



Clockwise from far left: Blue Note's baby beet salad, Ritual Coffee at Oxbow Public Market, Kenzo Estate vineyards, and a tasting at RiverHouse by Bespoke Collection.



IT'S AFTER 8 PM ON A FRIDAY in downtown Napa, and something unusual is afoot: A crowd settles into black leather sofas beneath a disco ball, the crackle of a needle on vinyl plays through speakers, and a band tunes their guitars on a red Oriental rug in front of a "JaM Cellars" sign. This might seem like a mundane scene to those hailing from hipper turf, but if you haven't been to Napa in a while, you'll understand the double take.

Five years ago, a drive through downtown after sunset meant buttoned-up storefronts and rolled-up sidewalks. Forget about grabbing a great dinner or a late-night drink in a place that's been a gas-up-and-go gateway to the eponymous wine valley. But times have changed, and the gold-rush-era town of about 80,000 is enjoying a new heyday, offering visitors and Bay Area locals something they haven't had before—a reason to stick around.

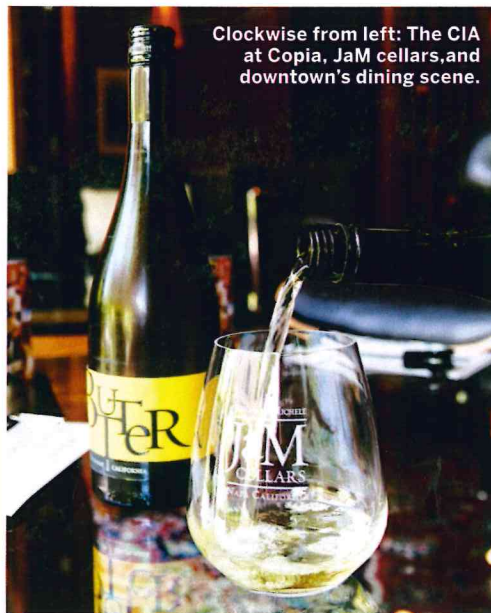
Hotels, restaurants, boutiques, and galleries have sprung up inside the Victorian, art deco, and Spanish

Develop a Taste for Napa

The valley's namesake city is ready to come out of the cellar.

BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA XIAO

Quick Escape



Clockwise from left: The CIA at Copia, JaM cellars, and downtown's dining scene.



colonial buildings lining the streets. The historic Napa Valley Opera House, originally opened in 1880, was recently revamped as a Blue Note jazz and supper club booking some of the country's best crooners. There are some two dozen (and counting) winetasting rooms in town – among them, JaM Cellars. Unlike many that shutter by late afternoon, JaM, with an aesthetic that skews more hangout-for-the-cool-kids than

oenophile salon, pours free glasses of sparkling wine at 4 PM and fills up for its Thursday- and Friday-night live-music sessions.

Napa natives John and Michele Truchard opened the music-themed space, complete with a recording booth, to show off their Butter chardonnay – a success story that grew from producing 1,000 cases in 2009 to more than 840,000 cases in the 2016 vintage. They also serve their Toast sparkling wine and JaM cabernet sauvignon. This whimsical wordplay hints at a larger vibe bubbling up around Napa: fun, youthful, and big on entertaining.

Fifteen years ago, there were about 200 members of Napa Valley Vintners (the trade group for area wineries), but that number has more than doubled. With roughly 3.5 million visitors descending on the valley last year, entertainment and activities have become key for businesses and wineries. Whether you're touring by train or packing a picnic and two-wheeling it on the recently inaugurated Napa Valley Vine Trail, a 12.5-mile paved bike path connecting downtown Napa to food-centric Yountville (the first phase of a proposed 47-mile path), a visit here is no longer only about the wine. Rather, it's as much about the experience surrounding the wine.

"You can only do so much in the bottle or with a label," says Michael Polenske, founder

TIP

"Celadon is one of my favorite Oxbow District restaurants; I typically order the macadamia-crusted goat cheese appetizer and a roasted-beet salad. They also serve a great weekend brunch – who wouldn't want to try strawberry cheesecake French toast? Not the best diet food, though!"

– Alyse Cori, *Virtuoso travel agency owner, Sonoma*

of Blackbird Vineyards, which opened its flagship tasting room, RiverHouse by Bespoke Collection, last September on Napa's pedestrian-friendly river walk. Visitors can taste Blackbird's full portfolio on a shaded riverfront patio or in semiprivate and private rooms decked out in handpicked European antiques, books, and local artwork – as well as museum-quality pieces from the likes of Andy Warhol.

