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5 Perfect Days in . . .

#7

California Wine Country

By Brook Wilkinson



Though the Napa Valley produces just 4 percent of California's wine, its grapes are the most sought after in the state and account for 25 percent of its wine revenues.

Illustrations by
James Noel Smith

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The Challenge

You've got less than a week to see Napa Valley, California's most famous farm country. But where to start among the roughly 450 wineries? Although the first commercial Napa grapes were planted by George Yount in 1838, it wasn't until 1976 that the region's winemakers earned international respect by beating true French Bordeaux and Burgundies in a blind tasting. Furthermore, you'll likely be sharing the 30-mile-long, 5-mile-wide valley with more than a few oenophiles: The more than 5 million annual visitors make Napa the state's second most popular tourist destination (after Disneyland). In the peak summer months, this means crowds running five deep at the most popular tasting bars, and one-lane highways choked with traffic. Even if you go in the off-season, don't plan on leaving things to serendipity: Many of the best wineries are open by appointment only, so no one will be there to greet you if you arrive unannounced. Finally, the sequence of your itinerary can be as problematic as the content: Each wine tasting and meal has a different stylistic note, and combining them is like composing a symphony.

For "The Solution," see page 100. >>

Day I (Thursday): Carneros AVA

Your first stop in Napa is the Carneros American Viticultural Area. The only one of Napa's 15 AVAs to share land with its hippie cousin county to the west, Sonoma, Carneros is a rural area without a single incorporated town. It was largely ignored by grape growers until the 1960s, when there was little land available elsewhere in the valley and a few pioneers discovered that the clay soil and bay-cooled weather here were perfectly suited to chardonnay and pinot noir.

Fresh off a flight into San Francisco International Airport, or after a few days in the city, pick up a rental car and head north on Highway 101. You should cross the Golden Gate Bridge (named for the Gold Rush, not its rust-colored paint job) by 10 A.M. to arrive at your first tasting appointment around 11. If it's not too foggy, pull off at the Vista Point on the far side of the bridge to admire San Francisco's skyline. You'll be passing cow farms within 20 minutes, and soon thereafter will turn right onto Highway 37. The painted bovine sporting exhaust pipes perched atop a billboard is the signal for your next turn—a left onto Highway 121, at the corner of the Infineon Raceway (once known as Sears Point).

Highway 121 hangs a right at Big Bend and takes you east into Napa County. If you've never been here before, you may well be surprised by your surroundings, since it will quickly become apparent that many of the county's residents can't afford its high-priced wines. Locals call these parts Napalachia, a term perfectly embodied by the broken helicopter in a yard near your resort, the Carneros Inn (707-299-4900; thecarnerosinn.com; doubles, \$480–\$655), where each cottage comes with its own wood-burning fireplace, entirely private heated porch, and outdoor shower. About seven miles past Big Bend, turn left at a traffic light onto Old Sonoma Road (see map). Richmond has arranged for the folks at Artesa Vineyards & Winery (1345 Henry Rd.; 707-224-1668; artesawinery.com) to greet you with a complimentary glass of sparkling wine at their hilltop aerie: When the Spanish Codorniu family decided to build an American outpost, they cut the top off

the highest point on their new property, inserted a winery, and replanted the grass on the roof. The result resembles a half-submerged submarine. The Codorniu clan had been making sparkling wines since 1872, and they continued to do so when they arrived in California. But in 1997, they shifted their operations to still wines, which they've been producing for four and a half centuries: chardonnay, pinot noir, cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and the occasional Gewürztraminer or cabernet franc. This is your first stop of the day because it's popular among city day-trippers, and the parking lot will be full of tour buses by afternoon. Vines cover the surrounding slopes, and on a clear day you can even see San Francisco in the distance. During your private tour and tasting, you'll see modern artworks in glass and reclaimed airplane parts, all done by artist-in-residence Gordon Huether.

If you've never "tasted" wine before, keep one thing in mind: Taste is actually the last sense you use to appreciate wine. First, look at its color. **Newer vintages tend to have a deeper, purple hue; a pinot noir will be paler than a cabernet sauvignon. If it's a sparkling wine, watch it effervesce—the smaller the bubbles, the higher the quality of the wine.** If you're tasting a still wine, swirl the glass. This pushes the liquid up the sides of the glass, increasing surface area and thus evaporation, maximizing the aromas, also known as the nose, or bouquet. You'll find that it's easier to get a graceful swirl when you leave the glass on the counter and make circles with your hand resting on the base. (By the second night of the trip, you'll find yourself swirling your water glass at dinner.) Dip your nose into the glass and think about what you're smelling. Cherries? Blackberries? Leather? Cigar smoke? Then tip a bit of wine into your mouth and let it

glide over your tongue, hitting all your taste buds. Some people suck in a bit of air at this point, to further aerate the wine. Finally, either swallow the wine or spit it into the available bucket. **Don't be afraid to ask whatever questions come to mind, no matter how silly they seem. After all, many wineries call their tasting staff "wine educators."**

To fortify yourself for the afternoon's two tastings, retrace your route back to Highway 121 and turn left into the



[Fig. 1]

It's said that winemaking is 45 percent cleaning, 50 percent moving stuff around, and 5 percent drinking beer. So top off the day with a pint.



