

CHEERS TO YOUR RETURN  
NAPA VALLEY'S REBOUND

SEVEN FESTIVE  
HOLIDAY SPLASHES

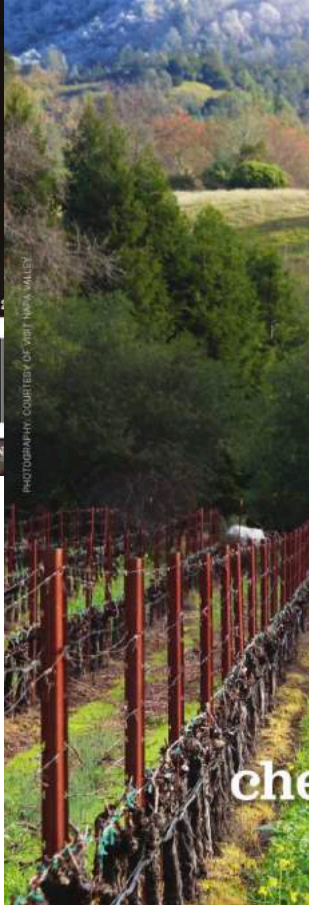
TEN INSPIRED WAYS  
TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

# PUNCH

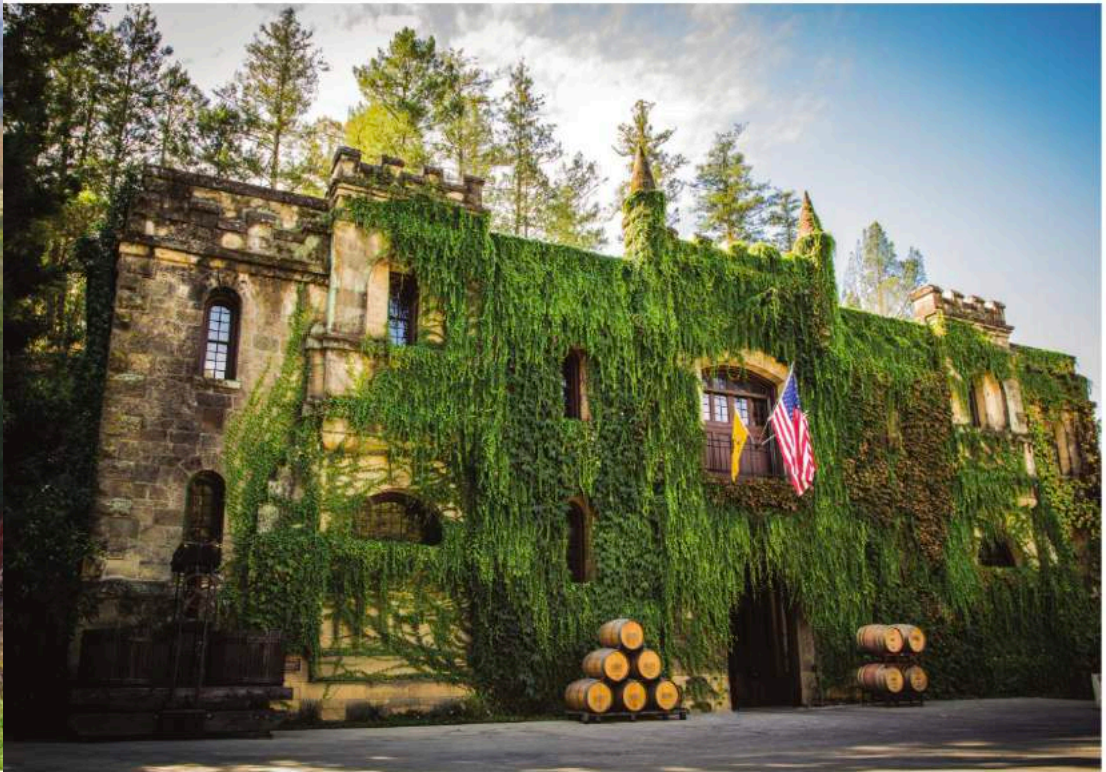
SPIRIT OF THE PENINSULA



{due west}



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF SPIRIT NAPA VALLEY



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF CHATEAU MONTELENA

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ABOVE: The ivy draping Chateau Montelena changes color with each season. OPPOSITE (clockwise): Bike rentals courtesy of the Napa Valley Lodge allow for exploring; an alluring brick fireplace at the Harvest Inn; outdoor patio serenity at the Napa Valley Lodge.

