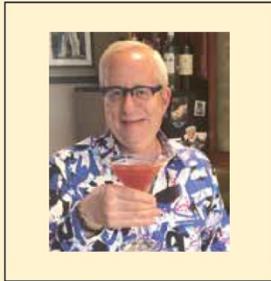


Napa Valley: It's About Wine



By David Landis—

It's wine time.

In the last issue, The Gay Gourmet visited Napa to recommend hotels, excursions, and restaurants. Now, it's time for what's front and center in the Valley: wine, wine, and more wine.

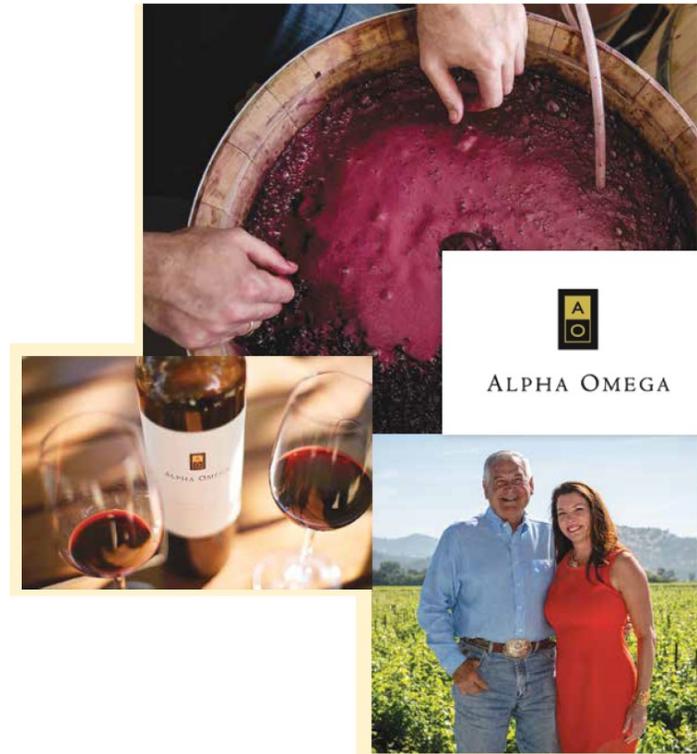
Visiting the wineries in Napa is a magical—and convenient—getaway from the Bay Area, barely over an hour from the city. I've been visiting the Napa Valley since moving to San Francisco in 1980 and the plethora of wineries has grown exponentially (at last count, it's somewhere north of 375!). The way in which one tastes wines has also changed dramatically. Back in the day, one could wander up to the wine country, stop in, and sip some of the best varietals—often for free.

Those days may be gone, but what's happening now are curated experiences that provide elevated oenophilic adventures: a way to discover wines, but in a more sophisticated and intentional way.

Which, of course, comes at a price. You'll be hard pressed to find wine tastings in Napa Valley for less than \$40 or \$50, but that price generally includes an extended, reserved seating (a must during these pandemic times); several wines from which to choose; and often, nibbles and bites to accompany your outing. Best of all, many of Napa Valley's wineries now also welcome dogs: my own pound pups, Gaston and Alphonse, are wagging their approval!

What follows are three of my personal **Napa Valley** favorites.

At the top of the list, I'd put **Alpha Omega Winery**. This boutique winery is located just north of Yountville, right off 29, in the Rutherford appellation on gorgeous acreage with views towards the mountains of Sugar Loaf Ridge State Park. Set amidst a charming, small lake with dancing fountains, the entire experience provides a relaxing respite from the stress of urban living, while allowing tasting of artisanal wines that the winery describes as "handcrafted with Old World practices." The COVID protocols at Alpha Omega Winery are exemplary: you are greeted in the parking lot where you wait in your car—and then, your party checks in by itself. Instead of an indoor tasting (which I'd done before), we opted for a tasting outdoors to enjoy the bucolic views. Because Alpha Omega is so dog-friendly, Alphonse and Gaston got to tag along as well.