The Tip

Each tasting is one ounce of wine, so five tastings equal a full glass. Feel free to use the spit bucket, and take notes so you'll remember what you taste.



The Tip

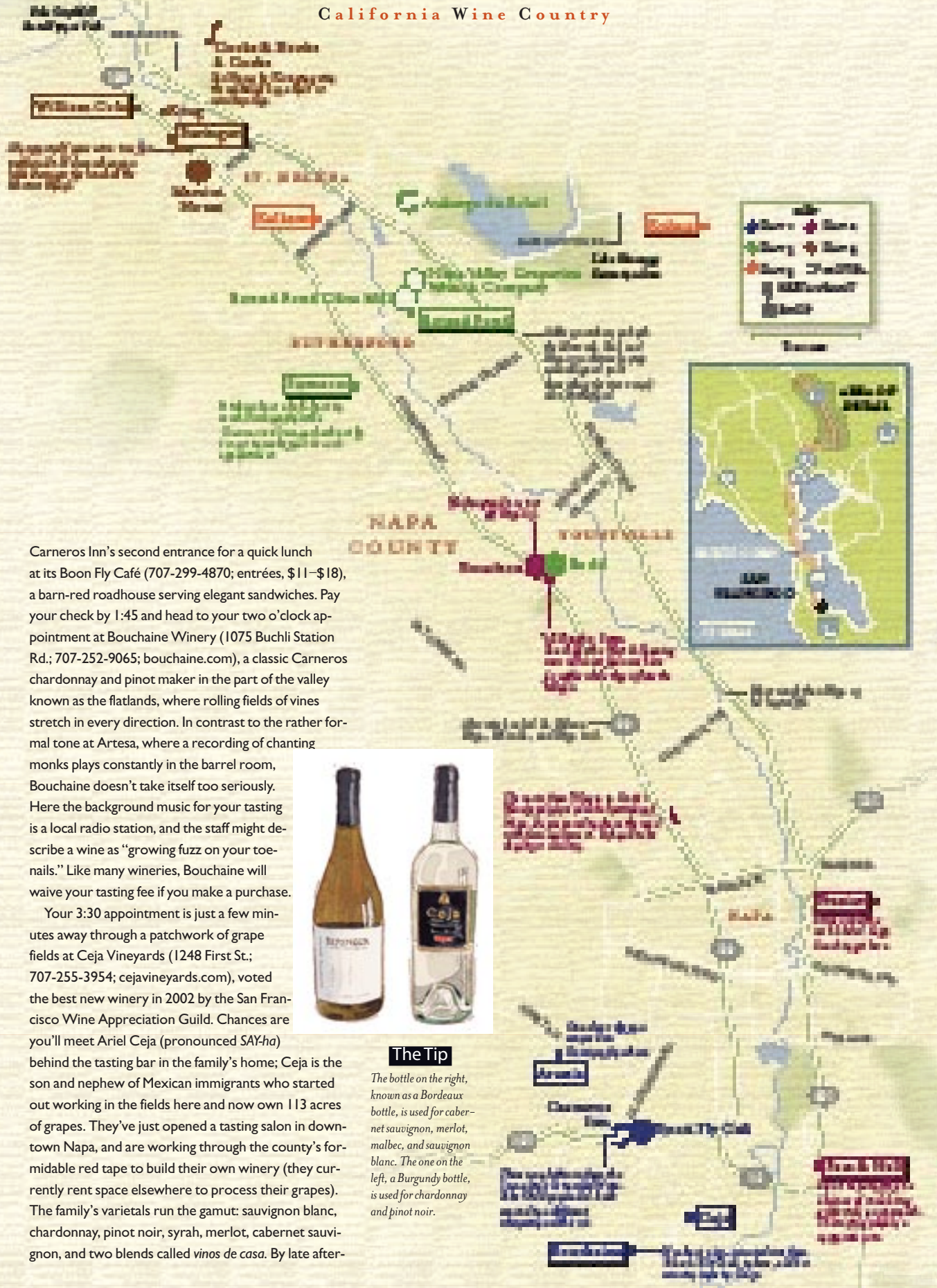
Buy an inexpensive portable cooler to keep your wine purchases from spoiling while they sit in your car.