Nearby, the immaculate, upscale Kenzo restaurant opened recently on Pearl Street. It's a sophisticated ambassador for Kenzo Estate wines, which are served alongside a traditional Japanese kaiseki-style menu of artfully prepared small dishes presented in painted bowls and lacquered boxes. The winery produces just 20,000 cases a year, nearly 80 percent of which are shipped to Japan. Outside of its new restaurant, one of the only spots you'll find Kenzo wine in the U.S. is at its vineyard's appointment-only tasting room, set on 3,800 lake-speckled acres 15 minutes east of downtown.

A short stroll across the river, the Napa Valley Wine Train has chugged visitors up and down the valley since opening in 1989. This summer, its popular Quattro Vino tour will expand into four different trips that take wine lovers to wineries such as Domaine Chandon, Charles Krug, and Robert Mondavi, with chef-prepared four-course meals on board between whistle stops. The train depot's by-appointment tasting room, also new this summer, will rotate wines from around the region, including Opus One, created by Mondavi in partnership with Château Mouton Rothschild.

Quick Escape

Kenzo's bento box and (right) the Napa Valley Wine Train.



Napa's gourmet cred has been slow to mature, even after La Toque arrived in 2008 and earned a Michelin star. But that's changing fast too, and the city's thriving Oxbow District is the hub for new culinary ventures that go beyond just restaurants. In February, the Culinary Institute of America opened The CIA at Copia next to the popular Oxbow Public Market, resuscitating a building that had sat empty for eight years. Unlike its professional-focused sister in Saint Helena, the Napa outpost caters to home chefs and entertainers with a roster of cooking classes, daily winetasting pop-ups, cookbooks and table linens at its store, and a full-service restaurant.

A few doors down, Feast It Forward shines a new kind of limelight on Napa's epicurean scene. The online network and lifestyle brand that promotes good living on a foundation of philanthropy has produced shows dedicated to food, wine, and music since 2009, with five percent of proceeds going to charities that aid women, children, and animals. This summer, it's going brick and mortar. Cofounder Katie Shaffer thinks there couldn't be a better time to bring her virtual world to a two-story farmhouse and garden on McKinstry Street. "Napa used to be this pass-through town, but it's rockin' and rollin' now," she says.

Shaffer calls the house "an experiential estate," with a floor dedicated to retail – everything from kitchen gadgets to wall paint, furniture, and light fixtures – as well as a collective of 16 Napa vineyards and a Gibson guitar corner. Upstairs, a studio for



AMONG THE VINES

Three retreats for your next Napa adventure.

The 100 cottages and suites at **Carneros Resort and Spa** deliver homey elegance surrounded by 28 acres of vines, five miles southwest of Napa. Among this self-contained country estate's enticements: multiple restaurants, a market with picnic-ready staples, complimentary bikes, and the area's most picturesque pool. *Doubles from \$650, including a \$60 breakfast credit daily and a \$100 spa credit.*

Nine miles from Napa in Yountville, modern and eco-friendly **Bardessono Hotel & Spa** has a tranquil rooftop pool, complimentary bicycles, and nice touches in each of its 62 suites, such as gas fireplaces, private furnished courtyards or balconies, and soaking tubs. *Doubles from \$700, including breakfast daily and a \$100 dining credit.*

Secluded on 250 acres of oak trees roughly 20 miles

north of Napa, **Meadowood Napa Valley's** 85 rooms feel like private farmhouse cottages, with wood beams, natural light, and huge decks. Guests return from winetasting to hiking trails, a nine-hole golf course and a croquet lawn, and chef Christopher Kostow's three-Michelin-star Restaurant at Meadowood, renowned across the valley. *Doubles from \$700, including a \$50 breakfast credit daily, a \$100 spa credit, and a box of local chocolates.*

events and cooking demonstrations with chefs such as Rick Moonen and Jacques Pépin is open to the public. Visitors can also relax in the back garden, complete with a bar fashioned from an old camper. When it's not touring, check out "Sophia," Shaffer's kitted-out Airstream and studio, from which she's streamed intimate concerts and conversations with musicians such as Imagine Dragons, Michael Franti, and Allen Stone.

A sure sign that Napa has arrived might be on South Coombs Street, where a crowd gathers around an outdoor grill sizzling with bratwurst, and locals line up three deep at the bar, eager to try Napa's latest liquid gold: beer. Across the country, microbreweries seem to be the bellwethers of a city's cool factor. With Tannery Bend Beerworks, a small-batch brewery and tasting room opened in March, it appears as if Napa has finally caught up. Sipping a pale ale in a place synonymous with wine? Yep, it feels just about right in a town where the new normal is anything but – a taste everyone enjoys wholeheartedly. VI



Napa newcomer Tannery Bend Beerworks.

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