



Views and Vintages

in Napa &
Neighboring Yountville

By Jody Robinson

Full disclosure: I am a mom. It's a fact that may belie my bias when I tell you that sometimes a girl simply needs a break. Children, husbands, work, the unending demands of every single day... it catches up with you. Even the oft-offered advice, "You must make time for yourself!" can feel like just another pressure.

The anecdote to the mayhem? A few relaxing days away in wine country, visiting family and friends. With our two young children in tow, my husband and I headed to Napa and neighboring Yountville, where we whiled away the days wining, dining, playing tourist and spending quality family time.

Visitors travel here from all over the globe to experience picturesque scenery and wine, paired with fine dining, entertainment and adventuring. For Orange County families, it's a little getaway with a lot to offer: Far away enough to be really away and close enough to keep your separation-from-responsibilities anxiety in check.

For the ideal family vacation that leaves you refreshed and enriched, pack a little bit of everything into your visit.

NAPA VALLEY WINE TRAIN

Napa is known for its panoramic vistas, fine dining and history. So what better way to experience the views and vintages, enjoy a gourmet meal and step back in time to the days when rails ruled as the preferred mode of travel than to step aboard the **Napa Valley Wine Train** (www.winetrain.com)?



Napa Valley Wine Train



Napa Valley Wine Train

The Napa Valley railway dates back to the late 19th century and eventually became part of the Southern Pacific Railroad (the original passenger service was discontinued in 1929). Sixty years later, when Southern Pacific petitioned to abandon the line, a group of local investors formed the Napa Valley Railroad (NVR) and purchased the right of way. Since that time, the NVR has evolved into one of the most popular excursion trains in the country. The Wine Train's gourmet lunch and dinner trains began service in 1989 and the line, which now includes 36 miles of track, rolls by 26 different wineries at about 10 miles an hour (the trip, which lasted just shy of three, started and ended at the downtown Napa station).

Three onboard kitchens allow Napa Valley Wine Train chefs to create culinary works of art from scratch using "fresh seasonal ingredients as well as humanely raised, hormone-free meats and line-caught fish" in creating gourmet meals for lunch and dinner.

Meals are served at tables laid out in the opulent dining cars with white linen, beautiful china and silverware. The

meal starts with a selection of artisan cheeses and finely cut meats, followed by a choice of grilled and roasted beef tenderloin or the Chef's fresh selection of seafood.

And now with the addition of a 36-seat Pullman railcar, for the first time in its 27-year history, the iconic Napa Valley Wine Train will make several stops along the route, allowing guests to spend time tasting and touring four wineries. If you're contemplating this new indulgent "Quattro Vino tour," plan to carve off six leisurely hours with stops at the Robert Mondavi Winery in Oakville, and the V. Sattui, Merryvale and Charles Krug wineries in St. Helena (the Quattro Vino tour runs daily on separate tracks from the regular three-hour tour train tour).

NAPA VINEYARD HOUSE

We really lucked out in discovering a wonderful accommodation within easy driving distance to downtown Napa, tasting rooms and wineries. Because we have family friends who live in the area, we've been blessed to be



Napa Vineyard House



able to visit the region fairly frequently, generally staying with our friends or in one of the nearby hotel properties.

The charming two-bedroom cottage at the **Napa Vineyard House** (www.napavineyard-house.com) proved to be a tranquil retreat convenient to everything and yet just far enough away from the bustle of downtown to make you feel like you were really "getting away from it all." On their web site, owners Kevin Hall and his wife claim that from the moment you arrive to the moment you leave "we'll do our best to make you feel at home" and our family can attest that they certainly deliver on this promise.