Bring plenty of layers to wear: Nighttime temperatures drop into the fifties even in summer.

Hot days and cool nights make for PARTICULARLY FLAVORFUL WINE

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Carneros Inn's second entrance for a quick lunch at its Boon Fly Café (707-299-4870; entrées, \$11–\$18), a barn-red roadhouse serving elegant sandwiches. Pay your check by 1:45 and head to your two o'clock appointment at Bouchaine Winery (1075 Buchli Station Rd.; 707-252-9065; bouchaine.com), a classic Carneros chardonnay and pinot maker in the part of the valley known as the flatlands, where rolling fields of vines stretch in every direction. In contrast to the rather formal tone at Artesa, where a recording of chanting monks plays constantly in the barrel room, Bouchaine doesn't take itself too seriously. Here the background music for your tasting is a local radio station, and the staff might describe a wine as "growing fuzz on your toenails." Like many wineries, Bouchaine will waive your tasting fee if you make a purchase.

Your 3:30 appointment is just a few minutes away through a patchwork of grape fields at Ceja Vineyards (1248 First St.; 707-255-3954; cejavineyards.com), voted the best new winery in 2002 by the San Francisco Wine Appreciation Guild. Chances are you'll meet Ariel Ceja (pronounced SAY-ha) behind the tasting bar in the family's home; Ceja is the son and nephew of Mexican immigrants who started out working in the fields here and now own 113 acres of grapes. They've just opened a tasting salon in downtown Napa, and are working through the county's formidable red tape to build their own winery (they currently rent space elsewhere to process their grapes). The family's varietals run the gamut: sauvignon blanc, chardonnay, pinot noir, syrah, merlot, cabernet sauvignon, and two blends called *vinos de casa*. By late after-



The Tip

The bottle on the right, known as a Bordeaux bottle, is used for cabernet sauvignon, merlot, malbec, and sauvignon blanc. The one on the left, a Burgundy bottle, is used for chardonnay and pinot noir.

noon, chances are there will be a small crowd at Ceja's bar and salsa music playing.

Once you've had your fill of Ceja's wine and spirit, head back toward the Carneros Inn. Follow the main drive past rows of board-and-batten guest cottages and your dinner spot for the evening, Farm (707-299-4880; entrées, \$20–\$34), to the reception area at the back of the property. Although there are nearly 120 cottages and fractionally and solely owned houses



The Tip

Most Napa vines are pruned into a T-shape and attached to a trellis (as shown on the left). Some older vines, though, are still head-pruned (as on the right), which forces the plant to support itself.

es on the Carneros resort's 27 landscaped acres, you may well feel you have the place to yourself, even in high season. Fortunately, the food at Farm is well worth the effort of rousing yourself from your cow-print chaise longue. The restaurant's exterior approximates its name, but the dining room is San Francisco chic, with neon-backlit wine racks and a glass-fronted kitchen that turns out simple but elegant dishes highlighting local products. If it's a romantic oc-

casion, request one of the leather banquettes by the fireplace [Fig. 1]. **Cap off the night with a dip in your hot tub, which overlooks the vineyards and horse ranches. Just don't stay up too late, because you have an early wake-up call tomorrow.**

Day 2 (Friday): Napa and Yountville

You're expected in Yountville at six this morning, dressed in layers. Why? You've got a sunrise appointment for a ride with Above the West Ballooning (800-627-2759; nvaloft.com; \$245–\$295 per person). Since you can't turn left on Highway 121 from the Carneros Inn, follow the Old Sonoma Highway instead past the A-I Market to Old Sonoma Road; a left here will take you to another intersection with Highway 121, at which you can make a left toward Napa and then another left up Highway 29. Your crew will meet you near Yountville's Villagio Inn, where you can have coffee while they inflate the balloon before helping you into the basket for your flight over the green-and-gold farmland. About an hour later, you'll return to a convenient landing spot for a sparkling-wine breakfast [Fig. 2].



[Fig. 2]

The best part of the hot-air balloon ride is the silence; you can hear dogs barking from hundreds of feet in the air.

Soon enough, it'll be 10 A.M., time to head to your first tasting of the day, at Frazier Winery (70 Rapp Lane; 707-255-3444; frazierwinery.com). The route here will take you past

Wine can be labeled a PARTICULAR VARIETAL (say, chardonnay) as long as it has at least 75 percent of that grape in its blend; to list an appellation on its label, it must have 85 percent of its grapes from the area

<< For "The Challenge," see page 96.