Our engaging wine expert Carl guided us through the hour and a half tasting, beginning with some delicious whites. We started with the winery’s 1155 Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc (2019), described as “balanced with a lively, acidic mid-palate with flavors of Asian pear.” What I personally liked about this wine was that it was aged in stainless steel, with just a hint of French oak. Carl called it a perfect drink for “a Napa Valley breakfast.”

Next, we sampled the 2016 Chardonnay that, according to another winery guide, “pairs well with fried chicken.” This Chardonnay, in my opinion, was quite elegant and oak didn’t dominate—an approach that I personally appreciate.

Moving on to the reds (since Alpha Omega is known as a “Bordeaux house”), we tried one of my personal favorites: the Proprietary Red Napa Valley (2018), described as “silky and balanced, with notes of caramel.” There is a smoothness to this wine that I thought would make it a perfect complement with pastas, beef, and more.

From there, we moved to the Petit Verdot Napa Valley (2019), described as “dense with red and black cherries”—another great choice. Next, we had two single vineyard offerings: the Stagecoach and the Drew Vineyard. Our party was divided about which we liked the best: the Drew Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon (2019), reminiscent of black plums, was a bit bolder; the Stagecoach Cabernet Sauvignon (2019), tasting more of blackberries, seemed a lighter choice. For our final wine, we tasted the winery’s special Era red wine (2019), a blend of vineyards tasting of dark fruit with understated elegance. All in all, Alpha Omega is a must-visit winery that should be a part of every Napa Valley trip.

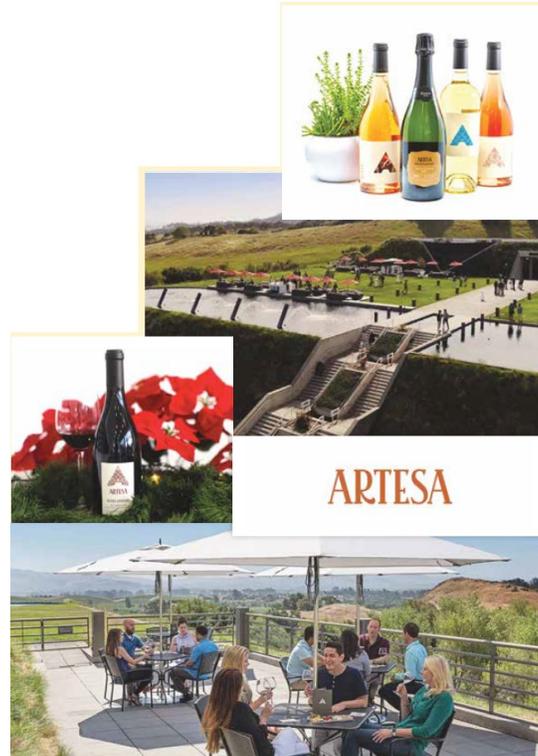
Another favorite on this trip was the re-branded **Chandon** winery (formerly Domaine Chandon), known for its sparkling wines and set on a beautiful parcel of land just west of downtown Yountville. The landscaped gardens are part of the attraction here, along with what normally would include a stunning lake (when California isn’t in a drought). Again, we opted for an outdoor tasting on a knoll surrounded by trees, a relaxing setting in which to sit and sip. Alphonse and Gaston were once again welcomed with open arms.



While Chandon has been around for years, one of its differentiators is that its winemaker is a woman, Pauline Lhote, who started her career at Chandon as an intern. Because she uses French techniques in her winemaking, these sparkling wines are sophisticated, light, and dry. Our party chose the rosé sparkling flight experience and, while we didn't opt for it, you can also add on culinary options.

