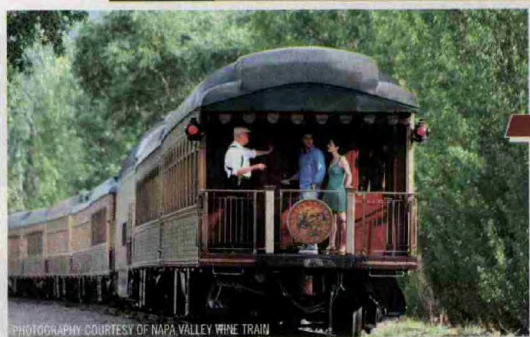
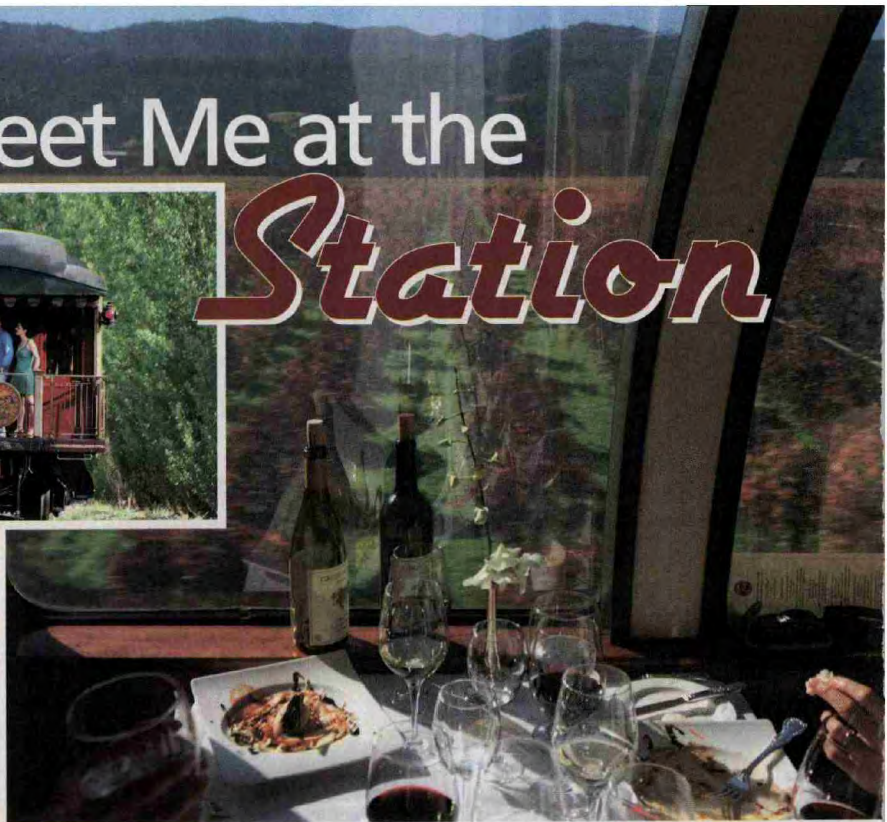


Meet Me at the

Station



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF NAPA VALLEY WINE TRAIN



Wine pairs so beautifully with so many things.
Cheese. Chocolate. Trains.

Trains? Absolutely.

A crisp California white or smooth red seems to go down a little easier when enjoyed while listening to the rhythmic clickety-clack of the wheels against the tracks as California's scenic Napa Valley rolls by.

Since 1989, the Napa Valley Wine Train has been carrying passengers through the vine-strewn countryside, offering the opportunity to bask in the lush richness that has made this area a boon to winemakers and wine lovers alike while experiencing an elegant meal prepared with locally sourced, sustainable ingredients.

Napa's Early Tourism Industry

The train runs on tracks built in 1864 by Samuel Brannen, a journalist and businessman who founded the town of Calistoga and built a tourism industry—as well as the railroad—around the hot springs there. Brannen, however, was later forced to sell the railroad in order to pay for an expensive divorce.

