

# THE DRINKS ARE ON US

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO OUR THIRSTY NEW DRINKING SCENE

Instant-classic cocktails • Argument-starting wines & beers • New-school bar masters  
Detour-worthy wine shops • The tasting lounge takes off • Downtown Napa blows up

# San Francisco

## At the bend in the river

Suddenly, the town of Napa is the place to be in wine country. Will the rush to attract attention turn it into a generic tourist mall, or can it become the Valley's sophisticated urban center?

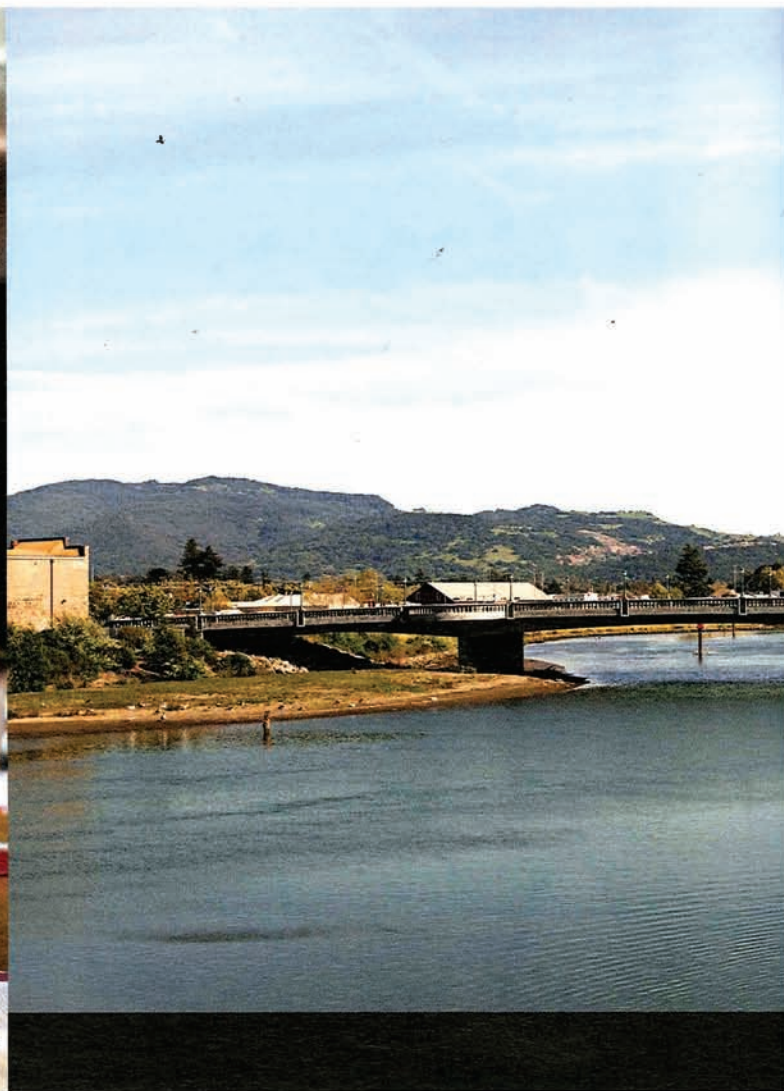
BY JORDAN MACKAY | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEN SISK



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## During nearly a decade of traveling to the Napa Valley,

I treated the town of Napa as the equivalent of a flyover state, zooming by on my way to the real wine country farther up Highway 29. On those rare occasions when I did stop, I never stayed for more than 20 minutes—just long enough to down a couple of the delicious tacos al pastor at the walk-up window of Tannya's, a bare-bones taqueria on Jefferson, a commercial street just off the highway. The rest of Napa barely warranted a thought, except thoughts of how to avoid it, after I'd gotten tangled up in its knots of one-way streets once too often. I assumed other people felt the same, because when I did on occasion park and walk around downtown, there was hardly anyone on the streets and little to see. *Sleepy* is too adventurous a word for it—*comatose* might be more apt.

