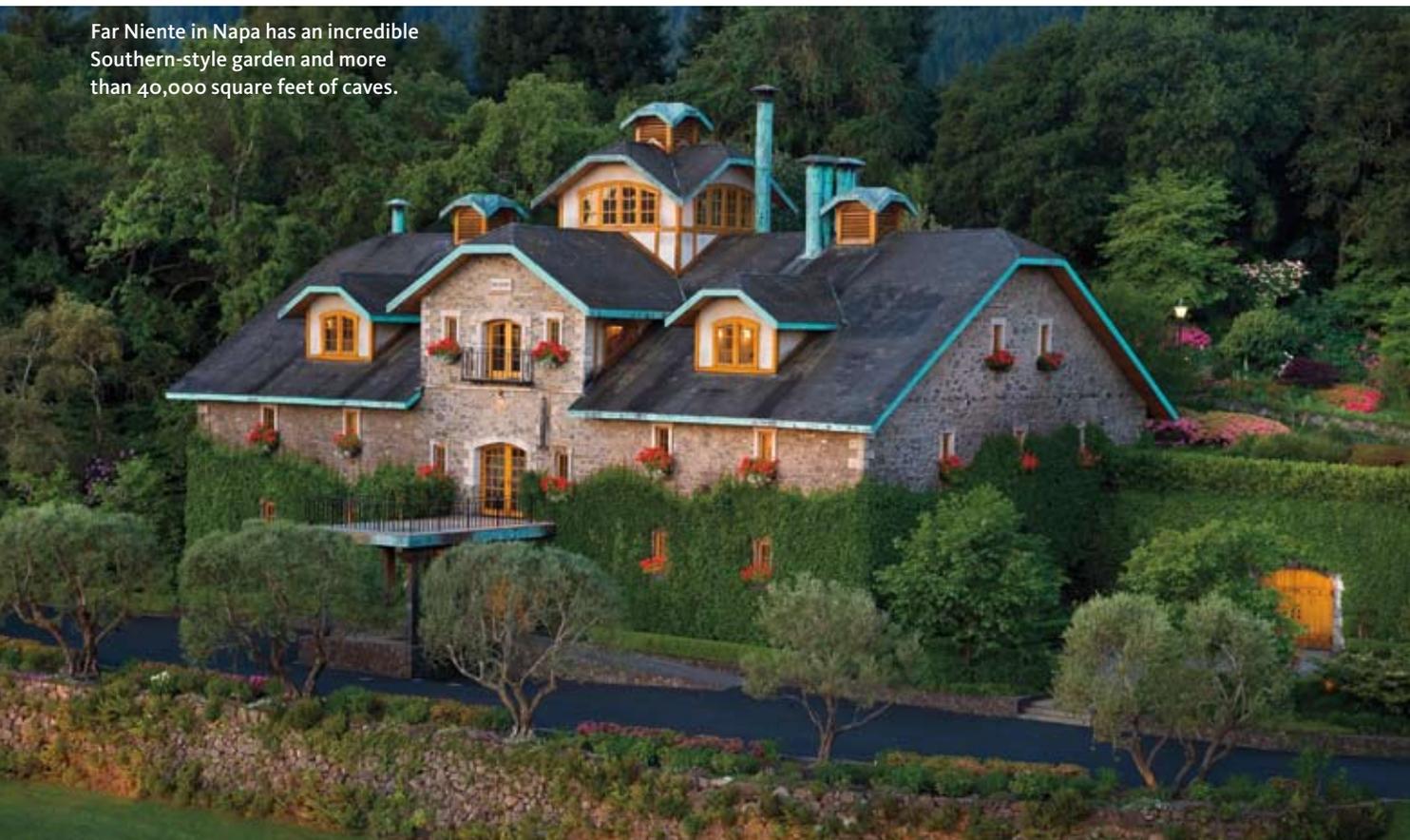


Far Niente in Napa has an incredible Southern-style garden and more than 40,000 square feet of caves.



