A visitor's guide to Napa

23 Jun 2008 by Linda Murphy

If you haven't been to Napa Valley lately, there are surprises in store.

The landmark wineries still draw crowds, The French Laundry in Yountville is still *the* place to eat, if you can get a reservation. Nearby Mustards Grill celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, and the Meadowood Napa Valley resort in St Helena continues to draw the well-heeled to its luxury accommodations, restaurants, golf course and croquet and tennis courts.

Yet the center of excitement is - are you sitting down for this? - the city of Napa. Yes, Napa, that dead zone in the southern end of the valley where fast-food joints, chain motels, discount stores and auto repair shops were the major attractions, serving those who worked in St Helena and Yountville, yet couldn't afford to live or eat there.

Napa still has such simple amenities, yet a recent downtown explosion of high-end restaurants, accommodations, winery tasting rooms, a snazzy public market and a riverside promenade has made Napa city as attractive a destination as Yountville, St Helena and Calistoga. And it gets better: in mid-September, the Westin Verasa hotel/condominium opens on the Napa River, and Ritz-Carlton is expected to break ground on a luxury hotel one block away in late fall.

All this was made possible in 1998, when Napa County residents voted to tax themselves (and tourists) to pay for flood control projects along the Napa River, which overflowed its banks and washed out downtown Napa every few years. Now that the river has been harnessed, development has accelerated at a furious pace, and Napa now has a burgeoning "restaurant row" on Main Street, nearly two dozen tasting rooms and wine bars within a four-block radius, and a new promenade along the river that will eventually stretch for six miles.

The jewel in Napa's crown is the **Oxbow Public Market**, a smaller version of San Francisco's Ferry Plaza Marketplace. Within Oxbow's confines are produce stalls, restaurants, and shops offering wine, cheese (photo courtesy of Frankie Frankeny), spices, baked goods, tea, coffee, organic ice cream, meats, seafood and charcuterie. Michael Mondavi has his **Folio Enoteca & Winery** here, and the **Hog Island Oyster Co** will start shucking its Marin County bivalves for customers in September.

Next door to Oxbow is **Copia**, which opened in 2001 with a look-but-don't-touch, elitist vibe. Disappointing attendance and the realization that people want to taste and learn, and not admire forks tacked to a wall, led to a Copia redesign. The centre now offers wine, cooking and gardening classes, a bar that will soon serve 500 wines by the glass, concerts, movie nights, and a casual bistro to go with the more formal Julia's Kitchen dining room.

A five-minute walk from Oxbow and Copia, and footsteps from restaurant row, is the **Napa River Inn**, the first (and currently only) luxury hotel in downtown Napa. On the National Registry of Historic Places, it began its life as a mill and warehouse in the mid 1800s, and has since been refurbished, offering modern conveniences, fireplaces, balconies and river views.

The best dining choices in downtown Napa include **Zuzu** for Spanish-style tapas, **Cole's Chop House** for steaks, and **Ubuntu**, a high-end vegetable restaurant (see right and Margrit Mondavi - video) with an only-in-Napa yoga studio upstairs.

Just north of Napa city is **Bistro Don Giovanni**, perhaps Napa's most beloved restaurant, especially by local vintners. Casual and friendly, it serves superb pastas, roasted meats, pizzas, Caesar salads, fried green olives and fritto misto, and

has an excellent wine list.

Continue north on Highway 29 to Yountville, which could be renamed Kellerville, after the three Thomas Keller restaurants located there. There is, of course, **The French Laundry**, one of the top five restaurants in America and perhaps its finest. It's a very difficult reservation to get, requiring great luck and perfect timing, so if you come up short, Keller's cooking can be experienced at **Ad Hoc,** which serves a four-course, prix fixe meal of hearty yet upscale American fare (beef short ribs, flatiron steak, etc.). Down the street is **Bouchon**, Keller's take on a French brasserie, with a menu that includes steak frites, mussels, roast chicken, boudin noir and leg of lamb. **Bouchon Bakery** next door is a must-stop at breakfast.

Also in Yountville is **Redd,** where former Auberge du Soleil chef Richard Reddington offers a pristine California cuisine menu featuring fish, glazed pork belly and game birds. I find the room a bit stark, yet the food makes up for it.

While I haven't dined there yet, the newest Yountville restaurant, **25° Brix** (formerly Brix), holds great promise with David

Gingrass (Two, Hawthorne Lane, Postrio) the consulting chef for the Keller family, which owns the restaurant and nearby

vineyards. The opening menu included beer-battered softshell crab, Alaskan halibut with pea ravioli and baby-squash

parmesan broth, and cast-iron pan chicken with morels, fava beans, sweet onion puree and sherry jus. Many of the ingredients come from the Kellers' orchards and gardens.

Sleep off dinner at the **Villagio Inn & Spa** in Yountville, with a new 12,000-square-foot spa, faux Tuscan architecture and comfortable rooms that are reasonably priced for the area (starting at $365).

In St Helena, Bill Harlan's **Meadowood** Napa Valley resort caters to the Mercedes and Jaguar set, with studio rooms starting at $670, suites at $1,300, and a four-bedroom lodge for $7,000 per night. Golf, croquet, tennis and a wellness centre are the extras, and The Restaurant is truly superb, a Michelin two-star winner under chef Christopher Kostow.

My recent tasting-menu meal at Meadowood was fabulous, including morel mushroom tea with pecorino and black truffle crumpet; cold-smoked toro and osetra caviar; olive-oil-poached black cod, lobster and sweetbreads; and roasted petrale sole with artichoke, caperberry and preserved lemon. My dining companion had suckling pig with caraway-scented cabbage, maple syrup and pickled apple, and poached, grass-fed beef tenderloin with brioche gnocchi, grilled chicories and morels. Sommelier Rom Toulon's wine matches to all our dishes were spot-on.

