

>5 things to do in **napa, california**

TAKE 5 IN NAPA

By Cathie Arquilla



We arrived in Napa for a two-night stay with the expectation of doing very little other than talking, eating and sipping wine. In other words, we wanted Napa to come to us on our all-girl mini-vacation. Here are five ways my two sisters, my mom, and I “did Napa” without ever getting in the car — no highways, parking or crowds, just grapes on the vine and wine in our glasses!

1. GET INTO BED AT THE RIVER TERRACE INN. Perfectly situated to soak up the spirit of Napa in a short amount of time, the River Terrace Inn was our home base. A five-minute walk to the Oxbow Market, practically next door to the Napa Wine Train and across the parking lot from Cuvée restaurant, the Inn delivered in terms of location. The lobby has a California lodge sensibility with oversized furniture, a stone fireplace and an ample bar. Rooms can be tailored to personal needs/taste. While my sisters were situated in a newly renovated room with a bathtub big enough for a baby elephant, this wouldn't work for my mom and me. The desk staff quickly switched us to a more practical room with a walk-in shower. www.riverterraceinn.com

2. MAKE YOUR OWN WINE IN THE BLENDING ROOM AT UNCORKED-AT-OXBOW. Who says wine is a natural depressant? John Ross, our host at this intimate establishment, was far from mellow when he explained the idea behind Uncorked's wine blending room, “It's amazing how quickly people zero in on their own taste. Once they've learned how to blend, they can ask, ‘What is the blend? What is the percentage?’ It's a great way to educate the customer on what they like!” For \$45 per person, eight people can become “winemakers.” Even if you don't get an opportunity to do your own blending, Uncorked is still worth the visit. Husband and wife proprietors Bruce Ahnfeldt and Celeste Carducci have created a collection of award-winning wines that are exciting and make tasting there an adventure. Each tasting was generously poured, with interesting stories and

explanations to go along with each wine. John gradually “took us up the ladder” of offerings, ending with 2006 Provocative Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon and some very dark chocolate. In response to our sighs, John said, “Yeah, if there is no wine or chocolate in heaven, I'm not going.” www.uncorked-at-oxbow.com

3. GET ABOARD THE NAPA VALLEY WINE TRAIN. The Napa Valley Wine Train has been providing passengers with a rail experience unique to any American wine growing region since 1989. Just a dose of the history: the tracks have been there since the 1860s and were originally laid to transport guests to the resort town of Calistoga. In the late 1800s the railroad became the property of Southern Pacific and played a crucial role in the economic and agricultural development of Napa Valley. It's a joy ride for history lovers and foodies as well. Executive Chef Kelly Macdonald is thrilled to be “the only chef with a train set!” He thrives on the challenge of running the Wine Train “like a normal restaurant with no excuses. Hot food is happy food.” Sitting down to a beautifully set table with full cutlery and linens, we felt like characters in the movies *Murder On The Orient Express* or *Twentieth Century*, minus the furs! Lunch included selections such as Grilled and Roasted Beef Tenderloin with Potato Sauté topped with a Roasted Mozzarella Artichoke Heart; need I say more? We chose to stay onboard and be catered to for the duration of the three-hour trip, but there are package options that include winery tours and special events such as Murder Mystery Dinner Theater. www.winetrain.com

4. CHECK OUT OXBOW PUBLIC MARKET It feels like an open-air green market, but it is actually housed under one cathedral ceiling roof. The signage is industrial-deco and the whole place has a very hip and current vibe. It's a great place to get a taco or buy an antique sign. Oxbow is where I met Mr. Christoe Loukids, an 80-year-old retired construction worker and veteran of the Korean War, who has been making birdhouses since he was 14. The houses are made from decorative wine crates and are lovingly executed. My sisters and I each bought one, but we all agreed they are too precious to hang outside! He has no website or other sales location, so there's no way to purchase these beauties other than cash in hand at the Oxbow, oxbowpublicmarket.com. A few more faves: Search out La Crepe! for crepes just like the ones you get on the streets of Paris, French accents and attitudes included, lacrepenapa.com. Heritage Culinary Artifacts has a wonderful collection of kitschy kitchen paraphernalia worth checking out both for purchase and amusement, heritageartifacts.com. Find every type and quantity of spices at Whole Spice, where the display and purchasing experience alone is worth a peek, wholespice.com; www.oxbowpublicmarket.com.

5. EAT DINNER AT CUVÉE NAPA. My sisters and I are all good

cooks. We were taught the basics by my mother and then ventured down our own food paths. Amy is partial to Southern cuisine, Bonnie goes for fancy food, and I'm a world food girl, Vietnamese, Mexican, you name it, and I'll try it. My mom married a second-generation Italian who loved that type of food, body and soul. As a group, we love to eat, but we're hard to please. Even so, Cuvée Napa served us the best meal we have ever had together. In explaining the idea behind a menu with choices such as 7 Hour Pork Belly; Arbuckle grits, sour cherry, Lacinto kale, cheddar and ale and crispy parsnip, Chef Jordan Mackey said he is doing “High Country Cuisine.” He says he was leaning toward Southern food for Cuvée but that wasn't very wine friendly. So he decided to create a hybrid of sorts, part Southern but, “with a distinct California cuisine flavor.” Our wonderful time was also due to the expertise of our waitress Allisyn Cline, who had the menu mastered. Her suggestions in wine pairings were spot on, critical in navigating the constellation of wine choices on any Napa menu. The blend of food, wine, atmosphere and service was a heady combination indeed and a great pairing for girl time with my mom and sisters. cuveenapa.com.

PHOTOS: 1. COURTESY RIVER TERRACE INN 2-5 BY CATHIE ARQUILLA