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How to spend it

STRIKING GOLD

NEXT-GEN NAPA

Napa Valley is the California myth in microcosm, a place of Michelin stars, maverick winemakers and mountain vistas. Might recent and planned developments change its bucolic soul?

Maria Shollenbarger returns to her home state to find out

Napa Valley veteran
Auberge du Soleil -
the hotel and spa was
originally opened as
a restaurant in 1981

I t's still one of the prettiest views in California, a state that far exceeds its fair quota of them: Napa Valley at sunrise. While the first rays warm the upper reaches of the pine-capped hills, thick mist pools in the valley below, a cotton-wool sea that can take hours to burn off. The air might be faintly acrid with white sage or chaparral, the silence broken only by the calls of crows or red-tailed hawks. In these first minutes of the day – before Route 29 below begins to hum and all the sleek artisanal cafés open, and the Wine Train (a gussed-up tourism reprisal of a historic 150-year-old rail corridor) commences chugging along its 18-mile route between the monied towns of Napa and St Helena – it's possible, just, to imagine it back in the '70s.

Not the 1870s, when Charles Krug and Jacob Schram were tending some of the valley's first vines amid walnut and plum orchards (alas, that kind of throwback Arcadia is now beyond most of northern California

to deliver). But the 1970s, yes – when European winemakers were lured west by rumours of soil profiles so promising that what they produced might forever upend connoisseurs' views on New World wines (as two Napa Valley wines famously did in 1976, at the blind tasting known as the Judgment of Paris).

Though not then tamed, Napa was increasingly cultivated, and consumer-friendliness grew apace with winemaking prowess. Small inns showcased European elegance and restaurants often presaged the farm-to-table zeitgeist by privileging local provenance (notably The Restaurant at Meadowood Resort & Spa and Thomas Keller's French Laundry, which now count six Michelin stars between them).

At some point in the Noughties, Napa Valley went from gilded, canny wine region to gilded, full-blown lifestyle playground – a trajectory propelled in large part by the rapid proliferation of a whole new

demography of multimillionaires in another famous Californian valley, just 80 miles south. The Michelin-starred venues here and in neighbouring Sonoma now number 10 and include knockout Japanese (at Kenzo) and 11-course “micro-seasonal” dining (at Single Thread, considered by many to be northern California's best restaurant). In March, the 38th annual Napa Valley Barrel Auction raised over \$13m for local charities. At shops like Forty Five Ten in Yountville, womenswear by Celine, Rochas and Delozo is arranged around displays of £160 Vintner's Daughter Active Botanical Serum. San Francisco socialites can sometimes be found under the umbrellas in front of Gott's Roadside in St Helena, feasting on its Niman Ranch burgers and famous garlic fries.

But Napa can still feel like a remarkably pure, agrarian place. The ineluctable sense of a bond with the land remains a constant – even in the wake of the devastating





wildfires that have plagued the state over the past few years. Before last autumn's Camp Fire – the deadliest in the state's history – decimated the town of Paradise and burnt some 150,000 acres, a series of fires in October 2017 had raged across Napa and Sonoma counties, taking lives and destroying at least five wineries, along with countless homes and livelihoods. But when I drove up from San Francisco last April, vivid green was already furring the forest floor and sprouting from blackened pines on the Oakville Grade, the winding pass connecting the two valleys – and Napa proper seemed remarkably, eerily, close to untouched.

It's a beauty that is as bankable as it is resilient. In 2016, almost 3.5 million people (20 per cent of them non-American) visited, spending about \$1.2bn; those who overnighted dropped on average more than \$800 per couple per day. It's perhaps no surprise, then, that two hotel-world heavyweights will soon be fixtures of the landscape. Though you'll not see their names on signage anywhere, thanks to a local (and locally very popular) no-formula ordinance that prohibits the presence of big-name chains, both Four Seasons and

Rosewood – operating as Calistoga Resort (pictured below right and overleaf) and Calistoga Hills Resort – are in full construction mode here, their sleek suites, spas, residences and restaurants slated to be open by mid-2019 and early 2020 respectively.

