

montecito JOURNAL

summer | fall • 2013



weekend Getaway

by Kia McNerny

DAY TRIP TO YOUNTVILLE

– the Greening of Napa

The tiny wine hamlet of Yountville at the southern entrance to Napa Valley is less than six hours drive from Montecito.

In springtime, when a carpet of green lines Highway 101 from Gaviota to King City, and our state's celebrated vines are wraithlike survivors of February rains, we traveled north on a whim to explore the area's new dining and lodging establishments.

In 1838, George Calvert Yount established the Napa Valley's first vineyard at Rancho Caymus, named after a tribe of local Indians. Had it not been for Yount, our state might have missed becoming one of the world's top wine regions – or attracting chefs and food savants from around the globe.

The incorporated hamlet named after Yount boasts three Michelin starred restaurants, with top chefs arriving each year. It is also adjacent to the Stags Leap wine district which, we all know, helped to put Napa Valley on the European wine-map in 1976.

In short, it's a perfect base to explore the Valley. Of interest to architecture buffs, Bardessono is a state-of-the-art "green luxury" hotel that adds to the hamlet's upscale reputation. The LEED Platinum resort combines the ultimate in green design with a sleek contemporary vibe. Materials include reclaimed wood, salvaged trees and recycled concrete. Geothermal wells pump 70-degree water for resort use, and solar panels provide over half its electricity.

The kitchen for Lucy, the hotel's innovative dining room, was





designed in the green spirit of Thomas Keller's French Laundry, a few blocks away. Unlike other commercial kitchens, requiring chemical cleaning products, the concrete floor slopes to a drain; a simple hosing-down leaves the space sparkling.

Executive chef Victor Scargle is a UCSB graduate. With a CV that includes some of the most prestigious kitchens in the country, Victor's early career began at Fess Parker's steakhouse. For Victor, "the quality of Napa Valley's local ingredients showcases a chef's talent." He sources organic ingredients from local artisanal farmers, and the estate's own gardens. Peppers, tomatoes, beets – whatever is fresh that day goes onto our plates.

DAY ONE

– Architectural Touring

A short drive from Yountville is the renovated, but still rustic, Oakville Grocery, with its vintage-style Coca-Cola mural on one panel of the building, and gourmet comestibles inside. The building opened as a general store in 1880, and is listed in the national registry of historic places. At Oakville Cross, we pass an early Christian Bros. winery building, before winding our way north toward St. Helena.

For those of us with a casual interest in celebrity architects, two new entries in spa and dining display architect Howard Backen's latest refinements to his "luxury Nordic barn" style.

This is the guy who transformed rural elements like corrugated metal roofing and rough-hewn exteriors into a new chic. Opened in 2012 is Backen's spa-centric Solage resort outside Calistoga. With soaring trestle ceilings, industrial lighting and pocket doors, the complex is textbook design for the indoor-outdoor lifestyle.

On our last visit to Napa, the architect's jointly owned French Blue all-day bistro, along St. Helena's main street, was in its incubation. Today,

we are seated in its sunny brick-floored patio, enjoying a crisp Chenin Blanc and debating lunch: Mussel soup with red coconut curry and coriander, or baked trout with house-cured bacon?

We share wine-talk with Backen's partner and beverage director Adam LaCanigna who, true to trend, selects producers for "sustainability."

What does that mean exactly – in a restaurant?

"We source local suppliers who practice sustainable farming. These days there's a big buzz around the idea. But most classic wine-makers were already into respecting the land as a matter of course."

Favorite producers include Mike Grgich and Heidi Barrett. "If one label – then I would say Mendelson Pinot Noir, a Burgundian style wine."

As might be expected, the architect was hands-on during construction. "Howard is detail-obsessive and committed to a smaller footprint." Such green features as LED-lighting and piped steam-heating in outdoor seating panels blend with sleek barn elements and zinc bar surfaces.

An easy stroll from the hotel at suppertime brings us to Bouchon, Michael Chiarello's Bottega Ristorante, or Redd, Richard Reddington's elegant space

for ethnic-inspired dishes. Bouchon and Redd are 2013 Michelin-starred. At Redd Wood, Reddington's casual pizzeria, we enjoy white rabbit with chestnut pappardelle.

DAY TWO

– Wine Touring

Brisk sunshine next morning calls for a bike ride to check out a winery or two. Cliff Lede Vineyards is known for its flagship "claret" and the well-made Breggo wines from Anderson Valley. The winery's sculpture garden is a relaxing venue after our ride, where a white heron among the vines pays us no attention as he scarfs up a snake.

Innovations at the winery include its concrete egg fermentation tanks for Sauvignon Blanc, a computer driven "eye" from France that sorts the grapes, and solar panels that will return their investment in seven years. "We're already selling power back to PG&E."



Exercise calls for lunch. A favorite setting is Brix's sunny stone patio on the vineyards. A glass of the owner's Kelleher Sauvignon Blanc is delicious with steak tartare, quail egg and baguette, followed by organic baby beet salad and parsnip soup.

Yountville's fame as a food Mecca commenced in 1994, with Thomas Keller's launching of award-winning French Laundry, renown for its prix-fixe French-based menus. In 2004, the eatery installed geothermal wells in its circa 1900 building. A circuit of water-filled pipes draws the hot air from the kitchen 260 feet into the earth to cool it, sending it back for use as heat at a constant 65 degrees.

Napa weather can turn chilly at night. Back at the hotel, there's a warming fire on the bar patio, where we opt for lighter fare like Kobe burger and caramelized onion and cheese Panini.



DAY THREE

– High Art and Historic Places

We arise restless for a change in culture and view. A short drive west accesses the museums and walking paths of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. We are easily admitted to the de Young Museum for a Vermeer exhibit in town from The Hague. After a stroll and pleasant lunch in the Science Museum, we are ready to drive south.

Convenient midpoint between San Francisco and Montecito, San Luis Obispo is our overnight destination. The main artery into town still has a Fosters Freeze with its original 1940s sign. An exciting surprise is the hip “new” boutique hotel we happen upon in the downtown walking district. The Granada Hotel & Bistro was originally built in 1922 as an enclave for traveling actors. Later, rumor suggests clientele included the cow-town’s “Johns” as part of its brothel trade. Recently, the hostelry has undergone a polished renovation, using glass, chrome and steel-beam design, to complement its brick structure.

As befits a college town, we won't go hungry. Besides the popular Granada Bistro, Novo at creekside offers an adventurous menu under the stars, lulled by the croaking of river toads.

Fortified the next morning with Big Sky Café's homemade cornbread, eggs chili verde and rustler-sized lattes, we're on the road again. Since starting our trip, the wild flowers have exploded. The hills are Kerry green. Hawks, llamas and mustangs all contribute to a stunning rural landscape. Someone once said “it's the small pleasures in life,” acknowledging the joys in minor moments.

When it comes to springtime and California, a two-day sojourn in Napa can be transforming.

