

Travelling along a rail line built in 1864, the Napa Valley Wine Train combines sightseeing with gourmet dining.



That's How She Rolls

Rumbling past vineyards and steeped in vintage splendour, the Napa Valley Wine Train serves up the perfect pairing / BY CATHERINE ROSCOE BARR



Mahogany panelling, etched glass, brass accents and velveteen-covered armchairs recall the grandeur of rail travel past.

SUNLIGHT STREAMS THROUGH century-old etched glass, illuminating my path, and the clink of wineglasses meets my ears as I climb the antique stairs to board the Napa Valley Wine Train. Other passengers are already offering toasts across the white linen tabletops set with polished silverware, and animated conversations reverberate along the length of the vintage railcar.

I'm in California's Napa Valley for the very first time and have chosen one of the train's lunchtime winery tours to get a broad view of the area. Along the way I'll experience the luxury of old-fashioned railway travel, enjoy a meal at the award-winning onboard restaurant and see one of the region's most visited wineries. Satellite images of the Napa Valley,

which stretches from Calistoga to American Canyon, reveal a multi-hued patchwork of agricultural plots, with more than 430 wineries blanketing the valley's floor and benches – in a space less than 50 kilometres long and five km wide. I'll catch a glimpse of that terrain today as the train ambles past more than 40 wineries along the western side of the valley.

To understand the history of the Napa Valley Railroad, one must travel back to the 19th century when the area at the northern end of its reaches was developing as a resort community. Californian magnate Samuel Brannan discovered the hot springs and mud baths of Calistoga and opened the first resort, which still stands today. The year was 1862 and Napa Valley's sun-drenched charm was

beginning to lure wealthy city folk longing to escape the San Francisco fog. Brannan built the Napa Valley Railroad to offer his guests safe (and stately) passage from the ferry docks in Vallejo to Calistoga, 65 km to the north.

But Brannan's wealth took a downward turn towards the late 1860s, and he was forced to sell his railroad. It eventually made its way into the hands of the Southern Pacific Railroad, which continued to operate it until the 1980s. Longtime Southern Pacific engineer Lou Schuyler petitioned the government to save the track, which was facing closure as automobile and air traffic increased. Though he lost that battle, his efforts galvanized a group of local citizens to seek financial support for privatizing what was left of the original railway line.

They found an enthusiastic buyer in San Francisco investor – and Rice-A-Roni inventor – Vincent DeDomenico. More than a dozen acquired and refurbished vintage railcars later, the Napa Valley Wine Train left the station for its first passenger voyage on September 16, 1989. It remains a family-run business today with numerous relatives holding various stakes and roles, including DeDomenico's granddaughter, Kira Devitt, the train's director of marketing and public relations.

Earlier today, Devitt met me at the station in the city of Napa for a quick pre-departure train tour. Standing at the south end of the train, she told me: "We're really, really proud of this," and gestured to the 12-car lineup: eight passenger cars, one kitchen car, two engine cars and a brand-new power car dubbed

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Passengers can visit one of four wineries along the route, including the family-run Grgich Hills Estate and its organic vineyards; (inset) the author's flatiron steak, paired with a Raymond Vineyards red (right).



"Grappa," referring to the strongest alcoholic beverage made from grapes.

Knowing I'm from Canada, Devitt emphasized that the FM/ALCO engines were built by the Montreal Locomotive Works in 1959. One is an original diesel locomotive, while the other has been converted to 100 per cent compressed natural gas – one of the train's environmental initiatives recognized by the U.S. Department of Energy's 2013 Clean Air Champion Award.

All of the passenger cars were built by the Pullman Company (six in 1915, one in 1917 and the double-decker vista dome-car in 1952). Each is fashioned with dark mahogany panelling, golden velvet drapery, plush upholstered chairs and polished brass accents.

From the central kitchen car, the train is virtually a mirror image of itself: observation decks at each end, moving inward to tasting rooms. Dining cars flank the nimble chefs preparing hundreds of meals to order (more than 100,000 every year).

The AAA Diamond-rated restaurant, dubbed "Napa's most unique restaurant," offers a selection of menus celebrating fresh California fare along with dozens of select local wines. The soundtrack is provided by the quiet rumbling of the locomotives chugging along the 150-year-old tracks.

The winery tours are "seated with others" events. Which is why I'm now shown to my table where Tim and Princess, a lovely couple visiting from New York City, are

already seated in the Gourmet Express dining car. We exchange introductions and order wine. I try the train's private label Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, specially crafted by Raymond Vineyards. It's rich and smooth, just what you'd hope for from the region's most famous varietal and the perfect pairing for the flatiron steak entrée I've got my eye on. Indeed, this pocket of land, 60 km inland from the Pacific Ocean and 75 km north of San Francisco, is remarkably diverse and exquisitely suited to winemaking. Numerous geographical factors combine to produce the Napa Valley's Mediterranean climate of hot, dry summers and cool, rather wet winters – ideal and dependable grape-growing conditions found on only two per cent of the earth's surface.

As for the steak, much of the train's naturally raised beef comes from Five Dot Ranch in Northern California. The chef's accompaniments for my main are local as well, such as the organic pattypan squash from Madera and the naturally salty tomatoes grown in brackish water near Lodi. After my incredibly tasty lunch, I seek out executive chef Kelly MacDonald, who's led the train's culinary team for more than 12 years. He's in the first-class vista dome-car chatting with patrons – a couple and their young son – about the food and wine pairings for that day's menu.