Not that the existing competition is exactly shoddy: in Calistoga alone, besides the unparalleled rustic elegance of Calistoga Ranch and the more youthful, urbane Solage – both part of Auberge Resorts, whose flagship, Auberge du Soleil (pictured on previous pages), is in nearby Rutherford – there is Indian Springs, the oldest continuously operating spa in Napa Valley (established in 1862), fairly fresh off a reported \$17m expansion and home to one of Napa's hottest new tables, Sam's Social Club.

But besting Auberge du Soleil itself isn't easy. Opened in 1981 as a restaurant by a French chef called Claude Rouas, the

Auberge was, in its day, pretty much the only fine-dining option around, conjuring the flavours of Provence on the Silverado Trail. Rouas and his partner, Bob Harmon, eventually added rooms and suites – designed, like the restaurant, by the late, legendary decorator and collector Michael Taylor – and then a lavish spa in 2001.

Today, Auberge Resorts is an international portfolio with hotels in the Caribbean, Mexico and Costa Rica and designs on the East Coast and Africa. But Auberge du Soleil remains a jewel and still at the top of a near-saturated Napa Valley class. I stayed in one of several new maisons being built into the hill last spring; they reprise the sun-baked neutrals and wide patios of the original, and add huge skylit bathrooms and fireplaces in the bedrooms. The spa, arranged around a courtyard planted with olives, lavender and California oaks, is still one of Napa's best; likewise the very grown-up pool, set away from the rooms in lush solitude, with its own bar.

The restaurant terrace at sunset was idyllic, the menu complemented by more than 15,000 bottles ranging from Rhône-style wines from Sonoma's Dry Creek region, to cult Cabernet producers from down in the valley, to the premier-cru Bordeaux reds that once inspired them.

A few miles south, in St Helena, is Las Alcobas (pictured below left). It's technically in the Marriott stable (part of

From top: Acacia House – the restaurant at Las Alcobas, which opened in 2017 – is already a destination venue. The deck of a suite at Las Alcobas, looking out over the vineyards of Beringer winery and towards the Mayacamas Mountains.

A villa at the Four Seasons' Calistoga Resort, opening in 2019 (artist's rendering)

its Luxury Collection), but having kept its flag-flying to a discreet minimum, it doesn't feel like one. Opened in June 2017, it sits flush with the roadside and as a result is fairly integrated into town life. In fact, its superb restaurant, Acacia House (pictured above left), named after the 1905 mansion that makes up one part of the resort, has become something of a power-lunch favourite among locals – who include some of America's top winemakers and chefs (not

exactly an easy-to-please bunch) – and it's not uncommon to find the tables lining its covered porch full on a weekday.

Behind Acacia House stretches a three-acre compound, with the lion's share of the 68 rooms and suites housed in two California-contemporary buildings – all limed-pine planks, stone and riveted steel – separated by a long and very photogenic saltwater pool. (There's also a striking barn-like spa with a beautiful relaxation room, natural light filtering through skylights in its tall ceilings.) Rooms are huge – the smallest clocks in at about 645sq ft – some with deep terraces; mine featured a slick gas firepit, while others had soaking tubs. The decor is pared back in greys and white, with light-oak floors: airy but austere – perhaps, wisely, forgoing any attempt to compete with the stop-and-gape views across the immaculate vineyards of Beringer, the oldest continuously operating winery in the region, which stretch due west towards the Mayacamas Mountains (and with which Las Alcobas shares a boundary).

