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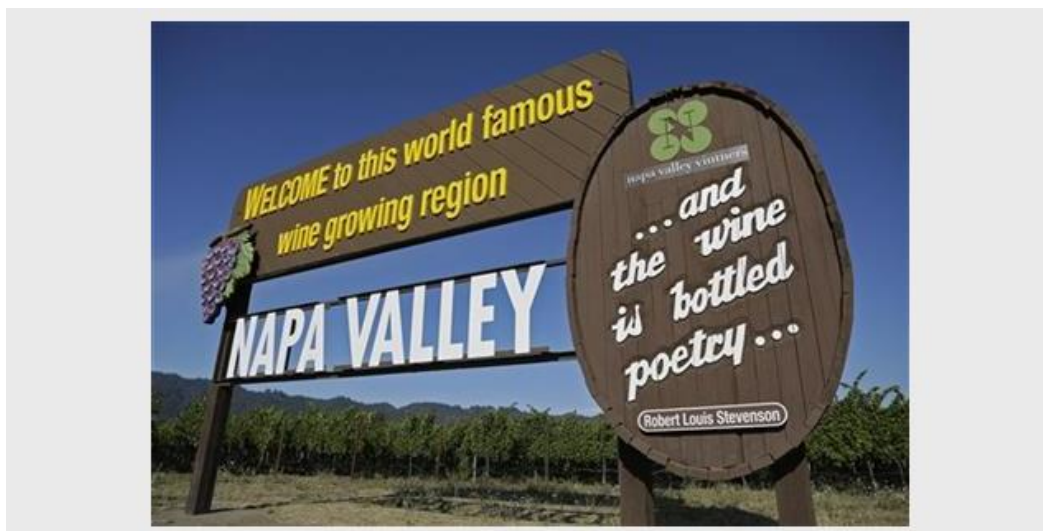
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Weekend Getaway: What's new in Napa

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NAPA (AP) — Sunlit hills of lush green vineyards, blue skies, fine red wines: Some things about wine country never change. But others do, like where to eat, stay and play. Here's a roundup of what's new and what's worth revisiting in California's Napa Valley.

WHAT'S NEW

A decade or so ago, the city of Napa, at the southern end of the valley, was a place you drove through. Now it's a destination with dozens of restaurants, tasting rooms and revamped or new hotels. Stroll along the riverfront — in the evening when the lights come on is the prettiest time — and check out shops and restaurants like Morimoto Napa (from Masaharu Morimoto of "Iron Chef" fame) which recently added the valley's first sake lounge. Up-valley there's Harvest Table, a new restaurant at Harvest Inn by Charlie Palmer. The menu focuses on local ingredients, including the wines.



Light fixture, which is shaped like a grape cluster and changes colors, illuminates the Crystal Cellar of Raymond Vineyards in St. Helena, Calif. Raymond Vineyards isn't new, but it has been completely renovated by new owner Jean-Charles Boisset. The Crystal Cellar features stainless steel walls, mirrored bar and a collection of Baccarat crystal decanters. The winery tasting room is open year round but reservations are required for reserve tastings and tours.

Recently opened wineries in the valley include Odette Estate, which has an 8,500-square-foot planted living roof and recently opened a new tasting room. (Appointment required.) Raymond Vineyards isn't new, but it has been completely renovated by new owner Jean-Charles Boisset. Check out the Crystal Cellar with its stainless steel walls, mirrored bar and collection of Baccarat crystal decanters. The winery tasting room can be visited without an appointment but reservations are recommended and some tastings/tours require them.

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CLASSIC ATTRACTIONS

Sipping sparkling wine on the terrace at Domaine Carneros has been a favorite Napa "to do" for a quarter-century. Order a plate of cheese and charcuterie, or if you're feeling flush, try an ounce of caviar (\$85). Reservations required. Another good spot for a bite is V. Sattui Winery where you can pick up cheese, salami, pates, fruit and bread made fresh in the winery's kitchen daily to assemble an al fresco repast for the winery's picnic grounds. No outside food allowed.

Bistro Don Giovanni is where visitors and locals go to dine; you'll probably end up sitting next to some of the valley's movers and shakers although you may not know it. The restaurant has a patio with vineyard views and features refined rustic Italian food. If you're craving a burger, try Gott's Roadside in St. Helena, a retro restored drive-in where you can have your burger with a shake or a bottle of high-end Napa cab.

Sterling Winery is a valley standby with a view, where you ride a gondola up to the mountain top winery.

Another classic attraction, the Wine Train, recently made headlines when employee booted a book club from the train. Most members of the club were black women, who felt they'd been asked to leave because of their race. Train officials issued an apology. The train makes a three-hour round trip from Napa to St. Helena with a meal and stops.

TIPS

Visiting midweek is always less crowded, and sometimes less expensive, than weekends. Winter is also a more tranquil time, the weather is often mild, and the seasonal menus better pair with the valley's renowned cabernet wines. Visit in late winter and you'll be greeted by a golden blaze of wild mustard that acts as a vineyard cover crop. April is arts month, with many of the wineries putting on special exhibitions, and in July there's Festival del Sole featuring music, dance and more from some of the nation's top names.

To help plan your trip, the Napa Valley Welcome Center at 600 Main St., Napa, is conveniently located on the riverfront and has a concierge to help with bookings and itineraries. For getting around Yountville, St. Helena and Calistoga, check out the shuttles that offer free or low-cost rides including some on-demand pickup. More information here, http://www.visitnapavalley.com/map_and_directions.htm.

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HANGING OUT

The Oxbow Market is a pleasant place to spend a few hours. You can pick up everything from tacos to oysters and enjoy them on an outdoor deck overlooking the Napa River or browse the specialty gift shops. For upscale dining, stroll the town of Yountville, which has a clutch of high-end restaurants including The French Laundry from chef Thomas Keller. You can also try one of Keller's more casual restaurants nearby such as Bouchon Bistro or Ad Hoc.

For a different type of Napa experience, explore the Coombsville appellation, which is on the southern end of the valley and was recognized as a unique growing area in 2011. This is a place many tourists zoom by, so you'll find it less crowded. Wineries are smaller and family owned; you may go in for a tasting and find yourself talking to the winemaker him- or herself.