

Local's guide to Napa Valley

By Sara Schneider

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The lauded California wine region is where you'll fall in love with wine

Napa Valley is in a class by itself among America's wine regions. There are some 500 wineries in the 16 subappellations that make up the 30-mile-long, 5-mile-wide valley. They include the historic, such as Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, whose Cabernet Sauvignon demolished an array of French Bordeaux in the 1976 Judgment of Paris, thereby putting Napa firmly on the world wine map. They include the very luxe: A few of the wines produced here can go for \$1,500 a bottle.

Napa's popularity and those prices can make the valley seem intimidating to people who just want to spend a fun day tasting wine. The crowds are real—try turning left onto Highway 29 on a busy weekend. And at times, the pretensions have been too. But recent forays have revealed a new Napa—still serious about wine but willing to cut loose a little.

Learn to navigate the valley, and you'll realize that it's still the best place in the world to fall in love—deeply, lastingly in love—with wine. Visit, sip, savor. You'll make your own wine memories, potent and pleasurable.

ST. HELENA

Raymond Vineyards. Talk about a makeover. Much loved but styled along the lines of a '70s dentist office, Raymond has been reinvented by Jean-Charles Boisset, scion of one of France's prominent winemaking families and husband to California wine aristocrat Gina Gallo-Boisset. "We don't just make wine ... we create dreams!" Boisset says. At Raymond, the dreams now include a Champagne lounge with a gold-flecked resin floor and karaoke, and Louis XIV-style furniture under the trees. But there's also a serious appellation-education room, a lab for blending your own wine, and a demonstration biodynamic garden with an app to guide you through it. And you can even bring your pooch to the doggie winery run by Boisset's French bulldog, Frenchie. *Tasting from \$25; 849 Zinfandel Lane; raymondvineyards.com. We recommend:* Raymond 2012 District Collection Cabernet Sauvignon (*Rutherford*; \$85).