

THE TRAVEL ISSUE

FOOD & WINE

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MAY 2016



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Napa Valley Dream-Trip Tips

F&W'S RAY ISLE DISTILLS HIS VAST AND HARD-WON TRAVEL WISDOM INTO ONE PAGE OF ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL ADVICE. LISTEN UP.

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN WISEMAN

BEING A WINE WRITER is a little like being a doctor: People ask you for advice at parties. The difference is that doctors get asked things such as, "My toe's been swollen like a grapefruit for two weeks—what's going on there?" whereas I get asked, "I'm going to Napa Valley in a few months—what wineries do you think I should visit?" I'm not surprised by the question. There are more than 400 wineries in Napa Valley; figuring out which ones to visit is definitely tough.

Here are my suggestions for mapping out a winery itinerary:

GO HISTORIC. Visit at least one 19th-century property, such as Spottswoode, Beringer, Schramsberg or Inglenook (owner Francis Ford Coppola restored the property's iconic name in 2011).

THINK SMALL. Throw in a few smaller, family-owned operations. I love to make an appointment to visit Matthiasson Wines, where Steve Matthiasson's minerally, subtle wines have recently gained huge acclaim. I'm also a big fan of Smith-Madrone vineyards in the Spring Mountain District, where the impressively bearded brothers Stuart and Charles Smith make terrific, old-school Napa Cabernets; and Honig Vineyard & Winery, where visitors can take a new eco-tour (in a golf cart, with wine) through Michael Honig's sustainably farmed vineyards.

SPLURGE AT LEAST ONCE. Include one (or more, depending on your budget) blowout. At the newly renovated winery at Joseph Phelps Vineyards, a five-vintage tasting of Insignia, the flagship bottling, is well worth the price (\$150). Or visit the impressively and very exotically remodeled Raymond Vineyards to be a winemaker for a day and blend your own red (\$125).

FIND A PICNIC SPOT. Choose one place (with great wines) that's both beautiful and not too crowded. I vote for Kuleto Estate, hidden away in the hills east of the Silverado Trail; Frank Family Winery, north of St. Helena; or Farella, in the Coombsville AVA.

A few other pieces of advice for the Napa Valley traveler:

VISIT A GREAT WINE SHOP. At the new K. Laz Wine Collection shop in Yountville, proprietor Kerrin Laz regularly sources bottles (for both tasting and purchase) from cult producers who never open their doors to the public.

USE THE SILVERADO TRAIL. At least as much as you can—Highway 29 often bears a disheartening resemblance to a parking lot. Plus, if you can afford it, hire a driver. Or take advantage of Uber, which now operates in the valley.

PACE YOURSELF. Don't pack too many wineries into a day; visiting three or four works well. The point is to have fun, not race around in a stressed-out way. Start the day at the farthest point from where you're staying and work your way back, so the trip home from your last tasting takes the least driving time.

MAKE RESERVATIONS IN ADVANCE. Not all wineries require them, but many of the best do; in-depth tasting experiences also often call for them. Regarding restaurants, 3.3 million people visit Napa Valley each year, and they all eat. Book in advance.

One final word to the wise:

If you're driving to the San Francisco airport in the morning, leave lots of time...and don't forget that you left a bottle of \$350 Cabernet in your carry-on bag. Seriously, trust me on this one. I know.