An unexpected twist was the first offering, a still rosé that was surprisingly light and dry, more in the style of Provence rosés rather than many Napa rosés. From there, we sampled the sparkling Brut rosé, which our guide described as “California sunshine in a glass.” It was the perfect way to begin a leisurely Sunday morning. Our flight continued with the E'Toile Prestige Cuvee, aged five years (one of our favorites), followed by Club Cuvee, described as “a pillow on the palette,” which our party declared a winner. The flight concluded with a very special Tete de Cuvee, aged ten years, an elegant finish to a delightful tasting.

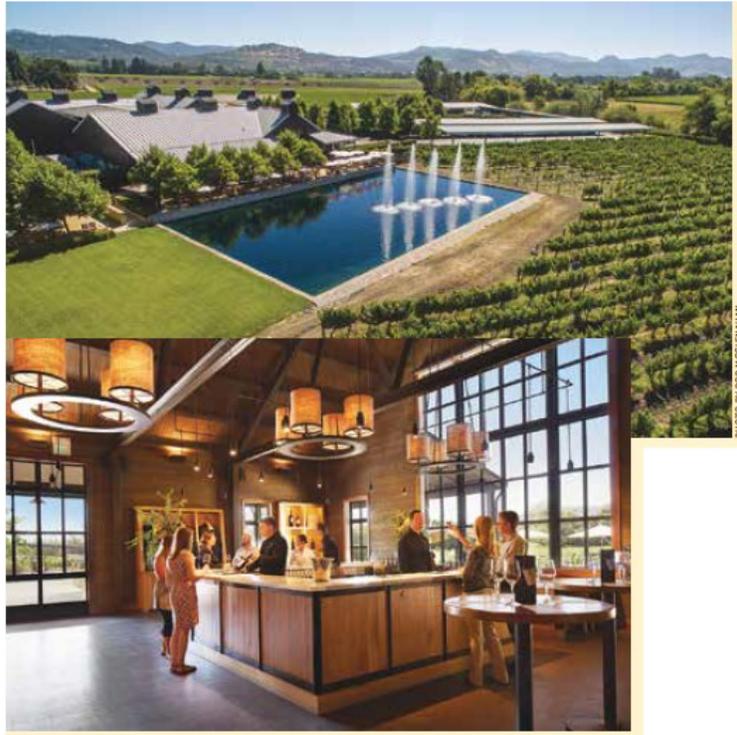
Perhaps the most magnificent view in the Valley is from the hilltop where **Artesa Winery** is perched, directly overlooking the Carneros region. To get there, you drive through sparsely travelled country roads overflowing with verdant vineyards and wind your way up to a stunning panoramic view. After parking, you climb up beside a vertical man-made waterfall to the avant-garde edifice, designed by Spanish architect Domingo Triay and built into a hillside. On a good day, the vistas allow you to see all the way to San Francisco. We chose to have our tasting flight sitting outside to take in the views; you can also add on a charcuterie plate for an extra price. During the tasting, Gaston and Alphonse loved sitting at our feet, and once again were warmly embraced by all.



Artesa was established in 1991 by the oldest winemaking family in Spain and blends Old and New World techniques. Our flight began with a lovely, dry 2019 Rosado (rosé) wine made from Tempranillo and Pinot Noir—crisp and delicious. From there, we sampled my personal favorite, the Albariño Estate wine (2020), aged in stainless steel and concrete, which gives the wine a clean, mineral finish.

Next, we had the Chardonnay Estate wine (2016), aged in French Oak—not particularly to my taste but for those who like oak and buttery whites, this is a good choice. Afterwards, we sampled both a light and fruit-driven Pinot Noir (Selection 91) and an earthier Block 12, more in the style of the French Pinot Noirs. Another favorite was the 2017 Tempranillo—a medium-bodied red wine that will complement just about anything. We decided that we weren't a fan of their 2017 Cask Reserve Especial Cabernet Sauvignon (too fruity for our tastes), but our wine guide then brought us a delightful, sparkling Grand Reserve Brut Barrica, which ended the tasting on a high note.

In conclusion, I'd say Napa still has it all—and more: delectable restaurants, fun excursions, great hotels, and, of course, some of the best wineries and tastings in the world. And it's a hop skip and a jump away from home. Go now!



