

Trek through Napa Valley offers more than wine tasting

By Laurie Brazil

CALISTOGA – The crush is fading, fall colors are stunning. Ah, a weekday in the Napa Valley. It means fewer visitors, more attention, and detailed information from the people pouring the wine.

Our short trek started on the main artery, Highway 29, with a stop at the popular V. Sattui picnic grounds, complete with a tour from the gardener of 25 years. After sharing his handiwork, he revealed that a not to be overlooked site is the recently completed Castello di Amorosa, an authentic Tuscan castle built by winery owner Dario Sattui.

He didn't mislead us. This is a must-see medieval 12th century reproduction in a magnificent setting with eight levels, complete with moat, drawbridge, dungeon and torture chamber.



Grapes hang on the vines in Napa Valley late this year.

Photos/Laurie Brazil

Tasting in a stone basement is often served by native

Italians, with the owner seen with his German shepherd in tow among the sheep, goats and chickens.

Just down the road from Calistoga is Clos Pegase, an estate winery, with its surrounding sculpture garden that includes some of the world's greatest 20th century works of art and meticulously manicured gardens. It includes the breathtaking Cave Theater, a dramatic setting for celebrations, presentations and special events. Clos, being the French word for an enclosed vineyard, is where every wine is made from that winery's grapes. Pegase, being the French word for Pegasus, the winged mythological horse, is the background for their label.

Not to be missed is Chateau Montelena, the site and subject of the movie "Bottle Shock." A beautiful winery complete with pathways, lake, and Asian inspired sitting areas. This elegant site is quite an experience – visually and historically. Chateau Montelena produced the American Chardonnay that in the 1976 wine competition the Judgment of Paris defeated French entries in a blind taste test. This was the first time a wine from the United States had won.

Our respite and stay at The Lodge in Calistoga offered an economical visit complete with breakfast, pool, sauna, and an ideal setting in a small town with a great selection of restaurants within walking distance. The rooms are well appointed and include amenities for a complete experience. Calistoga has upped its game quite a bit since our last visit and offers many boutiques, top-notch eateries and local music.



A bit of
history at
Chateau
Montelena.

Not to be missed on the Silverado Trail is the long-standing notable Stag's Leap, with its friendly and generous staff. Their architectural creativity of the Caves and Arcade, 17th century original paintings of ancient celestial maps, and the unique sculpture of The Greeter are a few examples of the beautiful collection of artwork at the winery.

Duckhorn boasts being Wine & Spirits magazine's 2010 Winery of the Year. In the traditionally designed Estate House and outdoor veranda you can enjoy the winery's waterfowl art collection or view their unique temperature-controlled above ground cellar.

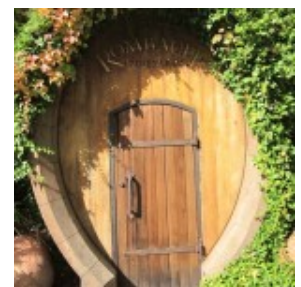
A relatively new addition to the valley, Darioush, houses a 22,000-square-foot winery; the first in America to combine architecture, design and Persian culture is a unique experience. The yellow stone used for the 16 monumental 18-foot freestanding columns was quarried near the region of Persepolis and exported to Turkey and Italy for cutting and tumbling before it reached the Silverado Trail in Napa. There is the feel that you're in the middle of distant lands and exotic locations.

Black Stallion, a more modern looking facility, became the latest addition to the small collection of wineries in Napa Valley's newly designated Oak Knoll District in July 2007. Located on the grounds of a historic equestrian center, a spectacular sculpture of a black stallion in motion is positioned at the entrance.



Hot air balloons offer a 360-degree view of the Wine Country.

The coup de gras remains St. Helena's ever-constant Rombauer, not only some of the best Chardonnay but a true class act in their presentation and engrossing staff. Our host, Jim, was knowledgeable and his enthusiasm to share his insight was paired with a true admiration and closeness to the family. Irma Rombauer was the renowned author of the book the "Joy of Cooking" one of the United States' most published cookbooks, having been in print continuously since 1936 with more than 18 million copies sold.



Rombauer on the Silverado Trail.

Hence, the Rombauer family's winemaking philosophy-to create a wine that complements the joy of good food as well as it complements the joy of good company. Though a tasting fee is now the par at most Napa establishments, at Rombauer their glasses are included in a beautiful gift bag and their wine is

packaged in a cloth embellished carrier. The grounds afford rustic pathways with over one hundred varieties of plants and flowers that accompany sitting areas for picnics with whimsical metal sculpture throughout.

Breathtaking views abound at every juncture – sweeping landscapes, picturesque rolling hills planted with photo ops at every turn. Although you can indulge in a myriad treatments, world renowned food or abundant activities the valley can also be experienced as a short economical stay just a few hours from our own jewel.