiding over a desk in the hotel's lounge. "You have to have appointments. And you can't visit Far Niente at all."

Far Niente, my former boss's favorite wine, was the only label I could think of.

"But," she added, with a conspiratorial smile, "I just might be able to make a reservation for you at Nickel & Nickel. They're the owners of Far Niente. Let me call them. I've been going to lots of tastings lately," she confessed. "It's my chance to learn about wine."

Handing us a map of the 199 wineries in the Napa Valley, she explained that better wineries not only require a reservation, they also charge a fee for a tasting; typically \$25 or more per person. But that fee pays for two hours with a wine connoisseur who leads the tour, then presides over a "flight" of wines which he or she pours, guiding you through a comparison.

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), and to Cakebread (join a group and wait your turn).

Later, Richardson, whose professional know-how made our mission a success, booked "his and her" aromatherapy massages with bath treatments at the Villagio Spa next door. A rare indulgence for us, it confirmed the old saw that "the couple that plays together, stays together."

If you go

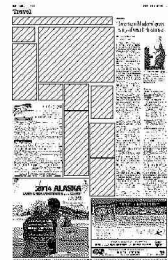
Napa and Sonoma valleys are east of San Francisco on State Route 29.

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

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

For Napa Valley information, see www.napavalley.com.

— McClatchy Tribune





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Guests enjoy a tasting flight at Hess Estate's Cellar in California's Napa Valley.