Napa's torpor even resisted such attempts to stir it as the construction, a few years ago, of a gastronomic hub similar to San Francisco's Ferry Building Marketplace. The Oxbow Public Market sits one block to the east of downtown on land circumscribed by a big curl in the Napa River: the oxbow. Even as recently as last year, walking around the open, light-flooded pavilion of the market on a weekday afternoon was a lonely experience. I could hear the clack of my footsteps echoing off the walls as I strolled past the nearly empty booths and their bored attendants—butchers at Five Dot Ranch shuffling the steaks around in their case and the clerk at the Whole Spice Company listlessly polishing her already glinting jars.

But by last spring, on my first visit back, the market had become a different place. Crowds swirled around the room like schools of fish. Every stool at the Oxbow Wine Merchant and Hog Island Oyster



# A USER'S GUIDE TO THE NEW NAPA

*Where to drink and dine downtown*

## BACK ROOM WINES

A great place to discover what the cool kids are drinking, Back Room features a tremendously well-curated selection of wines from around the world, specializing in hard-to-find, cutting-edge boutique wines from California. The "Is It \$15 or \$50?" tastings, where for \$15 customers can taste a variety of wines and guess their prices for prizes, are a riot. 1000 MAIN ST., STE. 120, 707-226-1378

## BISTRO SABOR

The Ceja family, of Ceja Vineyard fame, brings haute Latin street food to the table at their energetic bistro. Choice bites include shiitake and braised onion quesadillas and asparagus, mushroom, and poblano chili tacos. The carnitas and spicy prawn tacos are equally

excellent. On Saturdays, the restaurant pushes back the tables for its wildly popular salsa-dancing night. 1126 FIRST ST., 707-252-0555

## BOUNTY HUNTER

Big, burly Napa cabs are a natural match for barbecue, and this restaurant, bar, and retail shop specializes in both. Or come for one of the "brown bag special" blind tastings—guess the country and grape variety in the bottle, and they'll pour you a glass for just a penny. 975 FIRST ST., 707-226-3976

## CEJA VINEYARDS TASTING ROOM

Just up the street from their Bistro Sabor, the Ceja family's lounge-like tasting room has brought fresh vitality to downtown. The comfortable bar is outfitted

with cozy couches—an ideal spot to enjoy an afternoon of tasting beautifully balanced and intense Napa wines. 1248 FIRST ST., 707-226-6445

## MORIMOTO

The appetizers and soups here are refreshingly delicate and lively (words not often used to describe the food in this town), and the cocktails—such as the White Lily, made with shochu, Calpico, and yuzu and lemon juices—are stylishly creative. 610 MAIN ST., 707-252-1600

## NORMAN ROSE TAVERN

A succulent lamb burger and the wide selection of excellent beers to wash it down with make this buzzing gastropub the perfect antidote to a long day of wine tasting. 1401 FIRST ST., 707-258-1516

## OENOTRI

The draws here are fantastic Italian food and homemade salumi, an eclectic wine list, and the best cocktails in town: Try the Tequila Blossom, made with tequila, Luxardo maraschino, and grapefruit. 1425 FIRST ST., 707-252-1022

## ROTISSERIE & WINE

Tyler Florence's comfortable spot smells of deeply caramelized meat, and it's the perfect place to indulge in Napa's iconic cabernet sauvignon, which is well represented on the wine list. 720 MAIN ST., 707-254-8500

## TANNYA'S TAQUERIA

The walk-up window here recalls an old-school drive-in. The tacos are classic and delicious, especially the al pastor, which is best enjoyed at a seat on the glassed-in side terrace. 1601 JEFFERSON ST., 707-224-9000

## UPTOWN THEATER

After an extensive renovation that brought fresh luster to its Art Deco lines and ceiling murals, this historic theater opened last year for the first time since 2000, attracting the likes of Merle Haggard and Gretchen Wilson. It's now Napa's top music venue. 1350 THIRD ST., 707-259-0123

