

Casual eating in Napa Valley

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Twenty years ago on our first family holiday to a wine-producing region we visited Limoux in the south west of France, where they make sparkling, and increasingly good quality still, wine.

La Maison de la Blanquette on the main street was then run by the wives of the winemakers, but during the harvest it remained firmly closed. This was no time for feeding visitors as the women then had to devote themselves to the more immediate and physical demands of helping out in the vineyards and the cellars.

I was reminded of just how much the annual vintage ritual has changed, initially via the introduction of mechanical harvesters and today because of the growing popularity of visiting vineyards around the world as the grapes are gathered in, as I shared a cup of tea early one morning at the Friday Farmers' Market in St Helena in California's Napa Valley with chef/restaurateur Cindy Pawlcyn.

Pawlcyn has been cooking here for the past 30 years and now divides her time between Mustard's Grill (whose turnover is up six per cent this year, she told me with pride), Go Fish, a restaurant and sushi bar, and **Cindy's Back Street Kitchen**. But harvest, or crush as it is known in North America, which usually lasts for a month from the end of September, is a particularly busy time for every restaurant in the valley.

'It's not just the growing interest in wine which has meant that these four weeks are so hectic,' Pawlcyn explained, 'but it's also a period when the kids are settled and back at school and the parents feel that they can get away for a night or two. It's exciting for the chefs, too, as there's the beginning of the autumn produce with wild mushrooms, pumpkins and peppers in abundance as well as monkfish and cod to match the action in the vineyards. But I always warn people against going down Whitehall Lane at this time of the year as that's where the grape must is taken for composting and it smells like a dirty old bar.'

Of all the wine-growing regions I have subsequently visited, Napa Valley has always struck me as the one where the restaurant and the wine industry are most successfully interlinked. Most restaurateurs operate, for example, a sensible corkage policy of US\$10-20 per bottle so that those in the wine industry are encouraged to come in and use them for business. I remember at Redd's, a good restaurant in Yountville, watching a barrel salesman bring out half a dozen bottles from under the table to convince a potential winemaker to buy from him.

While the influx of fortunes made initially from businessmen outside the wine business has also been a distinctive contribution to what is on offer, most conspicuously at Meadowood and now at the more relaxed Solage, what struck me on this visit was quite how successfully chefs are integrating the valley's distinctive history into their restaurants.

This is certainly the case at Cindy's Back Street Kitchen, set in a charming old wooden building with a patio that has been a restaurant in various different guises for over 50 years. Today, a comfortable interior fits hand in glove with a relaxed menu whose highlights were a refreshing salad of watermelon, feta and spicy chipotle; deep-fried squid with shards of fennel, okra and lemon aioli; and duck, cooked in the wood oven with fresh cherries.

This historical association has now been extended by Michael Chiarello's opening last December (on the very day, he was to tell me, that the Dow Jones Industrial Index hit rock bottom) of Bottega, in Vintage 1870, now a retail complex but back then one of the very first wineries.

Bottega itself occupies the space that in the 1970s was home to The Chutney Kitchen, whose owners then went on to open The French Laundry before they sold it to Thomas Keller. But back then it was the place where grape growers and winemakers would meet in the late afternoon to discuss mutual problems and was the setting for the initial cooking classes that inspired many to appreciate and then to serve increasingly sophisticated food.

Although no stranger to the area (Chiarello was the chef at Tra Vigne for many years) he is now back at the stoves after nine years in management and over 250 appearances as a television chef. 'It's great to have such a big audience on TV,' Chairello said, 'but after a while it's strange not to be able to see who you are cooking for.'



Chiarello now makes up for this with a routine that sees him start in the kitchen and then walk around the different sections of Bottega, which range from a more formal restaurant to a couple of outdoor spaces and a bar, to talk to his customers and, as he sensitively put it, 'to thank those who want to be thanked.'

A polished and highly flexible Italian menu must make this highly rewarding. Our table of five began with shared salads of grilled octopus and burrata; moved on to excellent gnocchi and a lip-smacking dish of polenta cooked in a kilner jar topped with wild mushrooms; and then various pasta dishes, rockeye salmon and a vast plate of slow cooked short ribs.

Chiarello's other distinction is that he is not only a chef and a restaurateur but also a grape grower, with plots of old-vine Zinfandel and Petite Sirah that produce fascinating and reasonably priced wines.

Our final stop, although it may be the first for many as it is the closest to San Francisco, was in Napa itself, now far more of a magnet for food and wine lovers, thanks to the Oxbow Market and the fact that many of the more far-flung wineries have cleverly opened tasting rooms there.

Zuzu, close to the Opera House, was pretty quiet one Friday lunchtime but by the early afternoon it had filled up with winemakers, wine salesmen and several involved in IT in the wine business who have come to enjoy its cool interior, the kitchen's small and larger plates, and the hospitality provided by its genial proprietor, Mick Salyer. Highlights included crostini of anchovies and remoulade; a Tunisian brik pastry with tuna and peppers; and a sauté of fresh corn and broad beans. And the chance to overhear others gossiping about the wine business where the old saying that to make a small fortune you have to start with a large one seems more fitting than ever.

Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen, <u>www.cindysbackstreetkitchen.com</u> Bottega, <u>www.botteganapavalley.com</u> Zuzu, <u>www.zuzunapa.com</u>