The Solution

What you need is a Wine Country Concierge—and that's where Jackie Richmond comes in (see "Top Travel Specialists," August 2007; or go to cntraveler.com/travel-agentfinder). A 22-year resident of the valley, Richmond helped me orchestrate a Napa itinerary that would delight a first-time visitor as well as a valley veteran, and a wine neophyte as much as the owner of a thousand-bottle cellar. She suggested high-volume wineries that I might have poo-hooped and tiny operations I'd never heard of, and she steered me away from the big names that are either overcrowded or overly pretentious. The vast majority of Napa's visitors tour but a fraction of its wineries, so having a personalized experience is a matter of knowing where to go. Almost none of the wineries I visited are open on a walk-in basis, and at most you'll be the only guests present; one vintner wouldn't even have taken my call without

Richmond's introduction. The wineries you'll find on these pages have been chosen for the quality of their products as well as the tasting experience. Each time you open a bottle brought home from your trip, you should remember the mimolette cheese that was paired with it, or the fields of chubby grapes you saw ripening for a future vintage. However, just because a winery isn't listed here doesn't mean that it's not worth the trip. There's only so much you can fit into five days, so the wineries we recommend represent a variety of sizes, tasting styles, and varieties. If you prefer to stick to a certain varietal or plan to buy by the case, let Richmond know and she can adjust the itinerary as necessary. You'll find point-by-point directions here in case you want to drive yourself, but if you plan on imbibing at every stop, you'll need to hire a driver (an infamous state statistic puts Napa County at the top of the list for DUIs). You'll note that we've omitted lunch on several days, since there are generous

snacks at many of the wine tastings. If you get hungry, don't worry: Even Napa's delis rise to a higher standard.

I visited in January, and although the roads and rooms were empty and the vines had a certain skeletal beauty, some of the wineries and restaurants were closed. According to Richmond, August through October are the busiest months, with crowds gathering to watch the harvest and the crush, when the air is sweet with the scent of fermenting grapes and many wineries hold special events. Richmond prefers May, when the weather is warm but not too hot (temperatures can hit triple digits in August), the vineyards are outlined in wildflowers, and the roads are less congested. On a summer afternoon, it's nearly impossible to make a left turn out of the wineries lining Highway 29, so you'll notice that we include only right turns along that route. Note too that our itinerary is timed to a long weekend. There will be far fewer people mid-week, but some wineries will be closed.

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residential sections of the town of Napa (be prepared to share the road with farm equipment and horse trailers). The hills are dotted with cattle and wine estates, and the manicured greens you'll see on your way to

Frazier are the Napa Valley Country Club's fairways. Frazier is another family affair: Dad Bill started making cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and a wee bit of petit verdot when he neared retirement as an airline pilot. Your guide will take you into Frazier's 10,000-square-foot cave, where you can sample the aging



[Fig. 3]

Caves are perfect for storing and aging wine. They maintain a temperature of about 58 degrees, with high humidity levels that reduce evaporation.

wine straight from barrel before sitting down for a bottle tasting paired with three excellent cheeses [Fig. 3].

Shade your eyes as you emerge from the cave an hour or so later. At this point, you can either head back past the Carneros Inn to the di Rosa Preserve (707-226-5991; dirosapreserve.org), a sizable indoor-outdoor collection of Bay Area art adjoining a nature preserve, or go for one more tasting at Patz & Hall (851 Napa Valley Corporate

Many of the wineries in this itinerary distribute to a limited number of stores and restaurants. If you find a winery that you particularly enjoy, consider joining its club, which gives you early access to LIMITED-EDITION WINES

Way; 707-265-7700; patzhall.com). Either way, don't bother stopping at Copia, an all-too-academic institutional ode to "wine, food, and the arts" in a warehouse of a building, where the wine tastes are dispensed by machine. **More promising is the Oxbow Public Market (610 First St.; 707-963-1345), next door, which just opened last December and is slowly attracting local purveyors to its artisanal food stalls inside and farm stands outside.**

If it's more wine you're after, Patz & Hall will be an entirely different tasting from the others so far. You might think you're at the dentist when you enter the tasting salon—an impression that wouldn't be entirely inaccurate, since one of the

owners was once a dental hygienist. The salon is located in a corporate suite outside downtown Napa, and there's no view of undulating grapevines because, well, Patz & Hall doesn't own any grapes. Instead, it contracts with a number of growers to produce the fruit for its chardonnays and pinot noirs, many of which are single-vineyard bottlings. The salon feels like a rich friend's pied-à-terre (although you'll find portraits of the winery's star growers instead of family photos), and you'll sit down across the table from Patz & Hall's wine educator for a private sampling of three whites and three reds. Unlike at many other tastings, all are

poured in separate glasses so that you can compare, say, the 2002 Mendocino Chardonnay's tropical fruit bouquet to the 2005 Carneros Chardonnay's floral nose. The accompanying bites of cheese and savory snacks should tide you over until dinner tonight at Bouchon (6534 Washington St.; 707-944-8037; entrées, \$16–\$32), one of the jewels in king Thomas Keller's Yountville crown.

