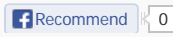


Michelin star-rich Yountville an ideal base for touring the valley

Ads by Google

Open-Air Jeep, Off-Road Adventure All Tastings and Lunch Included
www.temeculajeptours.com

Temecula Winery Tours



CAPTIONS

Guests enjoy a tasting flight at Hess Estate's Cellar in California's Napa Valley.

(Steve Haggerty/MCT Photo)

1/7

By Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty,
McClatchy-Tribune news

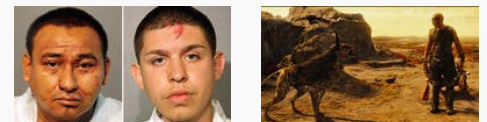
6:50 p.m. CDT, September 5, 2013

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.

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.

VIDEO

PHOTO GALLERIES



Somewhat novices regarding Northern California's secret hideaways, we 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, we 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.

In due time we 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 Vintage Inn bellhop. "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 half a 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) and 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, but the Vintage Inn met our first criterion: 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. 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 that 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 ruffled hills beyond, inspect the vegetable and flower gardens or play bean-bag horse shoes with your kids.

Ads by Google

Mugs in the news



Chicago photos in the news

New movies reviewed



Pets in need of homes

Destinations: A travel e-book



Destinations is a helpful, insightful collection of columns from Chicago Tribune travel writer Josh Noel, covering a wide range of expertly curated getaways. Click [here](#) for the e-book, free to Digital

Plus members and only \$4.99 for non-members.

Today's travel deals

Listed by **TRAVELZOO**. *Some taxes, fees additional

So, with four appointments in hand, we retrieved the car and were off to Hess (on rustic Mount Veeder), Nickel & Nickel (exclusive, organized, welcoming), Frog's 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 and 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 green salad, trout, fresh bread and Bouchon's famous 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 newfound 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 north of San Francisco on California Highway 29.

For lodging at the luxury-rated Vintage Inn, call 800-351-1133; or visit vintageinn.com. (Rates start at \$340.)

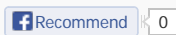
For more about Yountville, go to yountville.com.

For Napa Valley information, see napavalley.com.

Copyright © 2013 Chicago Tribune Company, LLC



Email



0



0

MORE FROM TRIBUNE

Family of Cleveland kidnapper Ariel Castro to claim body

August's fastest- and slowest-selling cars

Ex-Blackhawk lists home for \$1.9 million

Lamar Odom reportedly receiving treatment in wake of DUI arrest

Illinois companies warn of 600 layoffs in August

FROM AROUND THE WEB

Tasting Room: The Netflix of Wine *(The Huffington Post)*

The 10 Worst Hotels and Motels in America *(The Fiscal Times)*

The 21 Most Brilliantly Concealed Flasks for the Undercover Drunk *(The Savory)*

15 Most Popular Ice Cream Flavors: The Winner May Surprise You! *(ActiveBeat)*

Fifteen of the Most Bizarre Cat Breeds

SPECIAL ADVERTISING SECTIONS



MICHIGAN WINE COUNTRY
Explore Michigan's wine country



LIBERTY MUTUAL
Hometown Hub: Stories of the Chicago Marathon



TRENDS IN CHICAGO
Keep up with today's auto, home, food and travel trends

CHICAGONOW



Can Whole Foods revive Englewood?



Social media means no more drive-by parenting



Why the author of "FYI, if you're a teenage girl" is right

Join ChicagoNow...

Ads by Google

Plan a Trip to Australia?

Australia Specialists Compete To Customize Your Luxury Trip
www.zicasso.com

SkyCar Service

Start from \$15 to LAX call now! 310-828-3333
PassengersWanted.net

METROMIX