



Clockwise from left: Dining on the patio at Tra Vigne restaurant; A dish of tagliatelle, olive oil-poached tuna, tuna tartare, bottarga, chiles and Meyer lemon at Tra Vigne; Joseph Phelps Vineyards; Winetasting at Joseph Phelps.



{ 3 } OAKVILLE

Once this was plums. The observation is unavoidable as you make your way up the valley, into the thick of the region's wine-producing region—the boutique town of St. Helena and the unincorporated areas of Oakville and Rutherford. There are too many remarkable wineries to name here, but four stand out as uniformly wonderful—and for entirely different reasons.

TASTE

● **JOSEPH PHELPS VINEYARDS:** Too often the giants of the valley attract giant crowds, and while they might well pour some giant reds, they somehow lose sight of what a winery visit should deliver best: a nice place to taste wine. Joseph Phelps Vineyards could rest on the countless laurels it's earned since coming on the scene in the 1970s. Self-paced and informal—oh, and overlooking a private valley—the tastings lend themselves to reflection rather than hurry.

● **CASA NUESTRA:** Having seen big and seamless, don't miss little and quirky. Casa Nuestra proudly waves the flag of Napa's hippie roots, as you'll notice the minute you pull up to this funky shack of a winery; in lieu of architectural fireworks, you can pet the two goats out front. The antithesis of fussy and grand, the family-owned operation fosters a

mellow vibe, but takes its winemaking seriously and offers some interesting varietals.

● **HONIG:** At Honig, Kristin Belair has been creating extraordinary sauvignon blancs smack in the middle of red country, at remarkably low prices. Crunch your way down the gravel road that leads to this secluded operation, flanked by acres of grapevines. Weather permitting, enjoy the highly rated wines on the shaded terrace as the friendly, laid-back staff fills your glass as needed.

● **FROG'S LEAP:** Environmentalism isn't just a badge in Napa, and this winery is one of its pioneers. Founded on the site of a 19th-century frog farm, Frog's Leap doesn't just tread lightly on its 200 acres—it utilizes bees, chickens, ladybugs and other beasts to help sustain a balanced and healthy line of grapes.

EAT

● **EAT:** If you're staying at Auberge de Soleil, eat at the Michelin-starred restaurant, for Pete's sake—leaving the incredible premises should be avoided when possible. Otherwise, try Tra Vigne (*below*), Michael Chiarello's Tuscany-evoking old favorite and a longtime Napa classic. Or keep it simple: Head to the Oakville Grocery, a popular general store-type place where cyclists



nibble better-than-average sandwiches out front and gourmet picnic supplies can be found within. Stock up and go find somewhere green and shady.



STAY

AUBERGE DU SOLEIL: For those who want to splurge—like, “I invented Google” splurge—Auberge du Soleil delivers a rare and singular certainty: There is no place nicer. Whatever you’re imagining in the way of tasteful, secluded, infinity-pool-overlooking-the-valley luxury, just double it. Perched on an out-of-the-way hillside dense with manzanita and olive, this Mediterranean-style resort anticipates your every need. Need plain air art supplies brought to your room? Pick up the phone. Need to borrow a Mercedes convertible for a few hours? Just sign here please.

EL BONITA MOTEL: You don’t have to break the bank to make camp in Napa’s more upmarket spots. There to prove the point is El Bonita Motel, a classic ‘50s art deco number. In the winter months, the perfectly respectable poolside rooms start as low as \$79.99—not bad for a town where you could spend a month’s rent on a single night’s sleep.

LEARN

CULINARY INSTITUTE OF AMERICA: One of life’s mysteries is why our species enjoys watching other people cook. Ponder the riddle in one of the country’s foremost academies of deliciousness, the valley’s branch of the Culinary Institute of America. No need to enroll: Every weekend at 1:30 p.m., visitors can pile into the 15,000-square-foot teaching area—the views are remarkable—and take in a cooking demo (\$20 includes a taste of its own Greystone Cellars wine). If the point of your Napa trip is to sharpen your senses, nowhere can you do it better.

