

Upvalley wineries join the Napa scene

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Napa become more appealing to visitors, some established rural wineries are opening tasting rooms along First Street to accommodate the demand. Alpha Omega winery in Rutherford will occupy the space at right, formerly occupied by the Capp Heritage tasting room. J.L. Sousa, Register

Years into a sweeping revival, downtown Napa continues to rise. Flush with development, the heart of the city long thought of simply as a pit stop for tourists on their way to wine country is now steadily drawing in its own visitors and, increasingly, the world-famous wineries that bring them to Napa Valley.

Within the first few months of the year, a new wave of tasting rooms will open downtown, giving an urban presence to a cast of established Napa wine companies. The new tenants include Rutherford Bench hotspot Alpha Omega, Mount Veeder classic Mayacamas Vineyards and WALT Wines, the Pinot Noir partners of St. Helena staple HALL winery.

Though downtown Napa is no stranger to urban tasting rooms from smaller, generally estate-less wineries, the new wave of openings from well-known Napa names,

each tied to Upvalley estates, signals a growing interest in the city from the upper reaches of the area's wine industry and a new benchmark in downtown's image as a wine destination unto itself.

Beyond downtown, wineries' renewed interest in the city is also highlighting the question: what is the future of winery hospitality in Napa Valley?

"We started noticing, there's a lot of visitors that are just going downtown," said Robin Baggett, owner of Alpha Omega winery, "...and so I guess our opinion is they're getting more than their fair share down there, which is good."

Baggett hopes to see the new tasting room up and running by February, culminating a plan that's been about six months in the making. Replacing the Capp

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Heritage tasting room on the corner of First and Randolph streets, the new tasting room will sit directly across from the Archer Hotel, which opened last year as the epicenter of downtown’s revival.

A trade-off will also make the space the tasting hub of the other wines in the new Alpha Omega Collective, an umbrella for wines from Tolosa, a Burgundian-centric winery in San Luis Obispo and Perinet, a Grenache and Carignan-based winery in Priorat, Spain. Instead of being poured at Alpha Omega’s estate in Rutherford, a legal limit on tasting locations prompted the wines to go to downtown Napa, though the apparent boom of tourists on the city’s streets also played a role.



As portions of downtown Napa become more appealing to visitors, some established rural wineries are opening tasting rooms along First Street to accommodate the demand. WALT Wines will open a tasting room across from the Oxbow Public Market. J.L. Sousa, Register

“I’ve noticed over the years, with all the new infrastructure, hotels, restaurants, et cetera, in downtown Napa that a lot of visitors to Napa Valley are staying downtown at least for a day or two,” Baggett said.

“I think it goes without question; the Napa Valley is the wine capital of America,” he added. “And with the amount of visitors that come through here, it’ll be really a great opportunity for these other two brands.”

In general, Napa Valley visitorship has been on the rise for several years. Biennial reports from Visit Napa Valley track visitor numbers rising from 2.9 million in 2012 to 3.5 million in 2016. A spokesperson said the

group had not yet seen the results from its 2018 study, which would include visitor numbers since the Archer’s opening. The next results will be released in March.

Statistics aside, the surge of city visitors has been obvious enough to draw investment from others, like WALT Wines, which will take its place at the opposite end of First Street, a short walk away from Alpha Omega’s space.

“If we can find new areas with a lot of energy, we want to be there,” said Jeff Zappelli, general manager of WALT Wines. Filling the space of the former Uncorked at Oxbow tasting room on First Street, the new WALT Oxbow Tasting Room may see its opening by late spring, Zappelli said.

A partner of St. Helena’s HALL winery, and owned by vintners Kathryn and Craig Hall, WALT specializes in Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from Oregon’s Willamette Valley down to the Sta. Rita Hills of Santa Barbara County. Apart from an existing tasting room in downtown Sonoma, the brand is without a brick-and-mortar base just yet, though a winery in Sebastopol is in the works.