Conveniently located to great wineries, restaurants and shopping and with wonderful vineyard views to the north and south ensures that you know that you are in the Napa Valley wine country. The cottage features two separate bedrooms, each with its own bathroom on either side of a common area complete with a kitchenette, dining table and chairs and lounge area. As lovely as the accommodation is, it's the thoughtful touches that really made our stay memorable - from the fragrant L'Occitane bath products and bottle of wine and beverages chilling in the fridge to the daily morning delivery of breakfast on our doorstep (delicious

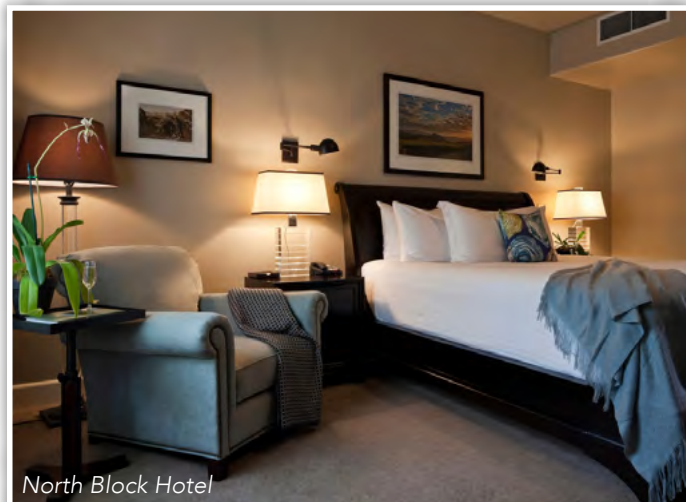


pastries, fresh seasonal fruit and juice from the renowned Bouchon Bakery - where you'll find a line out the door of locals and tourists alike no matter what time you stop by).

If you don't need the extra space, the property also offers a number of smaller, signature suites - all outfitted with the same luxurious Restoration Hardware furniture and linens, automated shade system, heated tile bathroom floors, complimentary wireless Internet, Bouchon Bakery breakfast and private vineyard views.

It's easy to imagine a wedding taking place on the perfectly manicured lush green lawn. For our part, we chose to take full advantage of an adjacent space and unwind with a glass of wine in front of a crackling outdoor fireplace and step into the farmhouse-style lounge for a family board game.

Nearby Yountville ranks among the country's most scenic communities. The postcard-perfect landscape surrounding this wine country town is reminiscent of the rolling French countryside while its downtown (on either side of its two-lane main drag - Washington Street) is defined by a collection of quaint structures built of brick, stone and wood adorned with ivy. These buildings are home to a concentration of one-of-a-kind boutiques, art galleries,



wine tasting rooms, informal eateries and gourmet restaurants.

Arguably the epicenter of Yountville shopping, V Marketplace features a number of specialty shops - highlighted stops include Scents of Napa (skin and beauty products inspired by the Napa Valley scents of lavender, French oak barrels, grape skins and rain water), Tay & Grace ('wine country casual' fashions) and Knickers & Pearls (a pink and frilly store stocked with beautiful lingerie and bridal accessories).

For our Yountville portion of our Napa Valley getaway, we chose the Mediterranean-inspired **North Block Hotel** (northblockhotel.com) Situated around a social courtyard, this boutique property features 20 sophisticated, comfortably chic guest rooms - all with either a patio or balcony, oversized bathroom with heated floors, a large soaking tub and separate rain shower, espresso machine, flat-screen TVs, music system and a mini fridge.

We loved the Superior King guest room, located on the hotel's second floor, for its abundant natural light, plantation shutters, warming gas fireplace, balcony above the social courtyard and its proximity to the gorgeous pool area where the kids spent the better part of an afternoon while their parents enjoyed - you guessed it, a glass of fine wine - from the shaded vantage point of the cushioned lounge chairs.

The hotel is home to Redd Wood, a superbly stylish Italian-inspired eatery by renowned Chef Richard Reddington which "brings a new sensibility to this laid-back wine



Bistro Jeanty

country destination" with a vogueish vibe, osteria-styled restaurant menu and locally-favored wine list.

Speaking of wine ... one of the most frequently visited landmarks in the valley is located within easy walking distance from downtown Yountville: on a knoll shaded by ancient oak trees on one of Yountville's premier pieces of real estate. Visitors to **Domaine Chandon** (chandon.com) can stroll the stunningly beautiful grounds across a bridge over ponds to a patio fronting the tasting room of the first winery to be established in the United States by a French wine and spirits producer, Moët Hennessy. Today, as America's leading sparkling wine producer, Domaine Chandon applies méthode traditionnelle techniques to showcase the ripe fruit and vibrant character of California. Over the course of its 43+ year history in Napa Valley, the winery expanded its portfolio to include still wines, including Pinot Noir, Pinot Meunier, Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Our tour provided a casual, informative education on the winery's history, its winemaking process and grape-growing regions followed by a tasting that offered further insight into the world of sparkling wines and the grapes used to make them (tastings are offered daily from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. in the Tasting Room or on the terrace).

