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The Gold List 2022

Our editors' favorite places,
hotels, and cruises





in good season

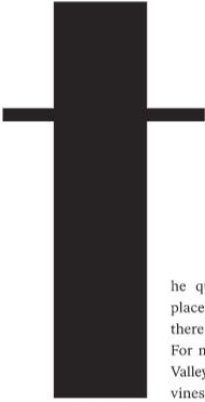
Despite the double whammy of severe wildfires and a global pandemic, Napa Valley still lures travelers with its timeless, Dionysian pleasures

By Lan Samantha Chang



An array of Napa Valley wines, including Faust head winery and estate from the Cabernet Sauvignon (the fact (water), grown at the winery's Sonoma Valley estate vineyard

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL ALAN TAYLOR



he quality of light in certain places transforms what we do there more easily into memory. For me, the bright sun in Napa Valley, shining on rows of grapevines and golden hills, infuses meals and conversations with an enduring beauty.

I remember the mahi-mahi burger I enjoyed—very like nigiri on an eggy-sweet bun—on a translucent summer evening with close friends at Gott's Roadside, a local favorite off Highway 29 in St. Helena. Years ago, at the old Tra Vigne, another legendary St. Helena restaurant, I had a lunch with a fellow writer that lasted almost four hours. We shared a few plates and ate slowly, speaking about



our friendships, our families, and our work. I remember a soft burrata and a perfect tomato. Time seemed to stop. It was the kind of relaxed and sensual meal during which it is possible to spend whole minutes admiring the beauty of the food or a drink in its clear glass, the kind of meal I seem especially to have when I'm in California wine country.

Residents of Napa Valley, that gorgeous, narrow swath of exorbitantly priced land north of San Francisco, are famously devoted to the cultivation of fine grapes, the making of wine, and the appreciation of that wine in excellent restaurants. Measuring 30 miles south to north and only five miles at its widest point, the valley possesses one of the rarest climates in the world. Its moderate temperatures, dry days, and cool nights are ideal for vintners. This devotion to the grape has led to an almost obsessive interest in fine dining, a parallel passion that seems to generate new accolades with impressive regularity: The tiny Napa town of Yountville (population 3,000) boasts more Michelin-starred restaurants per capita than any other place in the world.

Heading north from San Francisco in August 2021,

I did not expect to find the same Eden I had left two years before. Napa County had been buffeted by fire and, I feared, isolated by the pandemic. There would be inevitable changes. But as I crossed the wide, sun-dappled Petaluma River and continued into the valley, I was reassured to see orderly rows of grapevines headed by colorful rose blossoms, a refreshing harbinger of normalcy.

I was first drawn to Napa Valley by its well-known writers' conference, which attracts poets and novelists from around the country. In the dozen pilgrimages I've made here in the last decade, I've often thought of the rosebushes as unofficial greeters. Grapevines and rosebushes grow well in similar conditions; both are susceptible to the same insects and mildews, but rosebushes will show signs of aphids or disease first, which is why they're planted as a kind of early-warning system. Of course, winemaking today has become a technologically sophisticated industry, but the dazzling rose blossoms remain in the fields, a testament to the region's blend of beauty and business, pleasure and profit—and a reminder of its inherent natural fragility.

Community also matters to this locality of specialized winegrowers and restaurateurs, who live as neighbors in what amounts to a large, extremely valuable agricultural preserve. I spoke to several friends about how, in the wake of the 2020 fires that destroyed more than 30 Napa wineries, the community banded together to adopt more sustainable processes in order to ensure the survival of this beautiful, vulnerable place.