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Wines OF NAPA VALLEY



You’d have to spend weeks traveling through Europe—umbrella in hand—to take in the quality and diversity of the wine and food found in the 35-mile-long slice of heaven called Napa. *By Andrea Robinson*

Ideal Terroir

Napa Valley owes much to France for the rapid emergence of its world wine reputation. Although Napa’s wine culture took root pre-Prohibition, it took off in the 1960s, when Robert Mondavi spawned a quality movement based on classic French grapes, artisanal farming and winemaking techniques. It quickly caught fire with other pioneering vintners whose names endure on some of Napa’s greatest labels—Trefethen, Chappellet, Shafer and Grgich, to name a few. They saw what he saw in Napa: glorious dirt, which, as any Frenchman will tell you, is the key to great wine, but also to distinctive wine. A diversity of climate conditions matter, too—sunlight patterns and cooling influences such as altitude and nearness to the ocean. This is where Napa simply crushes it (pardon the pun) versus the rest of the world’s wine regions: Napa’s long, sunny growing season, tempered by a thermal cornucopia of heat and light created by Pacific Ocean breezes and fog, means that nearly every classic grape in the world thrives here.

Napa’s “Big Six” Grapes:

RIESLING

Trefethen’s dry riesling from the Oak Knoll District AVA has been a Napa Valley benchmark wine for decades. Its neon citrus flavors and laser acidity will cut right through a simple, winetasting-party-worthy pairing of chips and salsa or smoked salmon.

STEAL: Beringer dry Napa Valley riesling
SPLURGE: Stony Hill white riesling



CHARDONNAY

Another of the Big Six white grapes is the full-bodied chardonnay, a Napa Valley signature. The style is as diverse as the AVAs of Napa, ranging from mineral-spiked and cinnamon-sprinkled yellow apples in Carneros to caramelized, buttery golden pineapple in the warmer zones. It makes an awesome pairing with buttered popcorn. **STEAL:** Beringer chardonnay Napa Valley
MODERATE: Chappellet Napa Valley chardonnay
SPLURGE: Ramey Hyde Vineyard, Carneros



CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Cabernet is the grape behind Napa’s most famous wines, and it thrives all over the valley, with the greatest concentration of famous wines mid-valley in the Stags Leap District, Oakville and Rutherford AVAs. These tend to be luscious, velvety and concentrated, with dark berry, tobacco, cedar and mint notes. Many tasters are also partial to the cabs grown in Napa’s mountain AVAs of Mt. Veeder, Spring Mountain, Howell Mountain and Diamond Mountain. **CABS TO TRY:** Mt. Veeder, Robert Mondavi “Oakville,” BV Rutherford and Ladera Howell Mountain cabernet sauvignons

SAUVIGNON BLANC

After the light-bodied riesling, sauvignon blanc is a medium-bodied grape that I consider Napa’s “banker” white because it grows well all over the valley and offers amazing quality for the price. The neon flavors range from lemongrass to passion fruit to sweet fig, sometimes kissed with an oaky creaminess and a grassy “perfumé.” **STEAL:** Robert Mondavi fumé blanc
MODERATE: Cliff Lede sauvignon blanc
SPLURGE: Grgich Hills Cellar fumé blanc



PINOT NOIR

With reds, the lightest of the classic red grapes is pinot noir, which you may have already tasted as a bubbly. As a red wine, it seduces wine lovers with a lingerie-for-your-tongue texture and tangy cranberry, sweet cherry, black tea and spice notes. Pair it with a mild cheese such as Manchego or Gouda to let the wine’s subtleties shine. **STEAL:** Castle Rock Carneros pinot noir
MODERATE: Saintsbury Carneros pinot noir
SPLURGE: Etude Car-



SYRAH

The final red grape of the Big Six, syrah is native to France’s Rhone Valley and under the name shiraz is Australia’s signature red. Napa’s syrah specialists know how to tease out this grape’s gamey, black pepper and sweet spice notes and luxurious raspberry fruit. **MY FAVORITES:** La Diligence by Miner Family, Lewis Cellars, Spencer Roloson and La Herradura Vineyard

Now that you’ve gotten a taste of the amazing quality and diversity of Napa Valley wines, plan a visit! November 17-20, 2011, will be the first-ever Flavor! Napa Valley food and wine festival, featuring seminars by yours truly and other Napa wine pros and vintners, as well as demos and dinners by our rock star chefs, including luminaries such as Thomas Keller and Michael Chiarello and Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto.