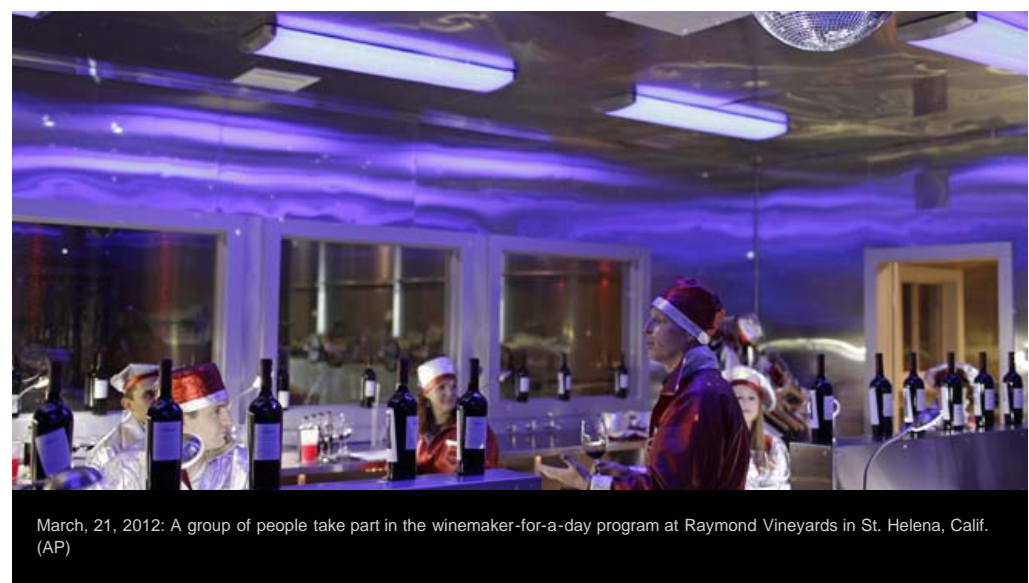


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Three wineries with hip sips

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March, 21, 2012: A group of people take part in the winemaker-for-a-day program at Raymond Vineyards in St. Helena, Calif. (AP)

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NAPA, CALIF. – The tiki tasting hut in the barrel room of the Judd's Hill winery is a tipoff: This isn't your old-school faux chateau.

Which is just the way Napa Valley winemaker Judd Finkelstein and his family want things.

"Much to my delight, one of the most common compliments is, 'This has been a lot of fun. We really like coming here; it's not stuffy,'" says Finkelstein. "That's music to my ears."

A few miles north, at Raymond Vineyards in St. Helena, owner Jean-Charles Boisset has been shaking up old winery paradigms. Visitors who sign up for the winemaker-for-a-day program don silver and red lab coats, with matching hats, naturally, and mix their own wine blends in a room decorated with a disco ball and black light.

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The new approaches are quite a contrast to the traditional nature of wine country, points out Joe Roberts, founder of the popular website 1WineDude.com and wine columnist for Playboy.com. "The wine world's about eight years behind everything with the exception of bottling lines and production techniques," he says with a laugh.

That can mean ornate tasting rooms where "you walk in and you feel like you can't move any of the furniture . that kind of thing doesn't really sit well with the younger generation, particularly Millennials," says Roberts. "The more inviting you can make something, the more it promotes the view of actually having an honest, human connection, not something that obviously came from a marketing machine."

Inviting can often mean interactive. Both Judd's Hill and Raymond have popular blending camps in which visitors make their own custom blends and take home a bottle or more. At Brooklyn Winery, an urban winery in the Williamsburg neighborhood — the unofficial HQ of hip — visitors can try chardonnay three ways — made as an unoaked, crisp, Chablis-style wine, made in a slightly mellower style with some oak, and made as "orange wine," in which the skins are left to ferment with the juice, giving the wine an orange hue. "We're focused on breaking people's myths or stereotypes that they have about wine and doing it in a really fun way," says cofounder Brian Leventhal. "We're here to open people's eyes to things they haven't tried before."

Looking to mix a little hip with your sips? Here are more details of what's on tap at these three wineries.

RAYMOND VINEYARDS

Under the guidance of Jean-Charles Boisset, scion of a French winemaking family who is married to Gina Gallo of the American Gallo wine dynasty, this winery has undergone a major change in recent years. Outside, the mood is quirky with giant frames on display that make for some excellent photo opportunities. Also outside are the Theater of Nature, a 2-acre demonstration of Biodynamic farming, and Frenchie's Winery, a special area devoted to dogs (named after Boisset's beloved French bulldog) with its own tasting bar (serving water). Inside, options abound, from the Red Room, a members-only private club, to the Corridor of the Senses, where a Touch Station and wall-mounted exhibits demonstrate the smell and texture of wine. Visitors who reserve a spot in the blending session will get to be winemaker for a day, mixing up their custom red blend under the tutelage of winery staff, designing a label and taking the bottle home. You can also order a case of your blend if desired. Prices start at \$100 for a 1.5-hour session.

Raymond Vineyards, 849 Zinfandel Lane, St. Helena, Calif., <http://www.raymondvineyards.com> or 707-963-3141. Open daily 10 a.m.-4 p.m.

JUDD'S HILL

Don't be surprised if winemaker Judd Finkelstein serenades you with a ukulele. Playing the uke is one of his passions. He performs in the valley with his group Maikai Gents Featuring The Mysterious Miss

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Mauna Loa. In addition to the regular tasting room and the tiki hut in the barrel room, Judd's Hill also offers visitors a Bottling Blending Day Camp. Four people can take part in a session that produces three finished bottles for \$225 (other pricing structures available). The winery hosts several events, including the annual Lobster Luau Wine Fest and presents comedy as well as musical acts like the jazz group Sketchy Black Dog.

Judd's Hill Winery, 2332 Silverado Trail, Napa, Calif.,
<http://www.juddshill.com> or 707-255-2332. Visits by appointment only.
Open 10 a.m.-4 p.m. daily.

BROOKLYN WINERY

When you're a winery based in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, there's practically a city ordinance requiring hipness. And this winery, opened two years ago by friends John Stires and Brian Leventhal, delivers. One of the few working wineries in New York City, guests can tour the facilities, watch cutting-edge TV series like "Breaking Bad" and "Mad Men" in the front-of-house restaurant, and take home some wine in a refillable "growler" bottle, filled with Brooklyn Winery wines available on tap.

Brooklyn Winery, 213 N. Eighth Street, Brooklyn, N.Y.,
<http://www.bkwinery.com> or 347-763-1506. Wine bar open Mon-Thurs 5 p.m.-midnight, Sat., 1 p.m.-1 a.m., Sun 1 p.m.-midnight. Winery tours Wednesdays and Sundays, free.

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