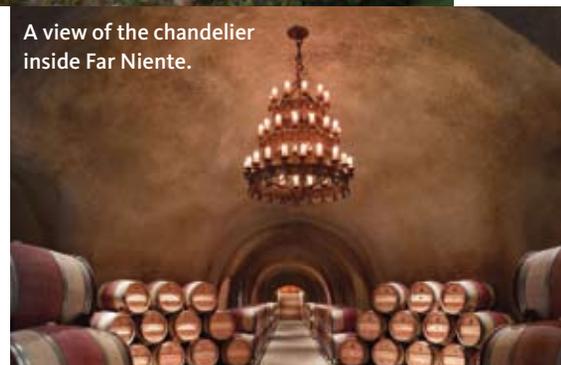
COURTESY: RANDALL CORDERO

Vintage California

Relishing fine wines in Sonoma and Napa
By Robyn Roehm Cannon

I'll never forget my first visit to California wine country. In 1997, my husband and I were guests at a sunset wedding in a private Napa vineyard during the peak of harvest season, or "crush." The rolling hills seemed to go on forever, covered in orderly rows of vines. Their leaves were turning gold and crimson, and the sweet scent of plump purple grapes perfumed the warm air. In the distance, the mountains looked like crisp cutouts against a brilliant blue and cloudless sky. ■ We spent the days before and after the wedding in relaxed exploration of several towns in Napa Valley and Sonoma County. I later learned that the vintage of '97 was stellar—the best in decades. For us, it was one of our most enjoyable vacations ever. So good, in fact, that we've returned every year since. ■ This wine country is relatively compact, but there is always more than enough to keep us entertained. Our favorite days include a leisurely, light breakfast, followed by a morning winery tour, wine tasting, and a noontime picnic at one of the area's world-

A view of the chandelier inside Far Niente.



COURTESY: ADRIAN GREGORUTTI

class estates. After lunch, we may visit another winery, shop at delightful boutiques, catch some sun by the pool, enjoy a spa appointment in the late afternoon and—after a nap, of course—sit down to a scrumptious dinner prepared by one of the area's acclaimed chefs.

In the warmer months, daytime temperatures reach into the upper 80s, and skies are nearly always sunny and clear. But after sunset, sleep is divine with our windows open to the night sky and a gentle breeze. As city dwellers, we find that our biggest luxury might just be the quiet.

COURTESY: KUNDE ESTATE WINERY & VINEYARDS



The Kunde Family Estate in Sonoma.

SONOMA

On the way into Sonoma County from San Francisco, we stop first at Viansa Winery & Marketplace, which is well-respected for Italian varietals. This Tuscan-style villa offers great views of Sonoma Valley. The winery also has a small deli and gift shop. In addition to admiring a broad array of picnic supplies, I can't seem to leave with-



The grapes are ready for harvest at Chalk Hill Estate Vineyards in Healdsburg.

COURTESY: CHALK HILL ESTATE VINEYARDS & WINERY

LODGING

SONOMA

Lodge at Sonoma: Recently renovated into a spacious, family- and pet-friendly resort with outstanding spa services. 866-263-0758, www.marriott.com.

MacArthur Place Inn & Spa: Originally a prestigious 300-acre working ranch with prized trotters, it now offers luxurious suites, and a spa and pool surrounded by gardens, just a few blocks from the plaza. 800-722-1866, www.macarthurplace.com.

Vintners Inn: This 44-room luxury hotel sits amid 92 acres of lush vineyards and landscaped gardens. Dine at award-winning John Ash & Co. just next door. 800-421-2584, www.vintnersinn.com.

NAPA

Bardessono: Located in the heart of Yountville, it has spacious spa suites with soaking tubs, and visitors can nap on organic linens, laundered by ionization to remove any soap. It's the essence of ultra luxury with a low carbon footprint. 877-932-5333, www.bardessono.com.

The Westin Verasa Napa: Each of the 180 plushly appointed condolike suites has a kitchenette complete with dishware and cutlery. Dining out is also a treat at Ken Frank's legendary La Toque. 707-257-1800, www.westin.com/verasanapa.

out a cookbook or two, and an Italian platter for entertaining at home.

If we don't dine under the grape trellis at Viansa, we head up the road to Gloria Ferrer Caves & Vineyards. A long, spectacular driveway leads past vineyards to this Spanish-style estate. It's owned and operated by the same family that produces acclaimed sparkling wine Freixenet. We tote a picnic up to the Vista Terrace and enjoy the magnificent view of the seemingly endless vineyards, while we sip icy-cold reserve sparkling wines by the glass.

We always make an appointment for the Chalk Hill Culinary Tour at Chalk Hill Estate Vineyards in Healdsburg—it's the ultimate formal, elegant and yet very relaxed tasting experience. First we tour the estate's extensive culinary garden with the head gardener—and taste at least 20 varieties of organic tomatoes right off the vine. Then, it's off to the Grand Pavilion—a hilltop conservatory that offers panoramic views of this pristine 1,477-acre estate—overlooking the family's equestrian arena. It's one of the largest arenas in North America, and the U.S. Olympic Dressage Team has practiced here. Beautiful small-plate seasonal tasting luncheons are paired with the estate's award-winning vintages. We finish up in the tasting room, sampling house-made chocolate truffles with estate cabernet. For us, this experience is the essence of wine country horticulture, cuisine and scenery.

We've learned much about sustainability and organic farming at the Kunde Family Estate from Jeff Kunde, a fourth-

generation Sonoma County winemaker. He seasonally plans several "eco-tours" on foot with small groups. The tours last three hours and climb 1,400 feet through the vineyards and into the Mayacamas Mountains. Our reward for this moderately strenuous hike is an incredible view of Sonoma Valley, and a gourmet picnic and wine-tasting in the mountains.