Bits and Bites

For the 2021 holidays, Alameda’s farm-to-barrel craft beer pioneers **Almanac Beer Co.** offer a fun and delicious way to give the craft beer enthusiast in your life a gift to remember. Almanac’s festive **Holiday Advent Beer Box** features twelve 16 oz. cans of beer, spanning a wide range of innovative craft beer styles including hazy IPAs, lagers, stouts, barrel-aged sours, and more. You can also add on Almanac’s limited-edition release of **Ugly Sweater LOVE Hazy IPA** (6.1% ABV), celebrating one of the season’s favorite traditions with a wonderfully tacky holiday label. **Ugly Sweater LOVE Hazy IPA** is dry-hopped with Sabro, Citra, and Mosaic hops and brings holiday cheer to all.

How about healthy, no-prep snacks in festive red and green colors for holiday gatherings? One of the Gay Gourmet’s favorites—**Harvest Snaps**—features farm-picked veggies like green peas and red lentils as the #1 ingredient. They come in festive flavors like Tomato Basil, Original (green peas), Parmesan Roasted Garlic, and Caesar. Whether served in grab-and-go cups, alongside dip, or used to add crunch to a crudité platter, the perfectly crispy, plant-based snacks bring savory goodness to any soirée. They’re also baked, so they’re better for you—and delicious, to boot.

Black Cat Jazz Supper Club in SF’s Tenderloin is midway through its **JAZZ@theEDGE Festival**, featuring underground artists renowned for taking the jazz genre to its edge. Black Cat curates the festival “at its glam-meets-grit urban lair” to spotlight both established artists and undiscovered new talent. Grammy-award winning trumpeter Maurice “Mobetta” Brown headlines for the restaurant/club’s New Year’s Eve shows. This venue is the best of both worlds: listening to live jazz while noshing on delicious American tapas.

Hanukkah is coming up this year November 28–December 6 and you can celebrate it with **Pomella** in Oakland, as well as **One Market** and **Mark ‘n Mike’s** in San Francisco. This holiday season, Pomella is partnering with local foodmakers **Bishulim SF**, **Boichik**, **Covenant Wines**, and others to offer something different nearly every day of Hanukkah. One Market is offering a three-course Hanukkah prix-fixe dinner for \$49, including: matzoh ball soup, potato latkes (additional charge), beef brisket, and a traditional jelly doughnut. In addition, Mark and Mike’s regular menu items are available for dinner.

Try this on for size: the new [**Manischewitz Ugly Sweater Chanukah Sugar Cookie Kit**](#). The offering has everything your family will need to create your ugliest sweater yet: sugar cookie mix, traditional yellow and blue color powders, Hanukkah sprinkle mix, three piping bags, and a sweater cookie cutter. All you need is your sense of humor and creativity. The packages make eight to ten Ugly Sweater Cookies to share, gift, or “just eat.”

This just in: **Eater** has named “**The 11 Best New Restaurants in America**” and San Francisco’s **Anchovy Bar** made the grade. Congratulations to our local hero!

Alpha Omega Winery: <https://www.aowinery.com/>

Artesa Vineyards & Winery: <https://www.artesawinery.com/>

Chandon Winery: <https://www.chandon.com/en-US/visit-us.html>

Almanac Beer Company: <https://almanacbeer.com/>

Harvest Snaps: <https://harvestsnaps.com/>

Black Cat restaurant/club: <https://blackcatsf.com/>

Pomella: <https://www.pomellaoakland.com/>

One Market: <https://onemarket.com/>

Mark ‘n Mikes: <https://tinyurl.com/4tk6k343>

Manischewitz Ugly Sweater Chanukah Sugar Cookie Kit from

Kayco: <https://tinyurl.com/e233smbk>

Anchovy Bar: <https://theanchovybar.com/>

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<https://sfbaytimes.com/napa-valley-its-about-wine/>