Jack Stuart, the retired manager at the Silverado Winery, remembers a time

PHOTOGRAPHS: STEPHANIE RUSSO, RACHEL WEILL, JUSTIN LEE

Clockwise from top left: Vineyard Barn, the rustic-chic event space at the Four Seasons Resort and Residences Napa Valley; one of the earth-toned guest rooms at Meadowood Napa Valley; outside the long-loved Solage, Auberge Resorts Collection, in Calistoga; a fresh fruit parfait at The McClelland House, a Napa bed-and-breakfast



when the Valley was lush. Now, he says, as wineries fight problems such as fire, smoke taint, and lack of rain, they are being more proactive in facing the actuality of climate change. From large ventures like Mondavi to smaller, family-run businesses, they are embracing drip irrigation and exploring other innovations in a bid to be more sustainable. Grapes, once one of the most water-intensive crops grown in the Valley, are now the least.

As they unite to preserve their craft, winemakers continue to support more intangible human endeavors. Local vintners have long been known for their championing of the arts and artists, and they have proceeded to buttress them in 2021. After going virtual in 2020, last summer the nonprofit Music in the Vineyards once again welcomed classical ensembles for live performances at wineries, which continue to lend their space, gratis, to the event. The Napa Valley Writers' Conference will carry on its tradition of sunset readings hosted by local wineries. Writers like myself, staying in housing offered by members of the community, will still find inspiration in a landscape witnessed by the likes of M.F.K. Fisher, the culinary belletrist who lived for two decades in a St. Helena Victorian, and Robert Louis Stevenson, whose 1883 travel memoir, *The Silverado Squatters*, contains a richly detailed accounting of his two-month honeymoon in Napa Valley.

Greg Evans, board president of Music in the Vineyards, told me recently that Robert Mondavi, a godfather of this valley, preached about "wine, food, and the art" as the holy triumvirate; in terms of pleasure and enjoyment, he noted, "they are all connected." These interlocking partnerships strengthen Napa, helping it prevail in the wake of challenges by finding new means of sharing its many gifts.

Late last summer, as I sat at an outdoor poetry reading, sipping a crisp Chardonnay and watching the sun dip over rows of carefully tended vines, I understood that the most powerful components of this moment—the spoken words; the still, deepening blue evening sky; the minerality of the wine in my glass—would soon transform into pleasures past. And yet, for that vivid half hour, I was held in the present. ●



fresh on the vine

After a few pandemic-related stops and starts, **Faust Haus**, a new tasting room just northwest of St. Helena, is officially open. Most wine venues here are either grand European châteaux or modern NorCal spots with lots of glass, concrete, and wood, so this matte-black-painted 1870s Victorian, with its steeple and weather vane, stands out. The Goth look (and of course the dark tale of its namesake) is a sharp contrast with its bucolic setting on a hilltop surrounded by terraced flower gardens. Stylish interiors that include freehand murals by Italian artist Roberto Ruspoli as well as vintage photographs and tapestries—plus delicious wine made with Cabernet Sauvignon grapes organically grown on its nearby Coombsville estate—have made Faust Haus the cool kid on the block. About 20 miles southeast on the Silverado Trail, **Seven Apart** opened its first tasting room this past October. Its vineyard, set atop Atlas Peak and one of the highest in the area, looks out over the Valley; by Napa standards, this is mountain winemaking. The boutique winery has been around since 2018, but with the new facilities and the arrival of celebrated winemaker Andy Erickson (the man behind big names like Screaming Eagle and Harlan Estate), it has become a name to know.



Clockwise from top left: A light, low-key meal at Solage's newly expanded Solbar; Meadowood Napa Valley; the glorious gardens at Faust Haus; a modern detail inside the historic McClelland House



ZZZs in the valley

From big brands to tiny charmers, Napa's new and reborn hotel offerings are as impressive as its wine scene

Four Seasons Resort and Residences Napa Valley

This past November, the Four Seasons opened its Upper Valley doors. It's an easy five-minute ride on one of the hotel's loaner bikes to the town of Calistoga and within walking distance of several wineries. The resort, with 85 modern, almost barnlike rooms that gently nod to Napa's ranching past, has rare double views of the Vaca and Mayacama Mountains. Knockout setting aside, what really sets the Four Seasons Napa Valley apart is that it has its very own winery, Elusa, developed in partnership with famed local winemaker Thomas Rivers Brown. Of course this makes tasting convenient, but it also means that when sitting on your private patio you're just a few feet from rows of Cabernet grapes. Guests can also experience this sort of immersion in the destination—not easy for an

international hospitality brand—at Truss Restaurant + Bar. Michelin-starred chef Erik Anderson has deep ties to nearby purveyors, as evidenced by meticulously sourced dishes like local quail with asparagus and fava beans. This newcomer is a great launchpad for exploring, but you can also stay put and feel pretty great about doing so.