DESTINATION DINING

Following our tour, we strolled back through town to dine at **Bistro Jeanty** (bistrojeanty.com) - the genteel iconic Michelin-star restaurant - and only French owned and operated dining establishment in Napa Valley - serving traditional French countryside dishes including Mussels au vin rouge, Cassoulet (baked beans, duck confit, toulouse sausage and apple smoked bacon), the famed rich and tasty



Domaine Chandon

tomato soup in golden brown puff pastry and coq au vin (chicken, mushrooms, apple smoked bacon and red wine stew). Between the four of us, every category was covered: seafood aficionado and meat lovers alike. The sole meuniere was perfectly prepared - Petrale sole fillet well cooked, moist throughout with lemon caper butter sauce atop a bed of mashed potatoes. My husband thoroughly enjoyed his Fliet au Poivre (Black Angus tournedos with a black pepper crust, haricots verts and a creamy mushroom sauce). The atmosphere was quaint and charming, the dishes delicious, the service attentive - all in all, an ideal ending to our culinary sojourn that day.

The next night, we opted an entirely different and equally enjoyable dining experience: this time at **Lucy Bar and Restaurant at Bardessono** (bardessonno.com) where the menu, derived from the seasonal offerings in and around Napa Valley, is characterized by fresh, innovative, garden-inspired cuisine, artisanal cocktails and of course, fine wine. Every dish is truly "field-to-fork" fare - all the cuisine starts in Lucy's Garden, located onsite at Bardessono (an atmospheric hotel and spa with a sustainable, modern-theme that translates through to its signature eatery) only steps from the restaurant kitchen and proteins are sourced from local farmers and purveyors, as well as a majority of seasonal seafood from the bay area.

By focusing the menu on what is in the garden or grown at local farms and picked at peak ripeness allows the culinary team to create the most flavorful of dishes. We started with "shared plates" of baby beet salad (flavored with fried goat cheese, wild arugula mousse and garden sprouts) and the rich, melt-in-your-mouth hand-rolled gnocchi with kale pesto and tartufata.

Two standout dishes among a menu of standout cuisine was the Diver Sea Scallops paired with English pea puree, pancetta, crispy beets and tarragon butter and the Dry Aged Striploin which was cooked to perfection and flavorfully enhanced by foraged mushrooms, truffled "rosti," duck liver and smoked beef belly bordelaise.



According to its web site, Bardessonno is "built upon the possibility of a meaningful exchange between the traveler and host." Every diner in our party would wholeheartedly agree that it was a spot on assessment of our evening at Lucy Bar and Restaurant, due in large part to our server, Frankie, who deserves to be mentioned by name. Clearly a seasoned professional, she more than delivered with exemplary service that was amiable, attentive, knowledgeable and unobtrusive.

NAPA VALLEY ART MUSEUM

Just across the St. Helena Highway and again, an easy stroll from downtown Yountville is the **Napa Valley Museum** (napavalleymuseum.org), housed on the grounds of the California Veteran's Home. A great way to gain an understanding of the region's storied past is to view its permanent art and artifacts - from the 1950s Napa City Limits sign (population then: 13,155. Now: 77,000+) and photos of the pioneers of wine, the museum chronicles the history of Napa Valley, its people and geology, along with the wine industry that put the region on the map.

The Museum's Main Gallery showcases a changing array of exhibitions featuring regional, national and local artists as well as treasures from local private collections. The newly opened current exhibit, scheduled to remain at the museum for the next six months, is entitled "Down the Rabbit Hole: Innovated Video Games" where visitors can explore the world of independent video games with an interactive experience of 10 fully playable gaming stations featuring both well known and fringe creators.

If you don't feel like walking, you can always hop aboard the free Yountville Trolley that runs from downtown to the museum and back every half an hour.

