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Venture beyond the valley floor in Napa

By Esther Mobley | October 22, 2015

If you're a casual visitor to the Napa Valley — the kind of person who wants to just drive up, without a strict schedule and without over-reliance on your phone's GPS — you'll likely spend your whole visit on Highway 29 and Silverado Trail, the two main highways that run parallel, north to south, through the valley.

It's a gorgeous drive, and even the non-aficionado will experience the thrill of name recognition (Robert Mondavi! Stag's Leap!).

The valley floor — as this area that spans 29 and Silverado is called — is the face of Napa. The roads are easily navigable, the signs are big, and amenities like artisanal olive oil tastings and gourmet-salt purveyors are readily available. This is where you'll find many of the valley's familiar landmarks, like Castello di Amorosa (“the castle,” to locals) and the Wine Train.

But flanking the floor on either side are mountains: Howell, Spring, Veeder, Diamond. Here, the wineries are harder to find, the roads are harder to drive, and the wines, in many cases, are harder to understand.

It took me a while to get to the mountains. When I first came to Napa four years ago, I worked as a harvest intern in Rutherford, smack-dab in the middle of the valley flatlands. Every moment not in the cellar I spent hungrily visiting as many wineries as I could. I didn't have much of a sense of direction then, nor of microclimatic variation; I chose wineries to visit simply on the basis of their visibility from the road.

The advantage to this approach is that the wineries in plain sight on the valley floor are the most likely to accept visitors without an appointment. Contrary to popular assumption, the by-appointment-only practice is not a phenomenon of winery snobbery: By law, most wineries in Napa Valley cannot accept visitors without prior arrangement, and there are limits to the number of visitors they can see every day. This was established in the Winery Definition Ordinance of 1989, which attempted to curb the degree to which Napa was becoming a playground for thirsty tourists.

It can still feel like such a playground sometimes. A sense of dread overcomes me whenever I see a limousine pull up to a winery where I'm tasting, and three or four overdressed couples stumble out of it, several hours of Chardonnay deep. Or those hive-like tasting rooms where you have to elbow your way to the front to get that 2-ounce drip of Oakville Cabernet — I feel like I'm back in my college dive bar.

Raymond Winery, owned by the theatrical Jean-Charles Boisset, offers guests a walk through a “corridor of senses” — a science museum-like exhibit of the textures, flavors and aromas that grace the wines of Raymond. Darioush winery — replete with pillars and fountains and a \$5,000 Darioush-exclusive backgammon set for sale — is a paean to the ancient Persian city of Persepolis, built by Iran-born Darioush Khaledi of supermarket KV Mart Co. fortune.

Wineries like these are impressive feats of architecture — and product differentiation. They are the reason some people come to Napa. That's great.