Also in St Helena, **Terra** is one of my favourite restaurants, for Hiro Sone's Japanese/French twists on California ingredients, and the front-of-the-house charm and baking genius of his wife, Lissa Doumani. Don't miss the sake-marinated black cod with shiso broth, or any of Sone's duck and pork dishes.

Cindy Pawlcyn, Meadowood's opening chef and founder of the still-going-strong **Mustards Grill** near Yountville, in 2006 gave Napans the type of restaurant they'd craved for years - an upscale fish house, **Go Fish**, serving a large assortment of raw shellfish, fish and sushi. The menu includes steak, chicken and pasta for those finicky about fish.

In Calistoga, at the northernmost end of Napa Valley, the new **Solage Calistoga** inn offers luxury lodging, spa services and the Solbar bistro restaurant. Solage is a 15-minute walk to downtown Calistoga, and bicycles provided by the hotel make commuting even quicker.

Accommodations

Meadowood Napa Valley, 900 Meadowood Lane, St. Helena, +1 (800) 458-8080 (toll-free), www.meadowood.com.

Napa River Inn, 500 Main Street, Napa, +1 (707) 251-8500, www.napariverinn.com.

Solage Calistoga, 55 Silverado Trail, Calistoga, +1 (866) 942-7442 (toll free), www.solagecalistoga.com.

Villagio Inn & Spa, 6481 Washington Street, Yountville, +1 (800) 351-1133 (toll free), www.villagio.com.

Silver Rose Inn, Spa & Winery, 351 Rosedale Road, Calistoga, California 94515, tel +1 800 995 9381, +1 707 942 9581, www.silverrose.com

Dining

Bistro Don Giovanni, 4110 Howard Lane, Napa, +1 (707) 224-3300, www.bistrodongiovanni.com.

Redd, 6840 Washington Street, Yountville, +1 (707)944-2222, www.reddnapavalley.com.

Terra, 1345 Railroad Avenue, St. Helena, +1 (707)963-8931, www.terrarestaurant.com.

The Restaurant at Meadowood, 900 Meadowood Lane, St. Helena, +1 (800) 458-8080, www.meadowood.com.

Ubuntu Restaurant & Yoga Studio, 1140 Main St., +1 (707) 251-5656, www.ubuntunapa.com.

25° Brix, 7377 St. Helena Highway (Highway 29), Yountville, +1 (707) 944-2749, www.25degreesbrix.com.

Ad Hoc, 6476 Washington Street, Yountville, +1 (707) 944-2487, www.adhocrestaurant.com.

Bouchon, 6534 Washington Street, Yountville, +1 (707) 944-8037, www.bouchonbistro.com.

Go Fish, 641 Main Street, St. Helena, +1 (707) 963-0700, www.gofishrestaurant.net.

Wine Shops

Acme Fine Wines, 1080 Fulton Lane, St. Helena, +1 (707) 963-0440, www.acmefinewines.com.

Backroom Wines, 1000 Main Street, Napa, +1 (707) 226 1378, www.backroomwines.com.

Enoteca Wine Shop,1348-B Lincoln Avenue, Calistoga, +1 (707) 942-1117, www.enotecawineshop.com.

JV Wine & Spirits, 301 First Street, Napa, +1 (707) 253 2624, www.jvwineandspirits.com.

Oxbow Wine Merchant & Wine Bar, 610 First Street (in the Oxbow Public Market), Napa, +1 (707) 257 5200; toll free 866 9919400, www.oxbowine.com.

Other

Copia, 500 First Street, Napa, +1 (888) 512-6742 (toll free), www.copia.org.

Oxbow Public Market, 610 First Street, Napa, +1 (707) 226-6529, www.oxbowpublicmarket.com.

Travel tips

- Unless you have a private jet to land at the tiny Napa Airport, those arriving by air must arrive at either San Francisco International, Oakland International or Sacramento International airports. Each is approximately one hour's drive to Napa city, though rush-hour traffic can add another 30 minutes. If you can, fly into Sacramento, as it's easier there to deal with baggage, security, rental car and parking.

- You'll need a car if you want to explore the valley, as public transportation is almost non-existent. Municipal buses run limited routes and with inconvenient schedules, and they don't stop at wineries. The only 'rail service' is the Napa Valley

Wine Train, a tourist-trap restaurant on wheels and not a mode of transportation. Taxis are an option for short distances, though they aren't plentiful and are very expensive.

- Two main roads run between Napa city on the southern end of the valley and Calistoga on the northern end - Highway 29 and the Silverado Trail. Highway 29 is a two-lane-each-way freeway from Vallejo through Yountville, then narrows to one lane. It can take forever to inch along Highway 29 on weekends. Stick to the less busy Silverado Trail, which runs parallel to Highway 29, 2 miles to the east. The towns of Napa, Yountville, Oakville, Rutherford, St Helena and Calistoga are all accessible from "the trail."

- Many wineries have tasting rooms open to all comers, yet just as many are open by appointment only. Some, like Screaming Eagle, Harlan Estate and Colgin, don't take appointments at all, except for press and trade. It's always best to call or email ahead at all wineries and arrange an appointment.

- Nearly all Napa Valley wineries charge for tastings. The range is $5 to $25 or more, depending on the wines poured and whether cheese and other foods are served. Some wineries subtract the tasting fee from the purchase of wines; others let you keep the logo glass from which you tasted.

Please note that we are planning more detailed coverage of Napa Valley winery visits - JR.