## VINTNER'S COLLECTIVE

Tasting rooms traditionally feature wines from a single producer, but here you can sample bottles from 18 Napa winemakers who don't have tasting rooms of their own. It's a chance to experience a broader range of styles than most tasting rooms offer, and the quality here is quite high. The current list includes wines from Ancien and Parallel and the personal wines of famous winemaker and consultant Philippe Melka. 1245 MAIN ST., 707-255-7150



Bar was taken, with more people waiting to spring on the next available one. The chatter coming from swarms of stroller-pushing tourist moms and local winemakers (many of whom I recognized) doing their evening shopping drowned out everything else. Elbowing my way to the bar at the Wine Merchant, I saw Peter Granoff, one of the owners, and casually mentioned how surprised I was at this transformation. He nodded briskly and said, "Yep. Napa's center of gravity has shifted."

Has it ever. "For years," said Steve Carlin, a 30-year Napa Valley resident who also happens to be the developer of the Oxbow Public Market, "St. Helena's and Yountville's growth came at the expense of Napa." Carlin, whom I sat with at a communal table between Ritual Coffee and the Wine Merchant, sipping an espresso and later a beer, lives in St. Helena but seemed giddy at the thought of the town he calls a sleeping giant finally giving the valley a sense of sophisticated urbanity. "Everyone used to talk about bypassing Napa as quickly as possible to go up-valley," he said. "Now no one wants to go up-valley anymore." He was exaggerating—traffic jams on the two-lane Main Street in St. Helena are as bad as ever—but the change is palpable. As put by Coombsville resident Barry Schuler, a co-owner of Meteor Vineyard, which lies just a few minutes out of town: "Napa used to be like Naples on the way to the Amalfi coast. Now, instead of being the zoom-through on the way to the it, Napa is rapidly becoming the it."

Transformative luxury hotels have opened (the Avia) or are being built (a Ritz-Carlton and a St. Regis). Fifty residential units went in above some of the finer restaurants in the Riverfront Complex, a \$72 million development that combines street-level retail and restaurants with condos, making it downtown's first true residential project. Just south of it one can stroll along the Napa Mill Development, newly fortified ramparts that are part flood protection and part promenade. The only liability to the serene picturesque vibe on these blocks is the river itself, which not only is prone to flooding but also tends to become a somewhat sludgy sump during summer months at low tide. Eventually, when held-up plans to dredge the river do go forward, the city will have a deeper waterway capable of handling boats year-round. "That means you could sail up, have dinner, and then go back to San Francisco," Mike De Simoni,

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## AT THE BEND IN THE RIVER

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developer of the Riverfront Complex, told me. "They were going to get these models of gondolas from Venice to make it really a romantic, beautiful place."

The theme-park metaphor is often rolled out to describe Napa Valley as a whole, and the specter of Venetian gondolas skimming the brackish waters of the river certainly brings to mind Las Vegas's Venetian casino, with its striped shirt-clad gondoliers and fake Piazza San Marco. "Napa Valley comes off like a joke," said a New York sommelier I talked with, citing the show-off tasting rooms where the architecture and design have nothing to do with the landscape. "There's some decent wine made there, but it feels second to collecting tourist dollars."

Napa's downtown, which has never had those dollars before, has a lot to celebrate as it emerges from its long doldrums. Now, the question is whether it can keep some of its working-class roots—its labor force up until a few decades ago was employed at places like Kaiser Steel and the Mare Island Naval Shipyard—while creating a downtown that both tourists and residents can enjoy.

## HOWEVER IT TURNS OUT, THERE'S NO DOUBT THAT DOWNTOWN NAPA'S SUDDEN

transformation from forlorn to filled with foot traffic has been fueled by what made the rest of the Valley so popular: dining and drinking. And nothing has propelled—or, at the very least, symbolized—the shift more than Morimoto, the namesake restaurant of the celebrity chef and restaurateur who grew to prominence on the Food Network's *Iron Chef* series. The decision to bring his first West Coast venture, which opened last July, to Napa, rather than L.A. or San Francisco, seems both brilliant and audacious. Not only is Morimoto packed every night, but also, as the first major investment here by a chef with no connection to the area (Tyler Florence followed, with Rotisserie & Wine next door), it has changed Napa's image.

