

Ehlers Estate vineyards. Opposite, from top: Cheery times at the Beringer winery, locavore flavor from Carneros Resort and Spa's Farm restaurant, and poolside at Calistoga Ranch.

Vintage Napa Valley

California's classic wine country
is always on the menu.

BY BECCA HENSLEY



It's morning in California's Napa Valley,

and though most people haven't yet poured their first cup of coffee, you've risen with the sun and are ready to explore. Fortunately, knowing your penchant for early starts, your Virtuoso travel advisor has reserved something special: a coveted spot at Ehlers Estate's intimate "Start Your Day" tasting experience. At the historic Saint Helena winery, visitors watch morning's golden light illuminate the surrounding mountains as winemaker Kevin Morrissey walks through the estate's vineyards and speaks about his passion for organic winemaking. Later, in the tasting room, you sample some of Ehlers' finest vintages, paired with flaky pastries from Thomas Keller's French-inspired Bouchon Bakery in nearby Yountville.

Though Napa Valley will never be short on charm, having someone who understands your preferences and tastes can mean the difference between a good getaway and an extraordinary experience. "Virtuoso advisors don't do 'one-size-fits-all.' They create bespoke trips to unlock the secret gems that Napa has to offer," says Jay Johnson, an advisor based in Garden Grove, California. "They're also able to leverage relationships that are available through the Virtuoso network to arrange exclusive winery events, specialty dining experiences, and customized tours that aren't available to the ordinary traveler." What else do advisors bring to the table? They can handle all your reservations and trip logistics, such as scheduling transfers between estates (the better to save you time for tastings), and secure added perks like exclusive hotel amenities and room upgrades.

With so much in the valley to explore, Virtuoso advisors' wealth of firsthand experience is key. From the town of Napa in the south to Calistoga in the north, the valley claims a chain of distinct communities, each with its own diversions and vibe, and to visit just one would be a shame. It's not just about the wine (though that wouldn't be a bad thing). But here, also, seasonal cuisine rules, haute hotels spoil, and activities from mud baths to hot-air balloon rides beckon. How to decide? Your advisor can help, but following are a few of our favorite ways to wine and dine your way through the valley.





THE PORTAL

Napa

Threshold to Napa Valley and big brother to the region's other wine villages, Napa (the valley's largest town) bustles with cutting-edge art galleries, lively tasting rooms, and upscale dining venues such as Ken Frank's Michelin-starred **La Toque** (1314 McKinstry Street). In fact, Napa has so much to offer, including its promenade along the Napa River, that sometimes travelers don't even venture outside the city limits (we highly suggest you do, however).

WINE: In Napa, you'll never be thirsty. Two must-stops along its tasting-room crawl are family-owned **Stonehedge** (1004 Clinton Street), home to handcrafted artisanal wines, and **Uncorked at Oxbow** (605 First Street), which offers private salons for personalized tastings and blending sessions.

DINE: From locally sourced picnic sandwiches at **Oxbow Public Market** (610 & 644

First Street) to five-spice-rubbed duck at **Celadon** (500 Main Street), Napa is long on options. Malaka Hilton, a Virtuoso advisor from Sarasota, Florida, extols the truck-stop-chic **Mustards Grill** (7399 St. Helena Highway), a community hub where you're as likely to find truck drivers as local winemakers and chefs. Her advice: "Order the slow-smoked barbecue pork."

STAY: Highlights of **Carneros Resort and Spa's** recent renovation include a new wedding events venue and updated family pool, along with a bar and outdoor terrace at its quintessential locavore restaurant, Farm. With 86 cottages and 10 suites clustered in tiny "neighborhoods" named for nature's elements, the swank complex embodies the essence of the Napa experience. *Doubles from \$375; Virtuoso travelers receive a room upgrade (if available), a daily breakfast credit, and a \$100 spa credit.*



Clockwise from top left: Cottage life at Carneros Resort and Spa, the resort's Farm-fresh fare, and pack your picnic basket at Oxbow Public Market.

NAPA VALLEY VIP

Your advisor can work with one of Virtuoso's on-site tour companies, **Revealed California**, to craft a number of private experiences during a tailor-made tour of the valley. Tasteful possibilities include, say, a cooking demo and dinner in Saint Helena with celebrated chef Cindy Pawlcyn at **Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen**; a tour of Calistoga's **Villa Ca'Toga**, Carlo Marchiori's residence/art studio, led by the artist himself; and a shopping experience and brunch at Rutherford's **Inglenook** estate with Eleanor Coppola, exclusive curator of the vintage collectibles and antique wine accessories found in Inglenook's boutique.

