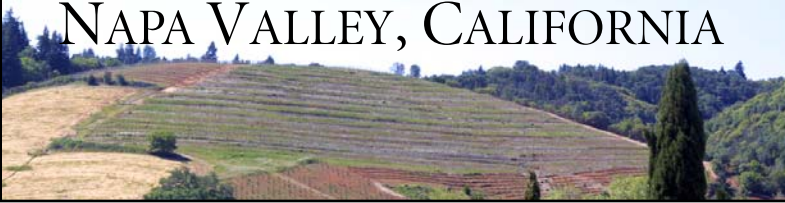


# BURT WOLF TRAVELS & TRADITIONS NAPA VALLEY, CALIFORNIA



**N**apa Valley is fifty miles north of San Francisco and easy to get to. It is a protected agricultural preserve, and the primary activity here is growing grapes that will make great wine. There are parts of Napa Valley that look like the district of



Provence in France, or Bordeaux, or Burgundy. And anyone who knows Northern Italy will quickly spot parts of the valley that are

similar to Tuscany. Napa is one of the most beautiful places in North America.

The busiest months of the year are September and October when the wineries are harvesting their grapes and starting to make wine. It's also the height of the tourist season. If you'd like less crush and more care, then January through March is the right time to make your visit. The fields are quiet. Traffic is light. And it's easier to get a reservation at the best restaurants.

The residents of Napa Valley appreciate visitors and during the early months of the year, they have more time to welcome them. You can stop into everything from a mustard festival to a neighborhood barbecue. But Napa Valley is not the kind of place you want to come to for a single day. You really need three or four days to appreciate what's happening here. And no matter what time of the year you come, you're always better off on weekdays than weekends.

The most extraordinary way to see the valley is by balloon. Joyce Bowen is the owner and chief pilot for the Bonaventura Balloon Company.

JOYCE BOWEN

BONAVENTURA BALLOON COMPANY

*I love the sense of freedom, the sense of peace, the serenity, the magnificence. Distances are deceptive in ballooning. When you are looking at something like a*

*half mile away, it seems like you can reach right out and touch it. I think that's one reason why people aren't afraid of ballooning when they think they're gonna be afraid of heights. It's just so close; it's like a painting all the way around you, only you're part of the painting. I liken it to music; as a musician, I think that flying is like a line of music. You've got vertical considerations and horizontal considerations and you follow a line, and you maneuver. It's very much like music.*

That was the first time I went ballooning and I loved it. The feeling of gently floating along above the world... the amazing peace and quiet... it's a wonderful way to travel.

The valley runs north to south for thirty miles and the main road along its length is Route 29. The first town that you come to as you head into the valley from San Francisco is Napa. The plan for Napa was laid out in 1847, which makes it the oldest town in the valley. It's located on the Napa River, which runs down to the top of San Francisco Bay and then out to the Pacific Ocean. During the 1800s, all commercial shipments from Napa Valley, including wine, were transported from the docks at Napa. When the California gold rush got started in 1849, Napa became a favorite winter hangout for the miners. Today Napa still has much of its river town atmosphere and one of the largest collections of Victorian houses still on their original sites.

You can drive out of the town of Napa and head up the valley on Route 29, or you can get a good look at the land and a good meal at the same time on the Wine Train. The Napa Valley Railroad Company was founded in 1864 and continued in

operation until 1987 when it was purchased by the Napa Valley Wine Train Company under the direction of Vincent DeDomenico, who at the time knew more about steaming rice and conching cocoa than spiking rails and



rolling stock. His family business invented Rice-a-Roni and owned Ghirardelli Chocolate. And he thought it would be great to have a classic old train take people up the valley while they ate and drank. So every day the Napa Valley Wine Train takes passengers on a three-hour ride up the valley. Meals are served in a restored 1917 Pullman car, mahogany paneling, brass fixtures, etched glass, rail travel and dining as it was in the golden age of the iron horse. And you can drink the wine of the vineyards as you pass them.

Three hours later and you are back in Napa. If you're moving up the valley town by town, the next place on the trail is Yountville.

During the early 1800s a North Carolina mountain man by the name of George Calvert Yount wandered into the neighborhood and hung around as a handyman. He became friendly with General Mariano Vallejo who was the Governor General of the territory, which at the time belonged to Mexico. In 1836 George changed his name to Jorge Concepcion Yount, converted to Catholicism and was rewarded by the general with a huge tract of land which is now downtown Yountville.