“There’s a number of tasting rooms you’re seeing starting to open downtown,” Zappelli said of the push into Napa. “We think we can differentiate and compliment those with something that is a little bit different and rare, which is Pinot Noir from a bunch of different regions.”

Set across from the bustling Oxbow Market, the space will be partially renovated and designed by the same architect behind HALL winery in St. Helena. The 1892 building that will house the tasting room also plays a side role juxtaposing sites like the Oxbow Market and Archer Hotel, the contemporary buildings of downtown Napa’s revival.

“Then you have these old buildings that are the old soul of Napa,” Zappelli said.

For visitors seeking out old Napa in terms of wine, a walk back down First Street will lead to the First Street Napa complex adjacent to the Archer and the new tasting room from Mayacamas Vineyards. The winery’s first urban tasting room, “an eclectic luxury experience,” is slated for a soft opening in February.

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The notion of a downtown location for the 130-year-old winery came after the Nuns fire destroyed the tasting room at its Mount Veeder estate in 2017. General manager Brian Baker wrote in an email, “...the team has grown to see this as a wonderful opportunity to bring the Mayacamas winery experience to the thriving, urban epicenter of food and wine in Napa,” while owner Jay Schottenstein said in a release from the winery this month, “The revival of the downtown area is certainly something that we are eager to be a part of...”

Beyond downtown, the success of the area’s revival may represent a turning point in the path between old and new Napa Valley, adding a new layer to the county’s most pressing issue today: an identity crisis wedged between an agrarian past and a future woven with world fame and the valley’s status as a destination.



Visitors walk along First Street in downtown Napa where a number of established rural wineries will be opening tasting rooms to accommodate the increasing demand.
J.L. Sousa, Register

The resulting struggle has played out in a tug-of-war over the definition of agriculture and how far winery hospitality can sustainably and legally go in tasting rooms Upvalley.

Throttled options for distribution have pushed winery business models to rely ever more on tasting room sales, while a revised definition of agriculture in the county’s general plan opened the doors to ancillary uses at wineries, blurring the lines between commercial activity and agriculture in the unincorporated parts of the county.

In one of the latest tugs, the county is attempting to reel in the recently opened tasting room of the Prisoner Wine Company in St. Helena with a notice of code violations, ordering the winery to scale back its food service and sales that were unrelated to wine.

As Baggett put it, for wineries today, “Basically you can have a fruit stand, and those fruit stands have expanded a little bit.”

For some, the answer to Napa’s hospitality hurdle lies downtown.

“When you have hotel rooms and restaurants, I think it’s a perfect setting for tasting rooms,” Baggett said.

Founded in 2006, Alpha Omega was built on a direct-to-consumer business model, Baggett said, with the vast majority of its sales made through hospitality. “Now with downtown Napa I think we’ll increase our brand exposure, but not necessarily at our facility in Rutherford,” he said.

As far as other wineries looking downtown for their hospitality needs, Baggett added, “I think it’s a total positive for the valley, because it lessens the pressure to expand these types of uses in the ag zone.”

Grape grower Andy Beckstoffer feels similarly.

“The future of the Napa Valley over the next 10 years is going to be the future of the city of Napa and how they work with the Upvalley,” he said.

The Beckstoffer family in 2014 bought the old Napa Register building on First Street, near the Archer Hotel and First Street Napa complex, across the street and down from Alpha Omega’s new space. The renamed Beckstoffer Building today hosts the tasting room for Brown Estate winery.

“I think what’s going in the right direction is the city of Napa is taking on some of the major wine hospitality function for the Napa Valley,” Beckstoffer said in a phone interview. “They should be a big part of the Napa Valley wine hospitality effort.”

“Most people come to the Napa Valley for some sort of a wine experience and if it can happen right in the city of Napa,” Beckstoffer said, “to some important extent, it’ll benefit everybody.”