Napa Valley 101: Basics for CA wine country trip

MICHELLE LOCKE | June 16, 2011 02:25 PM EST |

NAPA, Calif. — Blessed with lavish scenery and luscious wines, the Napa Valley is the kind of place you could spend days exploring. But it's compact enough that even if you only have an afternoon, you can still get a taste of wine country.

Located about an hour's drive northeast of San Francisco, the valley starts south of Napa and stretches about 30 miles north to Calistoga.

To get here from San Francisco, drive north on the Golden Gate Bridge and then take the Highway 37 exit going east to Highway 121/12, following the signs to Napa. From the east San Francisco Bay, take I-80 east to the Napa exit (Highway 37 east) and then go north on Highway 29.

There are two main routes through the valley. Highway 29 is a straight shot from Napa to Calistoga and hits all the big names such as Opus One and Francis Ford Coppola's Rubicon Estate. But it can get awfully crowded in summer.

The other route is the Silverado Trail, which avoids the towns, is quieter, and has breathtaking views. The easiest way to pick up the trail is to take Highway 29 to the Trancas Street exit and go east, turning left on Silverado Trail.

Wineries along this long and winding road include Stags' Leap Winery, the winery that made the red that beat the French at the famous Paris tasting of 1976, and Darioush, notable for its striking architecture which incorporates references to Persepolis, the capital of ancient Persia.

Lunch options along the trail include picking up a sandwich at the Soda Canyon Store.

The valley is only a few miles wide, so you can easily get back to Highway 29 by using the Oakville, Yountville or Rutherford cross roads.

Taking the Highway 29 route, your journey begins in Napa, which used to be a place you blew through on the way to quainter spots, but these days is a destination in itself, with a refurbished riverfront and a bustling downtown. Some standouts are Morimoto restaurant, opened by Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto, and Angele, a French-style restaurant overlooking the river.

A few miles north, the town of Yountville is a mecca for the dining set, serving as home to one restaurant with three Michelin stars, The French Laundry, and three one-star restaurants, Redd, Bouchon, and at the Domaine Chandon winery, Etoile.

After that comes the community of Oakville, where you can stop at the Oakville Grocery for picnic supplies, and Rutherford, home to Beaulieu Vineyard and the reasonably priced (and often packed) Rutherford Grill.

Prepare to slow down when you hit St. Helena; here Highway 29 turns into the boutique-lined main street of this small city. A point of interest is the Culinary Institute of America, Greystone, housed in a castle-like building that was once the Christian Brothers winery. You can dine here at the Wine Spectator restaurant.

Also in St. Helena is Newton Vineyard, which features a formal English garden set on a rooftop. (Visits to this winery are by appointment only.) Zinfandel Lane connects St. Helena to the Silverado Trail, and one of the wineries along the lane is Raymond Vineyards. This property is undergoing major renovations under the hand of new owner Jean-Charles Boisset; check out the Crystal Cellar, an extravaganza of lights, art and Baccarat crystal.

The valley ends in Calistoga, a 19th-century hot springs resort that is home to a number of wineries including Schramsberg, a sparkling wine house with atmospheric caves dug by Chinese workers in the 1870s.

Of course, there's much more to explore in the Napa Valley from hilltop wineries with breathtaking views to wineries featuring displays of art treasures.

But not to worry, you can check those out the next time you have a free afternoon.

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If You Go...

OPUS ONE: 7900 St. Helena Highway, Oakville; or 707-944-9442. Tours and tastings by appointment. http://www.opusonewinery.com
RUBICON ESTATE: 1991 St. Helena Highway, Rutherford; or 707-968-1100. Various tastings, tours, events. http://www.rubiconestate.com
SILVERADO TRAIL: http://www.silveradotrail.com
STAGS' LEAP WINERY: 6150 Silverado Trail, Napa; or 800-395-2441. Call for tasting tour reservation two weeks ahead of time. http://stagsleap.com
DARIOUSH WINERY: 4240 Silverado Trail, Napa; or 707-257-2345. Tastings daily, 10:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Tours by appointment. http://www.darioush.com
SODA CANYON STORE: 4006 Silverado Trail, Napa; or 707-252-0285.http://www.sodacanyonstore.com
MORIMOTO NAPA: 610 Main Street, Napa; or 707-252-1600. Entrees $25-$35.http://www.morimotonapa.com
ANGELE: 540 Main St., Napa, or 707-252-8115. Entrees $18-$34. http://www.angelerestaurant.com
FRENCH LAUNDRY: 6640 Washington St., Yountville; or 707-944-2380. Prix fixe tasting menu, $270. http://www.frenchlaundry.com/
REDD: 6480 Washington St., Yountville; or 707-944-2222. Entrees, $15-$32.http://www.reddnapavalley.com
BOUCHON: 6534 Washington St., Yountville; or 707-944-8037. Entrees, $24-$34.50.http://www.bouchonbistro.com
DOMAINE CHANDON: 1 California Drive, Yountville; or 888-242-6366. Tasting lounge, visitor center, Etoile restaurant. http://www.chandon.com
OAKVILLE GROCERY: 7856 St. Helena Highway, Oakville; or 707-944-8802.http://www.oakvillegrocery.com
BEAULIEU VINEYARD: 1960 St. Helena Highway, Rutherford; or 800-264-6918. Open daily, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., tastings start at $15. http://www.bvwines.com
RUTHERFORD GRILL: 1180 Rutherford Road, Rutherford; or 707-963-1792. Entrees, $18-$33; burgers, salads, sandwiches, $13-$19. http://www.hillstone.com
CULINARY INSTITUTE OF AMERICA AT GREYSTONE: 2555 Main St., St. Helena, . Wine Spectator Restaurant, 707-967-1010. http://www.ciachef.edu/california/
NEWTON VINEYARD: 2555 Madrona Ave., St. Helena; or 707-963-9000. Tours and tastings available by appointment Tuesday-Saturday. http://www.newtonvineyard.com/
RAYMOND VINEYARDS: 849 Zinfandel Lane, St. Helena; or 707-963-3141. Tasting room, open daily, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tasting fees start at $15. http://www.raymondvineyards.com
SCHRAMSBERG VINEYARDS: 1400 Schramsberg Road, Calistoga, or 707-942-4558. Tours and tastings by appointment only, reservations required. http://www.schramsberg.com