"Morimoto wanted to come to California, and there's no better place than here," said De Simoni, whose property houses the restaurant. "He came out, we played golf"—the Japanese

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chef reportedly liked the weather, the riverfront, and the local produce—"and there we are."

"As soon as I heard that he was coming to town," said Meteor Vineyard's Schuler, "I thought, 'OK, this is a game changer.'" That Morimoto's Japanese, seafood-oriented menu is not subservient to Napa's number one commodity, cabernet sauvignon (though you can order a steak), makes the statement all the more powerful. As Carlin said, "If you're a chef in the U.S. right now, you've got to be considering Napa as a possible location."

Although Napa's power players are clearly excited by the arrival of Morimoto and Florence, it's hard to see those names and not think of Las Vegas, where the casinos have been almost comically taken over by celebrity chefs, with a Boulud here, a Lagasse there, and Flays, Collichios, and Pucks all around. And there's a concern that the Food Network stars may push the many unbranded chefs who likewise have recognized Napa's potential to the margins. Ken Frank moved his excellent La Toque from Rutherford to Napa in 2008, a year after Jeremy Fox left Manresa to open Ubuntu. Curtis Di Fede and Tyler Rodde, the two young chefs behind Oenotri, one of Napa's hottest new restaurants, both have roots in Napa, and returned to cook here after cutting their teeth elsewhere. The biggest debut slated for this year is Todd Humphries's; the chef recently closed his Martini House restaurant in St. Helena and will open the Kitchen Door at the Oxbow Public Market this summer.

For those who have given up San Francisco to start businesses in the Valley, the town of Napa is proving to be not as remote as they initially feared. Taylor Boetticher, who moved to Napa from Oakland in 2007 to open the Fatted Calf butchery at the Oxbow Public Market, thinks that Napa's food scene is dynamic enough to make giving up San Francisco worth it: "A lot of stuff has opened in Napa, and that's why we came here, to be in on the ground floor of all these new places." And he has found a like-minded tribe to socialize with. "There are a lot of young wine growers, farmers, and chefs to hang out with here—my kind of people," he said. "It's not the Mission District, or anything like it, but there's no shortage of things to do." ►



Alongside the restaurants are 20 urban tasting rooms, and 15 of them arrived since 2008. These newcomers have updated the concept by fusing the tasting room with a lounge-like wine bar—an advance, in my opinion, from the standby of tooling in one's car up and down Highway 29 or the Silverado Trail, ignoring the many producers who don't have their own wineries or aren't on the main roads. Just next to the new, slick Avia hotel, for example, is the John Anthony Vineyards tasting lounge, a sleek wood-and-leather space with moody lighting and by-the-glass service. A block away, Ceja Vineyards opened a similar room in February 2008, at the height of the recession. "We planned to lose money that year," Amelia Ceja told me over a glass of her family's bright, brisk sauvignon blanc, "and were just hoping to increase our wine club membership." But the room was profitable in the first year, and its plush couch and comfy chairs are now filled day and night.

**BUT WITH ITS PROJECTED GONDOLAS AND LUXURY HOTELS,** the new Napa is at risk of becoming a city of tourists unto itself. During my conversation with Steve Carlin at Oxbow, a woman at the next table leaned over and interrupted us. "I'm so interested in what you're talking about," she said. She had moved from Los Angeles a few weeks earlier and bought two houses in town, one as a rental property. "I read about Napa being a good investment in *Money* magazine," she said, "and decided the time was right." City managers acknowledge that the arrival of the heavy tourist trade and such unaccustomed wealth both enable and complicate

**"It's not the Mission District," says Napa resident Taylor Boettcher, of the Fatted Calf, "but there's no shortage of things to do."**

their efforts to shape the new downtown so that locals as well as tourists enjoy it.