"I wanted to have a job where I could use the freshest California products that I can – I'm California grown myself," says MacDonald. "I've got a lot of handshake deals with local

Mix it up

Lunch, dinner, winery tours and special events – there are nearly two dozen Napa Valley Wine Train options to choose from. Here are three of the best-sellers:

• Ambassador Winery Tour

A three-course gourmet lunch aboard the train ride up the western side of the valley to St. Helena is followed by a one-hour stop at famous Raymond Vineyards – which helped put Napa on the international wine map with its win for Chardonnay at the Paris tasting of 1976. The tour also visits another Napa Valley pioneer, ZD Winery, to sample its organic French-style wines, and ends with a scenic 30-minute drive along the Silverado Trail, on the eastern side of the valley, back to the train station.

• **Valley First Winery Tour** Get an early start with a motorcoach ride up the Silverado Trail to Raymond Vineyards for a 90-minute tour and tasting, then board the train at its northernmost point in St. Helena for a three-course gourmet lunch during the ride south back to the station.

• Vintner's Lunch Packages

Changing throughout the year, each outing features a renowned Napa Valley vintner teaming up with executive chef Kelly MacDonald to create a wine-paired multi-course meal enjoyed in the vista dome-car and prepared fresh in the car's private kitchen. Along with the elevated views of the valley, enjoy personal attention and narration from the winemaker and chef. –C.R.B.





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farmers, people who are just as passionate about growing the products as I am about cooking them.”

And the by-products of all those meals? More than a third of what can't be recycled is diverted from landfill through the train's organic waste program, with a local company collecting food scraps twice a week to turn them into compost. MacDonald is also involved in community outreach through the train and received his second Hands Across the Valley Award in 2012 for providing 4,000 meals to those in need, including the homeless and senior citizens.

Disembarking near Calistoga 30 km later, I and a dozen other passengers then board a motorcoach for the train's newest winery excursion. The Castle Winery Tour visits Castello di Amorosa, built in 13th-century Tuscan style and surrounded by estate vineyards and mature olive trees. Wine educator and tour guide Joe Kunchick greets us in front of the moat and leads us up the stairs, over the drawbridge and into the chapel, where we take shelter from the sun and learn about the castle's history.

I'm fascinated to hear about the lengths that owner and fourth-generation winemaker Dario Sattui went to when he built his



The Castle Winery Tour explores Castello di Amorosa, built in 13th-century Tuscan style; (left) a 567-year-old fireplace from Tuscany anchors the Great Hall.

121,000-square-foot castle, which took nearly 15 years to complete before opening in 2007. Everything from the five defensive towers and four underground levels to the sprawling courtyard was constructed just as it would have been hundreds of years ago. Many of the building materials were salvaged from Sattui's travels to castle ruins across Europe.

"Dario brought in 225 shipping containers with bricks, roofing tiles, flooring tiles and timbers," says Kunchick. "If anything in the castle wasn't built from original materials, they used the same tools they would have used 500 to 800 years ago to build them with."

For example, skilled artisans from Italy taught local labourers how to square some 8,000 tons of imported stone with hammer and chisel, each piece taking two hours. It's easy to picture myself somewhere in ancient Europe as I walk by these hand-hewn surfaces.

Still, the Great Hall impresses me most, with its vivid, hand-painted frescoes, detailed coffered ceilings and 567-year-old fireplace. "The fireplace actually pre-dates Christopher Columbus," says Kunchick. "It's from the year 1447. Dario found it in Tuscany and brought it over."

Sattui also imported artifacts to adorn the Torture Chamber. "This is a rack," explains Kunchick. "It's about 325 years old." He points at other objects around the room. "Swords for

executions, flogging instruments, shackles. The Iron Maiden is about 400 years old. I believe Dario found it in a castle in Northern Germany."

I shudder and happily move onto lighter subject matter when we step outside and look down at some of the castle's animal inhabitants in the garden below. "Did you guys meet our cats today?" asks Kunchick. "We have two: one is Lady Guinevere, and the big orange one is Sir Lancelot. They're the pest control for the castle." We're also introduced to Giacomo, the goat, and a sheep by the name of Juliette.

Gesturing beyond, Kunchick says: "Our cabernet vineyards are on the top of the knoll over here. Some of the most sought after, some of the most expensive grapes in the world are here in the Diamond Mountain district." He adds that only 12 hectares have been planted on the 69-hectare property, then leads us downstairs to one of 25 tasting rooms.

Of course, I opt for the upgraded reserve tasting so I can try the crème de la crème of the castle's award-winning Italian-style wines: the 2011 Bien Nacido Chardonnay, Best of Class winner at the 2013 San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition; and the 2009 Il Passito, which won the 2012 American Fine Wine Competition in Boca Raton. Big, smooth and robust, they don't disappoint.

I head back to the station via motorcoach along the Silverado Trail, which traces the eastern side of the valley, offering even more views of Napa's vineyards and wineries. Gazing out the window, I take in every last bit of this journey – already hungry for my next adventure to this radiant and abundant place. winetrain.com, castellodiamorosa.com **GP**



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