The center of the town of Sonoma is a plaza that looks much like it did when its grand basalt City Hall building was completed more than 100 years ago—except today, this historic square is filled with many lodging, dining and shopping choices.

When it's time for lunch or dinner, we follow the locals to the friendly, traditional Italian restaurant Della Santina's, which is just steps off the square. The authentic dishes are huge and always well-flavored at this father-and-son-operated trattoria. Standouts include the daily antipasto and the creamy tortellini.

At the other end of the plaza, we've enjoyed many superb meals at Sonoma Meritage Martini Oyster Bar & Grill, where Southern French and Northern Italian regional cuisine reigns. Specialties are martinis and a raw-oyster bar with fresh Dungeness crab and lobster. We always try for a table in server Nima's section—he's a delightful Sherpa who has climbed Mount Everest 13 times, and his trekking stories are as amazing as the food here.

We love to sit outdoors with a light lunch and a glass of wine at the European-inspired Ledson Hotel's Harmony Lounge and take in the action on the square. Steve

Oxbow Public Market.



COURTESY: OXBOW PUBLIC MARKET

Ledson's family traces its Sonoma winemaking roots to 1860, and his inn is a gorgeous spot.

Herb Caen, the late Pulitzer Prize-winning *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist, had great affection for the area. "Heaven,"

he once wrote, is "a place that is said to resemble Sonoma in the spring."

When we're ready to go from Sonoma to Napa Valley, we take one of the winding roads that cross over the Mayacamas Mountains that separate the two valleys. It's then that my husband laments that his 1979 124 Spider is sitting in the garage in Seattle. Cheer up, I tell him—we can fit many more bottles of cabernet in the trunk of our rental car than in the Fiat.

DETAILS

UPCOMING EVENTS

The 5th Annual Sonoma Jazz + festival, May 21–24—This Memorial Day Weekend event is pure bliss for jazz aficionados and benefits a great cause—music education. This year, Joe Cocker and Big Bad Voodoo Daddy will perform, along with a host of other jazz legends. Visit www.sonomajazz.org.

MORE INFORMATION

Sonoma County Tourism Bureau: 800-576-6662; www.sonomacounty.com.

Napa Valley Destination Council: 707-226-7459, www.napavalley.com.

Now in its fourth edition, *The California Directory of Fine Wineries* (Wine House Press, 2008) is an invaluable resource: It includes maps, photos and detailed descriptions of 62 Napa and Sonoma wineries. www.tenspeedpress.com.



This restored Queen Anne farmhouse in Napa is home to the Nickel & Nickel winery.

COURTESY: ADRIAN GREGORUTTI

NAPA

In the city of Napa, a fabulous collection of artisans, restaurants, food purveyors and farms stands sits under one roof at Oxbow Public Market—a favorite stop.

We're fond of staying at the Napa River Inn, located in the circa-1884 Historic Napa Mill on the Napa Riverfront. This plush boutique hotel is a member of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Historic Hotels of America, and rooms are furnished in period detail, with fireplaces and bathrooms with huge claw-foot tubs.

The moment we enter the cozy Angèle Restaurant and Bar, next door to the Napa River Inn, we feel transported to the French countryside. Here, we're graciously served some of the most delicious and authentic French bistro food we've ever tasted, with a great wine selection to choose from. After dinner, we walk to Silo's Jazz Club, where the highly accomplished jazz vocalist Wesla Whitfield and her composer husband, Mike Greensill, perform several nights a week.

There are now about 400 wineries in Napa Valley, and while we love new tasting experiences, there are a few outstanding spots where we often return.

In 2004, we were delighted that—after 25 years of being open to the trade only—Far Niente opened its magnificent Great Hall, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, for tours and tastings. The winery has a beautiful Southern-style garden with a collection of 8,000 pink and red azaleas—a fabulous sight in late spring.

But that's not all. Touring 40,000 square feet of caves and an extraordinary collection of rare and classic automobiles made my Fiat-owning husband swoon.

Down the road, on the 42-acre Nickel & Nickel estate, a restored Queen Anne farmhouse is the site of a state-of-the-art winery dedicated to single-vineyard wines. It's a rare peek into what life was like before Napa Valley was developed for visitors.

The 13,000-square-foot gallery of contemporary art at The Hess Collection Winery is well worth the drive up a winding road to a forested mountainside location. The wines are as inspiring as the art in this ivy-clad stone estate built in 1903 that was also owned for a time by the Catholic evangelical Christian Brothers organization.

We always return from California wine country relaxed and rejuvenated. Now, if we could just figure out how to put the Fiat on the flight to California, it would be a perfect world. ▲

Robyn Roehm Cannon writes from Seattle.

GETTING THERE



Alaska Airlines offers daily flights to the Bay Area and to Sonoma County via sister carrier Horizon Air. Book reservations to California wine country at alaskaair.com or call 800-ALASKAAIR.