THE EPICUREAN

Yountville

Napa Valley's undisputed culinary capital, with more Michelin stars per capita than any other U.S. locale, Yountville personifies the California wine country lifestyle. Designated an official American Viticultural Area (AVA), the hamlet also houses **The French Laundry** (6640 Washington Street), Thomas Keller's storied pillar of New American cuisine and seasonal eating, and a bevy of other much-lauded restaurants, tasting rooms, and bakeries. Expect quiet nights followed by an early-morning parade of fitness mavens, from cyclists to runners.

WINE: You may want to linger all day at **Cliff Lede Vineyards** (1473 Yountville Cross Road), where you'll find blocks of grapes named for legendary rock tunes

such as "Moondance" and "Dream On" (and corresponding "Rock Block" blends like Moondance Dream), along with a variety of tasting options. Walk-ins can partake in bar flights, but those with reservations (hint: call on your advisor) can opt for exclusive veranda table tastings or imbibe in the VIP tasting room called "Backstage," which features signed guitars and a changing, rock-themed art exhibit.

DINE: The French Laundry may be Napa Valley's Mecca, but Keller's **Ad Hoc** (6476 Washington Street) also delivers – albeit with a more affordable, less complex menu. "I'm also a fan of Michael Chiarello's **Bottega**" (6525 Washington Street), says advisor Malaka Hilton. "Everything's good there, but don't miss the *branzino*."

In homage to Napa's Italian immigrant heritage, **Redd Wood** (6755 Washington Street) fires up hand-tossed pizzas, and sushi cravers can get an ultrafresh fix at **R+D Kitchen** (6795 Washington Street).

STAY: As California's first LEED Platinum-certified hotel, 62-room **Bardessono Hotel & Spa** has led Napa's trend toward sustainable tourism. Likewise, its restaurant, Lucy, celebrates quintessential farm-to-fork fare with an on-site garden. "You'll also love the rooftop pool and the Murphy bed-style massage table that comes in each room," says San Francisco-based Virtuoso advisor Lisa Baserga. *Doubles from \$450; Virtuoso travelers receive a room upgrade (if available), breakfast daily, and a \$100 dining credit.*



From top: Table talk at Bardessono Hotel & Spa's Lucy restaurant, chef Thomas Keller in The French Laundry's garden, and classic rock meets local wines at Cliff Lede Vineyards' Backstage Tasting Lounge.

(THOMAS KELLER) JEFF SINGER/REDUX, (CLIFF LEDE VINEYARDS) BOB MCCLENNAHAN



Clockwise from top left: Culinary art from The Restaurant at Meadowood, Cain Vineyard & Winery, Press' warm atmosphere, and sweet treats from Woodhouse Chocolate.

THE CLASSIC

Saint Helena

Known as “Napa Valley’s Main Street,” this natural beauty can best be described as comfortable in its skin. Home to a half-mile main strip lined with sycamore trees and a host of long-standing wineries – including **Beringer** (2000 Main Street), the valley’s oldest – Saint Helena has grown more chic and charismatic with age. Though it teems with history (Robert Louis Stevenson hung out here on his honeymoon), the town presents today as a well-heeled, modern wine village, festooned with the sort of shops you want to peruse: cookery stores, clothing boutiques, olive oil dispensaries, and artisan bakeries.

WINE: To taste Saint Helena’s finest, says New Orleans-based Virtuoso advisor Lila Fox, have your advisor secure winery appointments with his or her go-to local driver-guide, who’ll have access to all the best wineries and owners. One suggested route: Begin the day at **Ehlers Estate** (3222 Ehlers Lane), then continue to **Hall Wines** (401 St. Helena Highway), whose uber-stylish architecture complements the artistry they bottle. Later, ascend to **Cain Vineyard & Winery** (3800 Langtry Road), which overlooks the valley from the crest of the Spring Mountain district, for a guided vineyard hike and tasting.

DINE: Arrive early to **The Model Bakery** (1357 Main Street) – a Napa staple for nearly 90 years – for its famed oversized English muffins. (Note: You may be tempted to bribe locals for their place in line.) For lunch, Fox sends clients to **Farmstead at Long Meadow Ranch** (738 Main Street) – she promises you’ll swoon over the pimento cheese deviled eggs. She also urges: “Don’t miss the dark chocolate caramels with *fleur de sel* at **Woodhouse Chocolate**” (1367 Main Street). Outdoor fireplaces and a walnut bar set the scene at **Press** (587 St. Helena Highway), a farmhouse-styled chophouse

where dry-aged beef grills over almond- and cherrywood and whose wine menu exclusively features local bottles.