Spend the rest of the afternoon relaxing at the Carneros Inn, perhaps wandering through its pocket-sized fruit orchards or trying your hand at bocce before heading north again to Yountville, an unassuming frontage-road town off Highway 29 that just happens to have more Michelin stars per capita (six for 3,200 residents, if you're counting) than any other place on earth. Thomas

Keller owns four of those stars: three at the famed French Laundry and one at Bouchon, as well as three more at Per Se, in New York. The other two are shared by Redd,

where you'll be dining tomorrow night, and Bistro Jeanty. This tiny town is able to support such an embarrassment of riches largely because of its convenient location in the middle of the valley. It's nearly impossible to get a reservation at the French Laundry, but no worries: Bouchon is a lively, more casual bistro best known for its mussels, *pommes frites*, and profiteroles. Enjoy these and other specialties before making your way back to the Carneros Inn.

Day 3 (Saturday): Rutherford AVA

If your perfect morning starts with a sun salutation, attend the Carneros Inn's complimentary yoga class at 9 A.M., then pack up, check out, and grab some signature hot doughnuts at the Boon Fly Café or a scone at Market (707-299-4920), both on the Carneros property. You have an eleven o'clock appointment half an hour away at Swanson Vineyards (1271 Manley Lane; 707-967-3500; swansonvineyards.com). As you watch the flora change from palms and eucalyptus to evergreens and oaks in a matter of miles, you'll get a sense of the microclimates that govern this part of the country. North of Yountville, Highway 29 narrows to two lanes, and vineyards abut the road's shoulders so as not to waste an acre of precious Napa dirt. This is the heart of Napa Valley, where the big, meaty cabernets that the county is known for are born; Swanson shares property lines with Mondavi, Silver Oak, and Niebaum-Coppola, to name a few. Keep an eye out for Opus One on the right. It's the child of the 1979 partnership between Napa's original wine ambassador, Robert Mondavi, and Bordeaux powerhouse Baron Philippe de Rothschild—and a rather odd-looking child at that, emerging from a



[Fig. 4]

The tasting table at Swanson, which seats eight, is made of Moroccan thuya wood inlaid with African agate.



The Tip

Growers use wind machines—in this case, fashioned from an airplane's propeller and engine—to blow cold air away from the grapes during a freeze.



[Fig. 5]

That's not wine: Round Pond stains the middle of its oak barrels red to mask the messy wine drips that often occur.

grassy field like a half-excavated Mayan temple. Charging \$30 for a single pour, Opus One is overpriced and overrated. So too is Far Niente, hidden from view to your left, where the tour guide's spiel is as slick as a Seattle street. Although Swanson's rococo salon might seem similarly pretentious at first, the tongue-in-cheek paintings and exuberantly pink walls are anything but. This is the Swanson clan of frozen-entrée fame—now a big player in the Napa wine world. Swanson Vineyards started in 1987

with merlot—an unusual choice for this part of the valley—and today produces a wide range of wines. Its merlot, pinot grigio, and “Alexis” cabernet blend are available nationwide, while the chardonnay, rosato, sangiovese, syrah, petit syrah, and dessert wines are available

only through the salon and wine club. You'll be able to try about six different bottlings at the tasting this morning, each paired with caviar, cheese, or chocolate [Fig. 4].

Just as Swanson's edibles and wines are polar extremes, so its rococo salon is the opposite of the wood-beamed tasting room at the Round Pond estate (875 Rutherford Rd.; 888-302-2575; roundpond.com), where you have a one o'clock appointment [Fig. 5]. Hang a right at Beaulieu Vineyard, whose French founder you can thank for importing the disease-resistant rootstock that saved what was left

a phylloxera aphid infestation destroyed alley at the end of the 1800s. In fact, it's a miracle any wineries survived the next half-century: In 1906 San Francisco earthquake destroyed two-thirds of the state's wine, Prohibition shuttered all but a few wineries, and then the Great Depression and World War II took away the market. What brought the valley back? Tourism. Tastings attracted visitors, who encouraged developer hotels and restaurants, and corporations to smack up many of the family wineries. Today, Beringer is owned by Aussie beermaker Foster's, and Mondavi by wine and spirits behemoth Constellation. The growth could easily have accelerated exponentially had it not been for a 1968 county zoning ordinance that declared much of the area an agricultural preserve. The farmers got to keep their

seem beholden to the past and try to keep visitors far from the crush pad (the industrial-looking area where the fruit is destemmed and crushed into juice), Round Pond is hooked into the future, using satellite images to track growth in its vineyards and proudly showing off its shiny stainless-steel equipment. In warm weather, staff will bring your tasting out to a balcony overlooking the winery's 350 acres, all sustainably farmed. Since you skipped lunch, the paired snacks will be welcome.

Your 3:30 engagement is just across the road at Round Pond's olive oil operation, but take a few minutes to check out the neighboring Napa Valley Grapevine Wreath Company (8901 Conn Creek Rd.; 707-963-8893). Here, a grape-growing family turns its refuse into artwork: After the vines are pruned each winter, owner Sally Wood and her team weave the cabernet cuttings into wreaths, wine holders, and even reindeer [Fig. 6].

When Ryan MacDonnell, daughter of Round Pond owners Bob and Jan MacDonnell, declared that she wanted to make olive oil, they brought in a Florentine mill master, Marco Mugelli. He trained Ryan and her brother, Miles, and oversaw the installation of a full complement of Pieralisi mills, crushers, and extractors, thus creating the Round Pond Olive Mill (886 Rutherford Rd.; 888-302-2575). No olive spends more than 45 minutes traveling from tree to mill, and that freshness is evident in the little blue glasses of oil you'll be asked to swallow straight, as olive oil judges do in Italy. You'll also be given tastes of the company's blood orange and Meyer lemon simple syrups, as well as two red wine vinegars (no, not the runoff from the Round Pond wine). Once you've sampled the unadulterated oils, your host will bring out trays full of cheese, bread, and produce straight from the MacDonnells' biodynamic garden for a midday feast [Fig. 7].

Then it's time to head up-valley along the winding Silverado Trail and check in to Napa's grande dame, Auberge du Soleil (707-963-1211; aubergedusoleil.com; doubles, \$525–\$750). **Opened as a restaurant in 1981 and expanded to include a hotel four years later, the French-flavored property is nestled into a hillside along the Vaca Range. The two rooms in the main house are the smallest and might get a little noise from the restaurant underneath, but you'll save money and get the best sight lines on the vineyards.**

After you've settled in, head back to sleepy Yountville to dine at the restaurant of Auberge du Soleil alum Richard Reddington. His two-year-old Redd (6480 Washington St.; 707-944-2222; entrées, \$24–\$32) is minimalist but unpretentious when it comes to both design and dishes. Consider



[Fig. 6]

The sombrero is one of the Napa Valley Grapevine Wreath Company's most popular designs and an ode to the many Mexican laborers who keep the valley running.



At the Round Pond Olive Mill tasting, you'll sprinkle red-wine vinegar onto a sugar cube, which neutralizes the sourness so you can taste just the fruit.



[Fig. 8]

The stained-glass windows in Frederick Beringer's Rhine House cost \$6,000 in 1884, which accounted for almost one quarter of the total construction costs.



[Fig. 9]

The Bale Crist Mill was dismantled in 1980 and reconstructed using whatever original wood was still intact as well as new timber from vandalized redwoods found in state parks.

One vine produces FOUR TO SIX BOTTLES of wine. One ton of grapes yields 720 bottles of wine, or sixty cases. One barrel of wine is the equivalent of about 20 cases, or 1,200 glasses

land, and the strip-mall developers stayed away. In fact, the only fast-food outlet you'll see here is an A&W Restaurant south of downtown St. Helena that opened in the 1960s.

Beaulieu Vineyard's newest (and as yet still family-owned) neighbor is Round Pond, a seven-year-old producer of cabernet sauvignon and nebbiolo. Its brand-new winery building, sitting at the end of a palm-lined drive, is the valley's most recent addition of note. Whereas other wineries

putting your fate in the chef's capable hands with the five-course tasting menu, and, if ordering à la carte, leave room for the scrumptious desserts. It would have been more convenient to stay at Yountville's Vintage Inn tonight, but most hotels in the valley require a two-night minimum, and you'll want to be situated farther north for the rest of your trip.

Day 4 (Sunday): Northern Napa Valley

If you associate the Beringer name only with white zinfandel, Dean Busquaert would like to have a word with you. He'll be hosting your 10 A.M. private tasting of the brand's top tier of reserve wines—chardonnays, merlots, petite syrahs, and cabernet sauvignons—made from the best lots of the company's grapes. Many cost a great deal more than that white zin. Reversing one more common misconception, Busquaert will share his unusual philosophy of food-and-wine pairing: No, red wine doesn't always go with red meat. Beringer Vineyards (2000 Main St.; 707-963-8989; beringer.com) is the oldest continually operating winery in the valley—it produced sacramental wines

during Prohibition—and was the first to offer tours back in 1934. The Rhine House, the rambling Victorian that greets you on your way up the driveway, was built by Frederick Beringer in 1884 to remind him of his family's home back in Germany [Fig. 8].