Yountville is home to some of Napa Valley's most famous restaurants. It makes sense to have great food in Yountville. Napa Valley's first vines were planted here and today the town is surrounded by some of the valley's most famous winemakers. And what's the point of having good wine without good food to go with it?

### FRENCH LAUNDRY

Located in a very simple building in Napa Valley is one of the hottest restaurants in the United States. It's Thomas Keller's French Laundry. There are a number of things



that can produce top quality restaurant cooking and a distinct culinary tradition. First is money. If people will not pay for top ingredients and talented chefs,

not much is going to happen. The second is a local agricultural tradition. The area must be producing good things to eat or drink, wine, cheese, beef something.

The one place in the United States which appears to be developing a distinct cuisine which might turn out to be a truly American style is Napa Valley.

For the last 150 years, Napa Valley has been an

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### VELLA CHEESE

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agricultural area, and recently it has begun to attract people of considerable wealth. The first wine makers in California were Catholic missionaries who brought vines from Spain so they could make wine for their religious ceremonies. Today there are only nine Catholic churches in Napa Valley, but more than 240 wineries. It has become the most densely concentrated wine-producing region in the world.

For the first 100 years the wines of Napa Valley were much better off at mass than they were at meals. But all that changed in 1976. That was the year that a group of California wine makers organized a comparative tasting of their California wines against French cabernets and chardonnays. The tasting was held in France. And the judges were French wine makers and French wine journalists. The Americans won in both categories. The world's perception of California wine was permanently changed. You know, when it comes to the making of food and wine, there's something very special going on in Napa Valley.

### BARREL ALONG

A good place to take a look at the modern history of wine making in California is the Beaulieu Vineyard in Rutherford. During the early 1900s, Georges de Latour, a chemist from a French grape growing family, founded his own winery in Napa Valley. During Prohibition, Beaulieu prospered while other wineries were forced to close. Georges happened to hold the contract to supply altar wine to the Archdiocese of San Francisco. And churches across the country looked to the Archdiocese in San Francisco for their own altar wine.

The Archdiocese referred those requests to Georges. And Georges shipped hundreds of boxcars filled with his finest wine to the churches of the Midwest and the East Coast.



And even though Georges was making wine for religious purposes he always made the finest wines he could. And as those boxcars passed through Chicago, many of them

mysteriously disappeared! It seems like the fine vintages that were being presented in the mornings at mass were showing up at speakeasy meals at night.

When Prohibition ended in 1933, Beaulieu was producing excellent wines and Georges' socially connected wife began promoting them to San Francisco society. But Georges was always interested in improving his wine. So in 1938, he hired Andre Tchelistcheff, a Russian born, French trained wine expert who had studied at the Pasteur Institute. Andre revolutionized wine making throughout California.

Today, one of his students, Joel Aiken, is the Director of Wine Making at Beaulieu Vineyards. Joel is also one of the great experts on how the barrel that a wine is aged in affects the taste of the wine.

### JOEL AIKEN, DIRECTOR OF WINEMAKING BEAULIEU VINEYARDS

*Well in a small oak barrel, you get good flavor from the wood. It's a beautiful flavor. The wood is aged and toasted to get a smoky, toasty, woody character that complements the wine.*



*It's wood, so it actually breathes a little bit and it turns a very young, green, harsh wine into a nice, mature, full-bodied wine that you would want to drink.*

One of the indications of the importance of wine making in Napa Valley is that the most famous wine barrel maker of France, Seguin Moreau, has set up



a classic barrel making facility in the Valley. Visitors can come in and see barrels being made with the same procedures and the same tools that have been used for hundreds of years. Our best guess is that barrel making techniques were developed by prehistoric boat builders to keep water out. But by about 2000 B.C., we see that barrel makers are using them to keep water in. The first written reference we have to barrel making was actually Julius Caesar when he described the ancient Gauls of France rolling barrels filled with burning pitch at his troops. In the 300s, it got to be big business. The Catholic Church was ordering huge vats with deep submersion baptism of the newly converted. And in the 1600s it gets to be an even bigger business when international trade and intercity trade expand and everybody wants to ship something in a barrel.



A barrel maker is known as a cooper. And he starts his work by selecting about 30 oak staves that were harvested two years ago, dried, and matured in the company's wood yards. They're

assembled into the shape of a barrel and held in place with metal hoops. This process is called raising the barrel, or making the rows. For the next half hour, the barrel is heated over a wood fired flame where the cooper sprays water inside and out. The heat and the humidity give the wood flexibility.

