

Behind the Scenes in the Napa Valley



There's only one Napa Valley. Except ... there's not. The Napa that most travelers see is a valley built on prestige and myth, a place where wine is sipped elbow to elbow in the packed tasting rooms that line Route 29. But the beaten path here, in America's first revered wine country, misses the Napa that is built anew each day out of rich volcanic soils, hard work, and the passions of the people who live in and for this place.

This other Napa—where you can sit down with the vintners and walk among the fruit—is absolutely within reach of curious, experience-driven travelers. In fact, that's exactly what Paul Bailey, owner of Napa Valley Wine Excursions, believes makes it so special. The Napa native recently shared a few of his favorite hidden treasures.

Yountville's Secret Garden at Jacobsen Orchards



The praise of its wines may be lofty, but Napa's roots remain firmly earthbound. To kneel in the dirt here is to start at the beginning, and the small town of Yountville offers a perfect introduction to the land. Tucked at the end of a residential lane on the outskirts of town lies its Secret Garden, a small farm bursting with garden-grown inspiration and palate-expanding flavors.

The 1.3-acre garden holds more than 120 fruit trees and dozens of surprising plants, all lovingly grown by Peter and Gwendolyn Jacobsen, part-time farmers who have found a niche selling small quantities of inspiring ingredients to the chefs at some of Northern California's best restaurants, including Yountville's own French Laundry.

If novelty keeps the brain young, then the Secret Garden is a veritable fountain of youth. A guided tasting walk might include arugula blossoms that pack the bite of the mature leaf into a tiny yellow flower, succulent and crunchy *ficoide glaciale* leaves, or the delightful cognitive dissonance of white alpine strawberries, which smell like Concord grapes and taste like pineapple. You can book a walk through the garden with Ryan Hill of the Hill Family Estate winery, which has a tasting room just down the street.

The Terraces at Quarry Vineyards



Speeding along the Silverado Trail on the east side of the valley, you might easily miss the statue of the polka-dotted cow grazing under a stand of oaks among the vineyards. But catch a glimpse and you'll know you're in The Terraces' territory.

Like most valley visits, this one ends with wine. But before you arrive at the tasting room, you'll tour the land on a wild ride, learning about its history and the surprisingly adaptable alchemy of grapes. From the main building, hop into a four-wheel-drive Mule and head up into the vineyard itself. Speed up the slopes of this former quarry, through rows of grapevines bordered with local rhyolite stone walls and past trees hanging heavy with perfectly ripe peaches. Pause to explore the ruins of the original 1885 winery building, which was destroyed by fire after only one crush and never rebuilt. Continue up to the ridge for the chance to survey the valley from on high, and on the way back down, stop at the *acetaia*, or vinegar house, in the shade of cork trees.

Make your way down the weathered steps of the tiny stone house into a room that holds four matched rows of barrels—called batteries—arranged in order of decreasing size. Here, the family that owns the vineyard is nearing completion of its first batch of 25-year traditional Italian-style balsamic vinegar. Taste the sweet, dark, sticky vinegar in its various stages and you'll understand why, when the balsamic is bottled later this year, ounce for ounce, it will command a price steeper than most wines.

Sipping Under the Blue Oak at Aonair Wine



It's only a short drive from the city of Napa, but Coombsville feels like an undiscovered star in the constellation of Napa's 16 official subappellations. And it's here, in a renovated barn overlooking a small glen and the valley beyond, that you'll realize this is not your typical winery visit.

Few winemakers can claim that they've met everyone who owns a bottle of their wine, but for Grant Long, Jr., this distinction is both a sticking point and a badge of honor. The grape grower and winemaker behind Aonair—which means "one man" in Gaelic—focuses his growing efforts on the five mountaintops surrounding the valley. These higher-altitude vineyards yield grapes shaped by longer days above the valley's fog line. Free from the demands of mass production, Long crafts the best of these grapes into limited-release wines available only to visitors at his tasting room and members of his wine club.

On warm days, you can taste wines on a deck perched above the vineyards in the shade of a massive blue oak. When it's cooler out, pull up a comfortable seat by the fire inside one of the converted horse stalls. If you're among the wine lovers who assert that wine tastes better when you know its story, there are few wines you'll like more than Long's Cabernet Sauvignons, Grenaches, and proprietary blends.

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