Las Alcobas might not universally appeal; you wouldn't necessarily call the atmosphere cosy or rustic, and being in town means occasionally hearing town. But there are



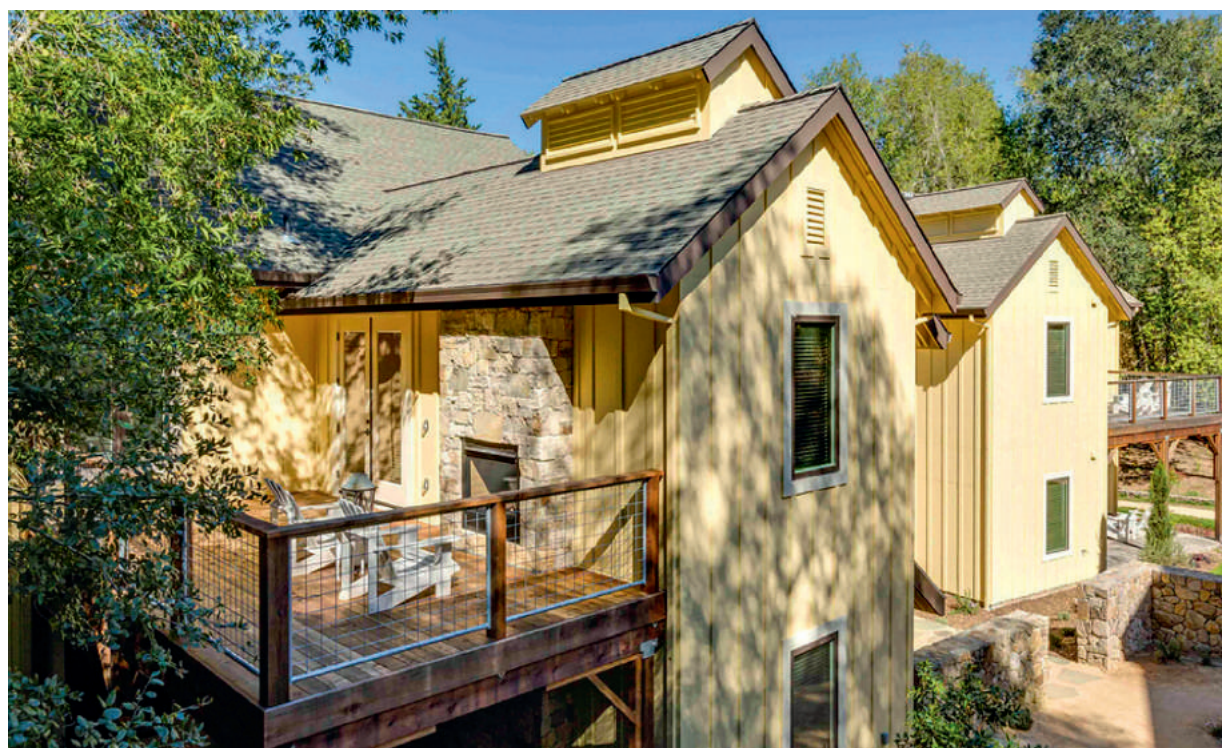
Napa's beauty is as bankable as it is resilient – in 2016, 3.5 million visitors spent \$1.2bn here

those singular views, and, for a new hotel, it evinces moments of real character. The witty bartenders were genuinely “stoked” (so said one, with movingly heartfelt enunciation) to talk me through the impressive craft-cocktail menu they’d spent the winter creating. Under chef Chris Cosentino – one of San Francisco’s finest and an alumnus of US TV’s *Top Chef Masters* – Acacia House kept luring me back, both for the food (a breakfast compote of oranges, dates, pistachios and mint was unforgettable, as was a tuna tartare that was a sort of deconstructed *salade Niçoise*) and the happy, industrious buzz of so many food proselytes in one place.

New Napa can be a lot of fun, then. But those who miss its older, more sylvan soul can head west, into Sonoma’s far – and far less-trod – reaches (where there are also excellent vintners, producing Pinot Noirs and Chardonnays that hew a bit truer to their Burgundian heritage in this cool, coastal-ridge climate). The west of Sonoma is less guileful than Napa, its countryside shaggier; an Abruzzo, maybe, to Napa’s Tuscany. Its towns – Occidental, Guerneville, Sebastopol – come complete with clapboard Wild West façades, artisan ice creameries, craft breweries, farm stands and the occasional one-house museum.