A winch is used to gradually tighten and arch the staves producing the traditional barrel shape at which point additional metal hoops are set in place. The dome shape that results is exceptionally sturdy and resistant to stress. When it is lying down, which is its natural position, the

entire mass of the form rests on a few square inches. A child can easily maneuver a full, 350-liter cask with one hand.

The newly formed barrel is ready for a 15 to 20 minute toasting over an open flame. Only the inside is toasted and the amount of toasting is set by the winery that ordered the barrel. Toasting changes the chemical makeup of the wood. Hundreds of different compounds are developed each with its own flavor and aroma. Vanillin is the most dominant flavor but every compound imparts some element to the wine that will be stored in the barrel. Each wine maker has slightly different specifications for toasting all part of his attempt to control the final taste and aroma of the wine.

After toasting, the staves are trimmed, and grooves cut in place for the barrelheads that close the ends. The heads are cut and measured and set in place. The final hoops go on. Some sanding and finishing to bring out the beauty of the oak. And finally, as coopers have done for hundreds of years, the master craftsman signs his work which means, it's time to barrel along.

#### SAY CHEESE

The only unfortunate interruption in the history of California winemaking was a totally misguided and highly



destructive experiment by our Federal Government, known as The National Prohibition Act. From 1919 to 1933 they tried to keep law-abiding citizens from drinking anything with alcohol in it. Many of the great California wineries were forced to close. But there was, however, one positive benefit to Prohibition. A number of those wineries realized that they could use their facilities for making great cheeses.

Today California is the nation's leading dairy state. In 1993 it passed Wisconsin in milk production. About half of California's milk goes into the making of cheese, which is produced in 130 different varieties. One of the country's most popular cheeses is also a California original. It is called Monterey Jack and it's named after the place where it was first made and the guy who first made it. Today it is produced in various forms by more than a dozen different California cheese makers. David Viviani is a third generation artisan cheese maker who specializes in Jack cheese. His grandfather learned to make cheese when Prohibition closed the winery where he worked. In 1987 it was the first cheese factory west of the Mississippi River to

win a gold medal in Wisconsin.

Today they are making Sonoma Jack. After the solid curds have been separated from the liquid whey the curds are flavored, measured into cheesecloth and rolled into balls. Dave said I should give it a try.

DAVID VIVIANI:

*This was a hundred pounds of milk this morning. Now we have ten pounds of cheese. We've got 'em. You know, it took two cows to make this much cheese. They worked all day to make that much milk.*



Down the block is the Vella Cheese Company, which produces Dry Jack, a cheese developed during The Second World War when the Italians in San Francisco couldn't get cheese from Italy.

ROGER RANNIKAR  
VELLA CHEESE COMPANY

*Dry Jack is a mixture of pepper, cocoa, and oil mixed together, and each wheel is individually rubbed and put on the carts, and these will age seven to nine months minimum. The cocoa powder pepper keep the oil in a state of suspension, allowing the cheese to breathe, and the oil keeps the cheese from cracking. When you eat it, you will eat the coating itself and everything, because it is naturally made.*

#### THE SPA AT MEADOWOOD

Napa's history as an area for winemaking goes back to the work of the Spanish missionaries in the early 1800s. Its cheese making goes back to the 1700s. But its history as a place to come and rest goes back for thousands of years. These days there are a number of great spas located in the



western part of the United States. Many are elegant resorts designed for a three or four day visit in the classic tradition. An example is Meadowood in Napa Valley. Meadowood is a private estate set among 250 acres of thickly wooded land. The main building houses the reception area, and there are rustic small buildings tucked into the forest that house eighty-five rooms and suites. The aspect that struck me the most was



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its stillness.

The Spa at Meadowood has all the traditional treatments, but whatever they do they take a very Napa approach to it. During the two weeks I stayed here they wrapped me in grape seed mud to reduce my stress, polished me with grape seed conditioner to reduce my stress, and rubbed me with grape seed oil to reduce my stress. But there's historic precedent for all this grape seed business.

During the 16 and 1700s, the French royalty living in Paris believed that taking a bath in a cask of Chardonnay wine reduced the negative effects of aging. And the more they sat in the wine, the more they drank and the more they drank, the more they believed that it worked. But then the French Revolution came along, and that had a very negative effect on aging amongst the French royalty. As a matter of fact, most of them just stopped aging and the Chardonnay bath was forgotten. But not everywhere.



It has returned in the form of Meadowood's Chardonnay Massage. Of course, the Chardonnay is in a body lotion instead of a barrel, but it's the thought that counts and that anti-aging thing.

In keeping with the traditional role of a spa, Meadowood entertains its guests with physical activities like swimming in the heated pools, biking along the trails, playing tennis at one of the seven courts, golfing on the nine-hole course, and my new sport: croquet.