Eventually, Southern Pacific purchased the Napa Valley Railroad, which played a vital role in the area's agricultural and economic development through the early 1900s. With the rise of the automobile's popularity, passenger rail service was discontinued in the

1930s. By 1984, Southern Pacific was expressing interest in selling the railroad and its related property.

Many Napa Valley residents were uneasy about losing the railroad. After years of riding the north-south route, retired Southern Pacific engineer Lou Schuyler understood the rail's historical significance and formed a group called The Society for the Preservation of the Napa Valley Railroad to try to save it. Though the society's initial efforts were unsuccessful, public interest in the railroad's fate led to the creation of another group, which looked for investors to help preserve the railroad.

Called Napa Valley Wine Train Inc., the group caught the attention of San Francisco businessman and Rice-a-Roni inventor Vincent DeDomenico, who was so enamored with the wine train idea, he bought the entire line from Southern Pacific. The train itself came together using vintage Pullman Co. rail cars built in 1915 or 1917. The Vista Dome Car, another Pullman find, was built in the 1950s. With the purchase and refurbishment of the antique cars and a team of wine and food-service experts in place, the company became the business it is today.

Drinking in the Wine and the Scenery

The train runs March through December and embarks from downtown Napa, a quick hour's drive

California's Napa Valley Wine Train couples history with good food and wine.

BY MONICA REID OLSON



from San Francisco or Sacramento. It offers multi-course lunches and dinners, which can be supplemented with a wine tasting and winery tours. Special-occasion excursions include Moonlight Escape, Murder Mystery Dinner Theater, December Santa trains and other holiday-themed runs.

My travel companion and I chose the five-and-a-half-hour Ambassador Tour, which includes a multicourse lunch in one of the dining cars and two winery tours by motorcoach. The first course included soup or salad paired with a 2011 Pine Ridge Chenin Blanc-Viognier blend. Main-course options were roasted beef tenderloin, grilled pork tenderloin, seared chicken breast, grilled salmon filet, or a vegetable-and-potato *pave* (a squared, layered dish). Each came with its own wine recommendation. Our choice, the grilled salmon, was paired with a 2009 Laird Family Estate Chardonnay.

Dessert and coffee were served in a lounge car, where the seats faced the windows, providing a front-row view of the passing scenery. The fall trip treated us to a view filled with row after row of grapevines with leaves fading from green to a golden yellow. In the background—set against the Mayacamas and Vaca mountains—some trees were just barely hanging onto their brittle brown leaves while others were still full and green, holding on to the last remnants of summer.

The train chugged north, passing the towns of Yountville, Oakville and Rutherford. Before reaching St. Helena, where it heads south for the return trip, the train stopped so some of us could disembark to the motorcoach for visits to two distinctly different wineries.

The Tours

Raymond Vineyards takes winery touring to a new level, and it starts before setting foot inside. Two acres of prime Napa Valley wine-growing land are devoted to the Theater of Nature, an educational exhibit of organic farming.

Inside, a series of elaborately decorated rooms is available for public and private events. The Red Room, with its plush sofas and chairs, is an experience in velvet decadence, while the rustic Barrel Room lets visitors sample wines directly from the oak barrels. Other uniquely themed spaces include the aptly named Crystal Cellar, the Library Room and the Corridor of Senses, where the colors, textures and aromas of wine can be fully explored.

Two former aerospace engineers, Norman deLeuze and Gino Zepponi, started ZD Wines in 1969. What started out as a part-time venture—with family members spending weekends and holidays making wine—turned into a full-time business 10 years later for deLeuze and his wife, Rosa Lee. Today, they run the business with their sons and grandchildren.

ZD's award-winning wines are produced using organic farming techniques, and the entire operation runs on solar power. In 1996, ZD Wines grew with the purchase of the historical Carneros Farm, where 26 acres of Chardonnay grapes and 7 acres of Pinot Noir grapes have been planted.

Planning Your Trip

To find out more about the Napa Valley Wine Train, call (707) 253-2111 or visit www.winetrain.com. For more information about Napa Valley, call (855) 333-6272 or go to www.visitnapavalley.com. Contact your AAA Travel agent or visit AAA.com/travel for help planning your Napa vacation.

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