Your tasting will take place in the Beringer family's wine cellar, deep within the hand-dug caves (there are bottles here from the 1940s and '50s)—or in the Rhine House, once it's completed a renovation in a few months. As if to outdo the Beringers, the gothic Greystone Winery was built next door in 1889; at the time, it was the largest stone winery in the world. Today it houses the Culinary Institute of America's California campus. And if you peek across Highway 29, you'll see the much newer industrial facility where Beringer now churns out one million cases of wine every year.

It's a quick drive from Beringer back down Highway 29 to the Martini House (1245 Spring St.; 707-963-2233; entrées, \$17–\$28), although you should allow a few extra minutes for the inevitable backup in St. Helena. Here you'll find another Michelin-starred restaurant, but of the less formal persuasion. **If it's nice out, ask for a table beside the koi pond on the terrace of this old Craftsman-style home, but wander inside to ogle the restaurant's design, a melding of Native American heritage and winemaking paraphernalia.** Chef Todd Humphries is famous for his mushroom dishes, and wine director Rob Renteria sorts his selections into such whimsical categories as Women Winemakers We Love and What's New in the Old World.

Refreshed for the afternoon, make a left onto Highway 29 (it's okay; there's a traffic light here) and head north again

to the Bale Grist Mill State Historic Park (707-942-4575; parks.ca.gov). Napa Valley's main agricultural export wasn't always wine—in its heyday during the California Gold Rush, the Bale Grist Mill produced 4,000 pounds of flour or 6,000 pounds of cornmeal a day, thanks to a 36-foot waterwheel that still turns every weekend. Stop by to chat with the miller and buy organic flour, polenta, or other grains fresh out of the chute

[Fig. 9]. (Be sure to inquire about the prenuptial agreement between Edward Bale's daughter and the winemaker Charles Krug.) This is as far up the valley as you'll be going on this journey; although Calistoga, to the north, is geographically part of Napa, the town's homespun temperament makes it a better bookend for a future Sonoma trip.

From here, you might want to stroll a mile up the History Trail to Bothe-Napa Valley State Park (707-942-4575; parks.ca.gov), where you can hike among towering redwoods for a few hours, or try your luck getting into William Cole Vineyards (707-963-6100; williamcolevineyards.com). Screaming Eagle may have been the cult wine of the last decade, but William Cole might claim that title in the next ten years [Fig. 10].

Only a few wineries are allowed by the county to let people picnic on their property. At others, you can BUY A BOTTLE and ask nicely. Failing that, try the town parks in Napa, Yountville, and St. Helena

Winemaker William Balentine produces just over 300 cases of cabernet sauvignon every year, all of which are sold to major-league baseball players and the like before the wine is even bottled. Shaun McDonald—part tasting guide, part geologist, part wine industry consultant—is careful about whom he lets on the property, with its nineteenth-century stone winery, but if you make it past his screening process, he'll show you everything from the vines to the fermentation tanks, and early that morning will decant a precious bottle in anticipation of your exclusive visit. You'll pass right by the aforementioned Charles Krug's winery to get to your 5 P.M. cooking class at the home of chefs DJ and Kent Nielsen, who live about 20 minutes away in a breathtaking spot overlooking Napa Valley [Fig. 11]. If you're more of a shopper than a chef, you might choose instead to spend the afternoon in downtown St. Helena, where High-

Winery—now the William Cole Winery—is steeped in history. After its founder became St. Helena's first murder victim, his wife was anointed the town's first female winemaker.



[Fig. 10]

The J. C. Weinberger Winery—now the William Cole Winery—is steeped in history. After its founder became St. Helena's first murder victim, his wife was anointed the town's first female winemaker.



[Fig. 11]

DJ and Kent Nielsen's semi-professional kitchen includes a six-burner Viking stove and a dishwasher that runs an entire cycle in just four minutes.



[Fig. 12]

Candleholders, wine racks, and cheese boards made from old barrel staves are for sale in St. Helena's Findings (1269 Main St.; 707-963-6000).

way 29 becomes Main Street and is lined with clothing boutiques and art galleries [Fig. 12]. Calling themselves Cooks and Books and Corks (707-965-9409; cooksbookscorks.com), the Nielsens will guide you through the preparation of a three-course dinner, or a customized class tailored to your interests (whether they be sausage stuffing or cheese-making). They'll then serve you the results—along with complementary wines—while you watch the sun dip below the valley's far horizon. It's a 20-minute drive back to Auberge du Soleil, where there's just enough time for a plunge in the purple-lit pool under a scrim of bright stars.

