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Here comes harvest time at Yountville in California's Napa Valley

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YOUNTVILLE, Calif. - If vineyards at harvest time call to you - grapes plump on the vines, leaves turning red and gold - consider a visit to Yountville, in the heart of California's famed Napa Valley. A country village by this city gal's standards, Yountville is tiny: about 12 blocks long and four blocks wide, an island lapped by rolling vineyards. Washington Street, the main drag, bisects the town, where 3,480 residents count themselves lucky to be making a living from tourism and the wineries that attract connoisseurs from near and far.

Somewhat of a novice regarding Northern California's secret hideaways, I headed there recently expecting to wander along winding lanes through picturesque hills and valleys, fixing the glorious fall colors for future recall. To add purpose to pleasure, I also hoped to stop wherever a friendly sign announced "Tasting Room," suggesting of a winery tour and a chance to buy a recent vintage at the source, a taste of Napa sunshine to warm a chilly evening back home.

In due time I arrived - with friends in tow - to discover that while some might call Yountville a village, it's a village on steroids, a city in miniature, depending on your definition. Nearly everything a wine-searcher could want is right there, from lodging to dining, a 10-minute walk from end to end.

"You don't need a car at all," said the bell boy at the Vintage Inn, who was leaning against the reception desk smiling, sharing a joke with the clerk while they waited early arrivals. "Just park it over there beyond the flower beds. You can walk everywhere," he told us, piling our suitcases onto a rolling cart and disappearing out the rear toward a distant fountain.

So walk we did, passing a half dozen tasting rooms (suburban outposts of distant wineries), fashion emporiums, art galleries, Napa Style (a must-see kitchen and comestibles shop on the Vintage Estate), a flourishing vegetable garden and the Villagio Inn & Spa, next door.

More notable than any of these, however, was Yountville's culinary scene, famous for cornering at least five (or maybe six) Michelin stars. From Bouchon, the bistro and bakery, to the French Laundry (three stars between just the two), and from Redd Wood (pasta and pizza), Bodega (steaks and Italian specialties) to Bistro Jeanty (pure French), they offered a bountiful cornucopia of fine (and expensive) dining surprises.

Our travel credo being, as some guidebook wag described it, "a peaceful night makes the next day bright," we booked rooms in the Vintage Inn, built in 1985 on the Vintage Estate's 23 centrally located acres. There are other lodging choices here in Yountville. But the Vintage Inn met our first criteria: a central location. It also won points with a large swimming pool and hot tub, both open into the evening for an after-dinner soak. The deal-maker was a no-charge breakfast (included in the room price): a buffet with fruit, cereals, sliced meats, bread, cheese, tomatoes and a chef-manned omelet station.

When an initial inspection of the proposed digs revealed a second-floor room with king bed, puffy quilt, shamefully large tub, two balconies, a fireplace and kitchenette nook, we registered. As for the wine project, we tasted and bought two cabernets at a tasting room across the street. But what to do about exploring Napa Valley's quaint country roads? Enter the concierge.

"Most of these wineries don't allow drop-in customers," said Christina Richardson, presiding over a desk in the hotel's lounge. "You have to have appointments," she explained. "And you can't visit Far Niente at all." Far Niente, my former boss's favorite wine, was the only label I could think of.

"But," she added, with a conspiratorial smile, "I just might be able to make a reservation for you at Nickel & Nickel. They're the owners of Far Niente. Let me call them. I've been going to lots of tastings lately," she confessed. "It's my chance to learn about wine."

Handing us a map of the 199 wineries in the Napa Valley - most I'd never heard of - she explained that better wineries not only require a reservation, they also charge a fee for a tasting; typically \$25 (or more) per person. It sounds pricey. But that fee pays for two hours with an wine connoisseur who leads the tour, then presides over a "flight," of five or six wines which he / she pours, guiding you through a comparison and evaluation. At some wineries, like Frog's Leap, a drop-in is more casual. You can sit all afternoon on the porch or on the lawn, drink in the rumpled hills beyond, inspect the vegetable and flower gardens or play bean-bag horse shoes with your kids.

So, with four appointments in hand we retrieved the car and were off, to Hess (on rustic Mount Veeder), to Nickel & Nickel (exclusive, organized, welcoming), to Frogs Leap (casual, fun), and to Cakebread (join a group and wait your turn). Later Richardson - whose courtesy and professional know-how made our mission a success, booked "his and her" aroma therapy massages with bath treatments at the Villagio Spa (next door), a 90-minute marathon of kneading, oiling, finishing with an open air soak in bubbly bath water. A rare indulgence for us, it confirmed the old saw that "the couple that plays together, stays together." Richardson also made dinner reservations for us at Bodega (good food, annoyingly pompous waiter), and at Redd Wood (fresh veggies, scrumptious sauce, lively atmosphere).

Why didn't we eat at the celebrated French Laundry? It was booked up for the next five months. But Bouchon had a lunch cancellation, a meal that became the trip's culinary highlight. Onion soup (the genuine article) whetted my appetite, followed by Salade Maraichere au Chevre Chaud (green salad), Truit Amandine (trout), fresh bread and Bouchon's famous Pomme Frites (French fries). A sommelier-chosen dry white wine enhanced the flavors.

Did we weigh down the car's rear wheels with a trunk full of wine? Not quite, but we did buy select labels, complex in the nose and smooth on the tongue. A few were reputed to improve with age, the sort of vintage years you store in the cellar and crack open when your toddler graduates from college. Inspired by Concierge Richardson, at the Vintage Inn, I realized there was much more to learn. I envisaged a new-found hobby, something akin to bird watching; calling for a distant trip, a guidebook, a checklist.

I've now checked off nine Napa wineries. Just 190 to go. An epic journey begins.

IF YOU GO:

Napa and Sonoma Valleys are located east of San Francisco, on State Route 29.

For lodging at the luxury-rated Vintage Inn, call (800)351-1133; or go to www.vintageinn.com.

For more about Yountville, go to www.visityountville.com.

For Napa Valley information, see www.napa valley.com. PHOTOS (from MCT Photo Service, 202-383-6099):

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