The golf cart veers past the vines neatly lined against a rocky road dividing the venerable **Chateau Montelena Winery** into halves. Riding in the back, I'm careful not to spill a drop of the ruby red 2005 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon because it's too tasty to waste. And it's not like we're going to get those 15 years back.

My host, Olivia, wheels the cart to a lookout where the garden of grapes absorbs the sunlight in a cradle between the eastward Palisades mountain range and Mt. St. Helena. (Say "Mount Helena" five times fast and you might crush it into *Montelena*.)

**Located outside Calistoga near the northernmost rim of the Napa Valley, Chateau Montelena is the ideal place to begin soaking up Napa Val-**

**ley lore. After all, the winery made history in 1976 when its buttery Chardonnay proved victorious at the international Judgment of Paris competition, thrusting California wines onto the global scene.**

Some of this success is due to the composition of the soil that feeds the grapes. Some five million years ago, a vast volcanic field stretched across this valley and left ash residue in the terroir. When Montelena grapes are planted, they're forced to burrow deeper into the earth for water, which in turn, enhances the concentration. It's that grappling for life that produces the finest wine.

"Too much water and the grapes will swell," Olivia explains. "We want our vines to struggle."

Perhaps no other metaphor better describes Napa Valley in its current

state. In the same way perseverance produces high-quality wines, Napa found itself confronting setbacks in 2020, including back-to-back fires that ravaged parts of the valley during the critical harvest season. But if doomsday was on the calendar, then it was clearly disregarded given the resurgence of vitality now echoing through the valley. Fires retreated, Napa remains.

While the harvest months tend to attract a rush of visitors to the area, the crisper winter season is not to be overlooked. Unlike the mild climate patterns on the Peninsula, Napa experiences four seasons with frostier months that encourage toastier getaways. A mere hour-and-a-half stretch beyond San Francisco, it qualifies as the Bay's backyard—and now is the time to venerate the vintners.

DECEMBER

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visitors unite under one rooftop. Following a tip from a retired local math teacher, I gave **C Casa** a try and was pleasantly impressed with its healthful and innovative approach to taqueria cuisine. The Bay Area micro chain uses sustainably sourced greens, fresh fruits, vegetables, artisan cheeses, meats and handmade tortillas.

### **EMBRACING WINE COUNTRY LIFE**

In addition to the valley's now iconic hot air balloon rides, activities are abundant with the **Napa Valley Train Tours** returning to service and enough wine tasting opportunities to fill a few lifetimes.

Napa is synonymous with sipping but you can also try your hand at crafting from the vine. Located just off the Silverado Trail, you'll find **Judd's Hill**, a winery that specializes in a bottle blending day camp experience. Through its microcrush program, Judd's Hill invites guests to become their own winemakers.

The session begins with a quick lesson about grape growing from the engaging and colorful host, CJ,

who has worked in the valley for the past two decades. She explains how Napa's precise and contained rainfall season allows for ideal growing conditions. Using four wines with various tannins to choose from and with help from a graduated cylinder and beakers, I concoct my own blend of red. Next, I bottle my own wine, cork it and then devise my own label and name. In honor of my host, I choose the moniker *Caroline's Joy*.

For a more traditional wine tasting, I stop by **Chateau Montelena Winery**, where the easy-going demeanor of the master winemaker Bo Barrett pervades. The winery features a distinct 19<sup>th</sup>-century stone structure resembling a castle with a small lake below the knoll. The winery dates back to 1882 when Alfred Tubbs built the chateau following

a visit to France (inspired by none other than French winemakers). Another owner added the small lake (initially hoping to create a moat before hitting developmental snags) before the Barrett family took over in 1968. Less than a decade later, the winery prevailed in Paris, an event

that ushered in the modern era of Napa Valley winemaking.

Following a weekend of wine tasting and lounging, it was time to sweat out the toxins. Offering easy-to-use rentals of bicycles or e-bikes is **Napa Valley Bike Tours** in Yountville, which is conveniently located in the middle of two routes: heading north for vineyard-focused adventures or a cool eight-mile ride into scenic downtown Napa.

**Riding along the Napa Valley Vine Trail, a smooth bike path with convenient free roadside bike maintenance stations, offers serene views of the valley. Once in Napa proper, I head to the Wildcat Vintage Store to flip through racks of cultivated styles, then venture by the town's Rail Arts District (RAD) al artists'**

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