#### CROQUET ANYONE?

A dramatic way to get a look at Napa Valley is to take a ride in the wine plane. Jim Higgins and his wife Kim will take guests on a private aerial tour. It gives you a unique view of how the vineyards, mountains, lakes and canyons come together to form this beautiful valley.

#### JIM HIGGINS

#### THE SPA AT MEADOWOOD

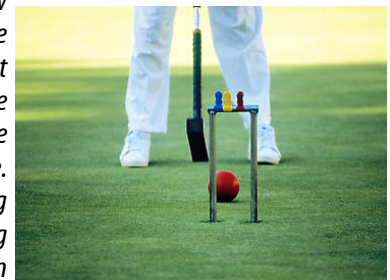
*I find this to be a particularly interesting and beautiful part because of the way that the vines kind of hang on to the*



*hillside. They have to really struggle to grow. There is such fantastic drainage here that the root system actually has to dig down and work very hard. When the vine has to work hard, it produces a more flavorful,*

*intense grape. And it typically works out that whatever looks good from the air typically tastes good in your glass as well. And down to the right, you'll notice as we circle around Meadowood Napa Valley nestled in the hills. It has its own private little valley, and you can see it clearly defined here by the golf course. And then if you look at the large green spot in the middle that's a perfect square, that's the croquet lawn.*

*So you go through each wicket twice, once in each direction. And the object is for me to get the two balls on my side through all six wickets twice and hit the stake before you get your two balls through all six wickets and hit the stake. When you swing, you want to swing the whole mallet from your shoulders. It's the shoulders are the top of the pendulum. So you draw your hands back to the body, and you extend out through the ball. So the whole mallet swings. The arms should move more. You want everything relaxed; the only thing that should move when you swing a mallet and*



*hit a ball is your arms. Your head stays down, your body doesn't move, just a nice, smooth swing from the shoulders. Just like that. There you go. That's not makeable. One of the hard parts about the game is learning to make the balls do*

what you want 'em to do.

*A lot of geometry and physics. There's one trick shot that comes into play once in a while. Let's say red ball needs to make this wicket, but the blue's in my way and I've already hit it, so I'm not allowed to hit it again. So the only way to do that is to put my feet in front of the ball, which allows me to hit down on top -- that way I got through and I didn't touch the blue ball and it's all legal.*

**OLD FAITHFUL**

And just up the valley from Meadowood: more good stuff in the town of Calistoga. Lincoln Avenue, the main street, looks like it was part of the set for *High Noon* or maybe *Blazing Saddles*. A hundred years ago it was a tough frontier town and much of the architecture has remained. Local shops line the street. No chain stores are allowed in Napa Valley. There are a number of excellent restaurants here and I got to eat in a few of them.

Brannan's is named after Sam Brannan. In 1859 Sam was living in San Francisco when he heard that the top of Napa Valley was filled with hot springs. He came up and bought 2,000 acres and put together a plan for a spa and resort that he hoped would rival the famous Saratoga in New York State. Then he brought up a bunch of potential investors and showed them the neighborhood. Threw a big party for 'em. Lots of eating and drinking. When it came to the point where he was going to explain his plan, Sam had had a little bit too much to drink, and "Saratoga of California" came out as "Calistoga of Sarafornia." But he got his investors anyway, and Calistoga got built.



Brannan's Grill has a multi-ethnic staff that is reflected in the menu. We started with skillet clams and mussels, the Italian influence, but the sauce is lemongrass curry, the work of the chef Rob Lam, who is Vietnamese. The main course was braised lamb shank with roasted onions, pappardelle pasta, and mint yogurt. It's like the United Nations in a bowl. For dessert we had a mini-flourless chocolate cake that was served while it was still soft in the center, a scoop of banana ice cream on the side.

The food in Calistoga is good, but Sam Brannan was right -- what makes this place special and has for thousands of years is that it sits on top of an intense geothermal area that sends hot water shooting up from the center of the earth. It even has its own "Old Faithful" geyser.



Deep beneath Calistoga is a river. As it runs over the molten rock at the center of our planet its water is turned into super-heated steam, which shoots to the surface. Thousands of gallons of water at a temperature of 350 degrees are driven skyward for about 60 feet. The geyser repeats this performance at regular intervals.

But from time to time the pattern changes, and some scientists believe that change can predict earthquakes. That has certainly been the case in my personal relationships, so I understand why they are monitoring Old Faithful.

**TO LEARN MORE . . .**

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