Just outside Forestville, where the 116 becomes River Road and starts to ascend in earnest into the Russian

River Valley – ie, within pretty perfect striking distance of both Napa and this lovely bit of Sonoma – sits Farmhouse Inn (pictured below and bottom). I’d been hearing about it for a couple of years from friends in the Bay Area, but only visited last spring, around the time its owners, siblings (and fifth-generation Sonoma farmers) Catherine and Joe Bartolomei, were putting final touches on renovations to its charming guest cottages, each with its own hinged gate or wisteria- and rose-covered trellis. These, along with a rambling two-storey farmhouse that holds the outrageously good (and Michelin-starred) restaurant, had comprised the original inn until 2009, when they built a complex of cheery, butter-yellow two-storey outbuildings holding several more rooms and suites, bringing the total number of accommodations to 25. The Bartolomeis



have done something special with Farmhouse Inn, which is to capture a whole zeitgeist – Northern California Living – in bricks and mortar (and timber cladding and barn doors and native dry-plant gardens) and then carefully curate local food, drink and culture so that they are present in an unaffected, diffuse but continuous way. The second-floor rooms in the new buildings are the best, for my money, with their pitched and raftered ceilings, ample indoor-outdoor fireplaces and even ampler feather beds. The aesthetic is quintessential California Country – shabby chic and whitewash all the way, with the cavernous marble, tile and nickel bathrooms that Americans love.

That the restaurant is superb is due in no small part to being a beneficiary of the bounty of Bartolomei-owned farms and orchards (which produce everything from kale and tiger melons to figs and ornamental flowers, not forgetting the requisite dozen-odd varieties of heirloom tomatoes and free-range eggs). That your reception at any of the fine boutique wineries within a few minutes’ drive is a personal one is thanks to Jennifer Jespersen, the Inn’s master sommelier, who usually accompanies

guests to ensure the knowledge dive they take is suitably deep.

From top: the kitchen and sitting room in one of the residences at Calistoga Resort (artist’s rendering), slated to open in mid-2019. The butter-yellow, two-storey additions to Farmhouse Inn, in Russian River Valley. Farmhouse Inn’s guest rooms have a shabby-chic aesthetic

In the cosy reception, there are enamel buckets and baskets piled next to artfully arrayed bins and bottles of bath salts, oils, shaved soaps – all made from farm produce, all intended for help-yourself, no-limits use (though you’d be missing a trick to not book at least one treatment in the glorious spa, with its fresh lavender- and alfalfa-stuffed mattresses on the massage beds). At the head of the driveway, just beyond the pool, there’s a gleaming food truck – The Farm Stand – that dishes up Baja fish tacos, chef’s salads, harissa fries and more; guests eat by the pool, on the dining patio, on one of the Adirondack chairs grouped in the front garden – wherever they want.

Not that 21st-century Napa Valley isn’t fabulous, and not that it won’t possibly be even more fabulous when Four Seasons and Rosewood debut. But at Farmhouse Inn, the ethos of both farm and house – of bounty and welcome – are still present in a way that’s timeless in its honesty. That’s worth raising a glass to. ♦

NAPA OF THE GODS

Maria Shollenbarger travelled as a guest of **Scott Dunn** (020-3553 6900; scottdunn.com), which offers a 10-night California Itinerary from £4,350 per person, with five nights’ B&B at Farmhouse Inn and five nights at Auberge du Soleil, including international flights with United Airlines and car hire/transfers. **Auberge du Soleil**, aubergeresorts.com, from \$700. **Calistoga Ranch**, aubergeresorts.com, from \$1,150. **Farmhouse Inn**, farmhouseinn.com, from \$495. **Indian Springs Resort & Spa**, indianspringscalistoga.com, from \$499. **Las Alcobas**, marriott.com, from \$740. **Solage**, aubergeresorts.com, from \$700. **British Airways** (ba.com) flies daily from London Heathrow to Oakland from £820 return.

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