Stanly Ranch, Auberge Resorts Collection

The Napa Valley has long been associated with wellness thanks to Calistoga, which has been luring pilgrims to its healing waters for over a century. But when Stanly Ranch opens later this winter, it will usher in a new age of self-care. The centerpiece will be Halehouse, a sprawling well-being center with cutting-edge treatments like cryotherapy and a huge, multilevel sauna. The resort, with 78 cottages surrounded by 700 acres of active

ranch land, is set just 45 minutes from San Francisco in the southernmost part of the Valley near the border with Sonoma, making it easy to check out both counties' stellar, yet distinct, wine scenes.

Meadowood Napa Valley

A collective sob sounded throughout the hospitality world when parts of this beloved St. Helena resort, including chef Christopher Koslow's three-Michelin-starred restaurant, were consumed by the Glass Fire. But 36 rooms perched on the oak-filled hills reopened this past summer and are as amazing as ever. The hotel has always had strong regional roots: since the 1960s it's been a gathering place for Napa families who use it like a country club. And today, even though it draws a savvy international set, you're just as likely to see locals at the pool or enjoying a meal. A new restaurant is coming this winter, but in the meantime, Meadowood's serene wooded setting and excellent spa, coupled with its aura of indestructible goodwill, are more than enough.

Dr. Wilkinson's Backyard Resort & Mineral Spa

Anyone who has driven through Calistoga over the last 70 years has likely clocked the hotel's neon sign advertising hot springs and mud baths. This midcentury landmark is fresh off a sassy makeover with offerings that channel its namesake doctor, like arrival prescriptions (essential-oil blends), an updated spa, and rooms that feel more Coachella Valley than Napa (retro mini fridges and pale-pink bathrobes). The new restaurant, House of Better, takes influence from restaurateur Trevor Logan's time in the Southwest, with dishes like roasted green chile flatbread from the wood-fired oven. There are also tasty alcohol-free herbal tonics in case you need an antidote to all the wine-tasting. The hotel skews young and relatively inexpensive, qualities that can be hard to come by in Napa.

The McClelland House and The George

Over the past few years, the town of Napa has come into its own as a destination. For a car-free, totally walkable wine

weekend, two lovingly restored 19th-century Victorians have opened just steps apart near the revamped riverfront district. The George is a nine-room Queen Anne on the National Register of Historic Places, while The McClelland House, with six spacious suites, is a Victorian-Italianate mansion. Both are great home bases to explore Oxbow public market, which has outposts of local favorites like Hog Island Oyster Bar, and tasting rooms like Outland and the always fantastic restaurant Angèle.

Solage, Auberge Resorts Collection

New suites, zhuzhed-up guest rooms, and an expanded patio at its beloved Solbar—these are just a few of the changes this Calistoga mainstay made during a recent \$30 million renovation. But the most exciting addition might be Picobar, a breezy poolside restaurant with views of the Mayacamas mountains, where Ensenada-born chef Gustavo Rios turns out stunners like whipped avocado with goat cheese, seeds, and edible flowers.

KATE CUNNINGHAM

Clockwise from top left: The veranda at Faust Haus; the fireplace at Solgaga's Solbar; inside one of the modern farmhouse-style Arbor cottages at Stanly Ranch, Auberge Resorts Collection



PHOTOGRAPHS: ADRIAN GAUT, THE INCALLS, AUBERGE RESORTS COLLECTION