Day 5 (Monday): From the Mountains to the Valley

Although many of the weekenders left last night, you've still got another full day to explore the valley. You might like to start with breakfast in bed, and then make your way to Kuleto Estate (2470 Sage Canyon Rd.; 707-963-9750; kuletoestate.com). The route up Sage Canyon Road is one of the least inhabited parts of the valley you'll see, as you skirt Lake Hennessey amid moss-covered oaks. The winery is at an elevation of 1,475 feet, with views down to Rutherford and St. Helena [Fig. 13]. Perhaps you'll recognize



[Fig. 13]

The Kuleto Estate is a little over two miles up a winding road, so the winery has its own fire truck permanently stationed on the property.

the "Candle-log-ra" light fixtures from the Martini House: Both the restaurant and the winery are owned by culinary entrepreneur Pat Kuleto, who has six other restaurants in the Bay Area. Kuleto bought 761 acres in 1992 and proceeded to construct the oldest-looking new winery in the valley, with vines creeping up the stucco walls and oak trees growing out of the floors. Others had deemed the steep, scrubby hillsides unplantable, but winemaker Dave Lattin has coaxed delicious cabernet sauvignon, sangiovese, syrah, zinfandel, and rosato out of them. **Your 10:30 appointment grants you a food-and-wine tasting and a tour of the grounds, including a barnyard full of sheep, turkeys,**

and rabbits [Fig. 14]. As you approach the lake on your way back down to the valley floor, look for the bald eagle's nest perched in a tree between two telephone poles.

Drive another mile or so up the Silverado Trail to Kelham Vineyards (360 Zinfandel Lane; 707-963-2000; kelhamvineyards.com), where the last tasting of your trip awaits. Ebullient mother hen

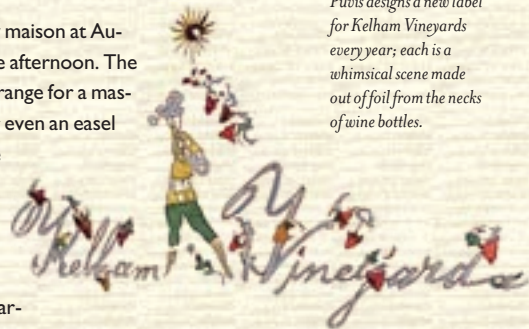


[Fig. 14]

The livestock you'll see grazing on the Kuleto Estate are raised for "culinary purposes."

Susanna Kelham will personally present you with a lavish food-and-wine pairing to enjoy on the family's patio, overlooking 10 acres of cabernet. Husband Rawson Kelham has been farming 60 additional acres down in Oakville, near Swanson Vineyards, for 47 years. His cabernet, merlot, petit verdot, and sauvignon blanc grapes used to be bottled by Cakebread, Mondavi, and others but now go into the Kelhams' own wines, crafted by sons Hamilton and Ronald. Especially interesting are the vertical tastings (which means you'll be trying different vintages of the same wine) of cabernet sauvignon and merlot [Fig. 15].

Retreat to your cozy maison at Auberge for the rest of the afternoon. The staff will be happy to arrange for a massage, a tennis lesson, or even an easel if you're inspired by the painterly landscapes. Bike rides through



[Fig. 15]

French artist Gerard Puvis designs a new label for Kelham Vineyards every year; each is a whimsical scene made out of foil from the necks of wine bottles.

Napa are popular, but for no apparent reason: Most roads have narrow shoulders, and the combination of wine and exercise leaves many feeling queasy. You have dinner reservations tonight at the hotel's Michelin-starred restaurant (prix fixe, \$90–\$125). But first linger on the terrace with a drink for a last glimpse of the valley, to savor all that you've seen, smelled, and tasted over the past few days. □

How to Book

Contact Jackie Richmond of Wine Country Concierge (707-252-4472; info@winetrip.com). But first, go to cntraveler.com/travelagentfinder/tips for advice on how to get the most out of working with a travel spe-

cialist. Richmond will use your credit card to reserve rooms and tastings, so you'll be paying her directly only a fixed price for her time. The cost of the tour described here is roughly \$3,250 per person, based on double occupancy in the month of May. This includes all hotels and wine

tasting and tour fees, the cooking class, the balloon ride, Richmond's fee, and a rental convertible. The tour cost does not include gas, meals, and tips. (If you wish to taste and swallow the wine at each stop, Richmond can procure a driver for you, at a rate of approximately \$100 per hour.)

Although the order of this itinerary was carefully chosen, do not be surprised if Richmond has to move things around. Private tasting appointments are booked well in advance for the warm-weather months, and you'll need a clear, calm morning for a balloon ride.

The Adventure Continues Online You're not done yet! There's much more on our Web site, including other hotel and restaurant options (for those who just can't get enough), a special report on how to ship or store your new purchases, and our "Wine Essentials from A to Z," including the wine terms—from barrel-fermented to racking—you need to know. For all that, plus an easy-to-print PDF of this article, go to cntraveler.com/iconictrips after March 25.