STAY: **Meadowood Napa Valley**’s 250 acres feel like a village in itself. The resort holds 85 cottage-style suites, tennis courts, a new spa (request the 3.5-hour vinotherapy treatment), a croquet field, and a golf course, but it’s most renowned for its three-Michelin-starred restaurant, one of only five in the western U.S. *Doubles from \$750; Virtuoso travelers receive a room upgrade (if available), a \$50 breakfast credit and a \$100 spa credit, and a box of locally made chocolates.*

(THE RESTAURANT AT MEADOWOOD) ERIN KUNKEL, (PRESS) KRISTEN LOKEN

THE EARTH MOTHER

Calistoga

Located at the valley's northern tip and less traveled than Napa, folksy Calistoga exudes an unpretentious, accessible ease. Home to **Chateau Montelena Winery** (1429 Tubbs Lane), famous for its win in the 1976 Judgement of Paris, it draws visitors with family-owned businesses, wine-centric cafés, and coffee shops decorated with poetry graffiti. Perhaps most defined by its mineral-rich geothermal springs and curative mud baths, available throughout town, Calistoga offers wellness with a direct connection to the valley's fertile soil.

WINE: A decades-old stone winery and an original Craftsman-style house-turned-tasting room comprise **Frank Family Vineyards** (1091 Larkmead Lane). Though its tasting room is open to the public, your advisor can arrange a private tasting with Frank's legendary winemaker, Dennis Zablosky. For a more whimsical experience, the **Tank Garage Winery** (1020 Foothill Boulevard) occupies a former gas station in which guests can sample stellar local wines amid pinball machines and vintage motorcycles.

DINE: Join locals for breakfast (all day!) at cozy **Cafe Saraformia** (1413 Lincoln Avenue), where corned beef hash, salmon and eggs, and towering pancakes provide fuel for wine jaunts. For dinner, tuck into classic French,

German, and Mexican dishes at **Johnny's** (1457 Lincoln Avenue), whose chefs make their own charcuterie and forage for local ingredients. At the bar, brioche bun sliders steal the show.

STAY: Eco-friendly, 89-room **Solage** lies a short walking distance from Calistoga's shops and restaurants. Known for its Michelin-starred restaurant, geothermal bathhouse, and Mudslide spa treatment, the hotel also appeals to active oenophiles who appreciate its complimentary fitness classes and saltwater pool. "Solage's Mercedes-Benz program allows guests to borrow from a collection of cars, including a convertible, for off-property excursions," adds advisor Lisa Baserga. *Doubles from \$390; Virtuoso travelers receive a room upgrade (if available), breakfast daily, and a \$100 resort credit.*

Calistoga Ranch offers 50 lodges within a 157-acre site marked by ancient oaks and a private lake. With mountain views, a host of hiking trails, and chef Bryan Moscatello's seasonal menu at The Lakehouse restaurant, the resort firmly roots guests in the setting. Highly recommended: the ranch's on-site beekeeping course, guided meditation walks, and Calistoga-inspired Water Therapy treatment in the spa's healing mineral pool. *Doubles from \$845; Virtuoso travelers receive a room upgrade (if available), breakfast daily, and an estate winetasting experience.*



From top: Tank Garage Winery and a bottle of its finest (and feistiest), get your veggies at Calistoga Ranch's Lakehouse restaurant, and a warm welcome at Solage's geothermal bathhouse.

MORE TO EXPLORE

A visit to Napa Valley can be a celebratory, once-in-a-lifetime trip - or you could return repeatedly and find something new each time. Here, two other towns in the valley to capture your attention.



OAKVILLE

Koa, a four-legged family member, greets guests at **Gamble Family Vineyards** (7554 St. Helena Highway), where founder/owner Tom Gamble pours his wine for you (tastings are by referral only, so have your advisor book ahead). Featured on our cover, **Durant & Booth's** recently opened tasting salon (7856 St. Helena Highway) serves wine flights paired with cheese and charcuterie plates within a restored Victorian home built in 1877. Just next door, the **Oakville Grocery** (7856 St. Helena Highway) stocks plenty of gourmet picnic supplies. Pack a basket and dine along a hiking trail or in the back of your car while your private driver steers you safely to the next estate.

RUTHERFORD

With its own AVA designation, neighboring Rutherford is best known for its cabernet sauvignons, which taste different than those grown just a stone's throw away. Full of berry and herb flavors, they have a certain earthy wonder that oenophiles call "Rutherford dust." Your advisor can reserve a tasting at **Alpha Omega Winery** (1155 Mee Lane), a boutique outpost with limited-production cabernets and a terrace overlooking the Mayacamas Mountains. **Rutherford Grill** (1180 Rutherford Road) is where all the winemakers hang out. There's no corkage fee, so you'll find them around the bar, sharing their wine with one another. Order the rib eye, a perfect match for the hamlet's powerful reds. **VT**

(GALADS) ERIC WOLFINGER