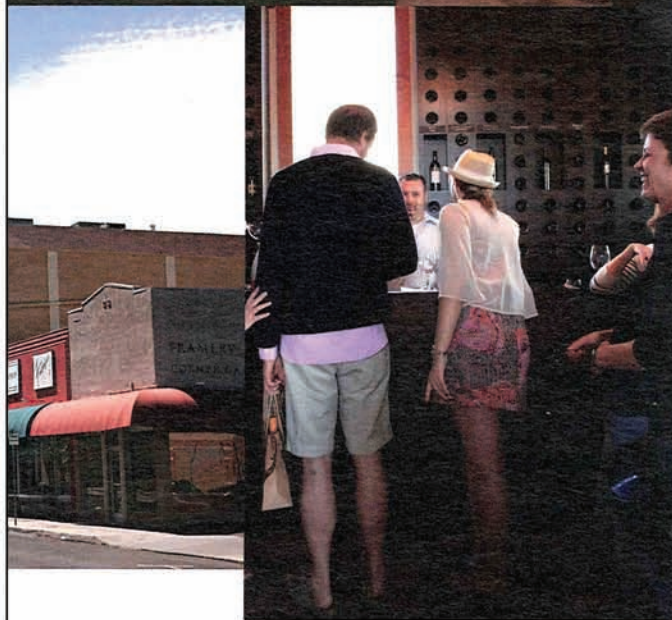
To pull that off, they will have to walk a tightrope. Smaller, more agricultural wine country towns like Sonoma and Healdsburg, one county to the west, have boomed around a historic town square, an anchor that helps maintain a sense of continuity, community, and charm. Napa doesn't have that advantage. On the other hand, there's the example set by Santa Rosa, the much-disparaged Sonoma County city that has grown rapidly while losing much of its historic identity.

Napa's method of dealing with this tension will ultimately decide how the city looks and feels. For instance, the Avia hotel became Napa's tallest building over arguments that its height (only five stories) would be out of sync with the historical scale of the city. But the mayor, Jill Techel, maintained that the hotel had to project a certain lavish quality to fit the vision of the new Napa. To accomplish an appropriate degree of luxury, "they said they had to build five stories," Mayor Techel said of the developers. "It was a big change for us."

The Avia certainly makes an impression on First Street, where more storefronts are being remade in an unsurprisingly Tuscan style that generically recalls Florence, with its ochre and sand-colored facades and arched windows. The hotel's own beige stone facade and wooden trellises have little to do with the late-19th-century architecture of such local landmarks as the opera house and the mill. Rather, like the Riverfront's garnishes, they seem



KWISSE FROM FAR LEFT: Damian May works at Oxbow Wine Merchant; newly fortified arts provide flood protection, while creating a front promenade; Morimoto's plush digs have ght a new level of luxury to town; the Vintner's ctive is the region's first multi-winery tasting , pouring wines from 18 vintners from around alley; the renovated Uptown Theater preserves of the town's historic look.





meant to invoke some cultural fantasy about sunny wine country living. The mayor defends the city's decision to transition its historic downtown to one that attracts tourists. "We struggled some, until we decided to embrace tourism, with really figuring out what our economic engine is," Techel said. She added that explaining to the community that you're doing it for the tourists requires finesse: "There needs to be an educational piece that says tourism is a good replacement, because the high-end restaurant and hotel jobs are more lucrative."

Certainly, downtown Napa is a work in progress, with a disturbing number of empty storefronts (though I was assured that many of the vacancies are simply due to standoffs between entrepreneurs and at least one dominant landlord in town). The most glaring and painful of these vacancies lies right next door to the Oxbow Public Market: the Copia Center, a sprawling, multistory complex with acres of gardens, a theater, restaurants, and seemingly no real purpose—a reminder of what can happen when ambitious plans go awry. Cofounded by the late Robert Mondavi, the center opened to much fanfare in 2001 and shut down seven years later, after accruing close to \$80 million in debt and without ever having discovered its role in the Valley's cultural landscape. Copia's failure seemed confirmation that Napa would never compete for attention alongside those quaint but ritzy neighbors farther up Highway 29. Now, however, Napa's officials seem confident that the massive complex can be repurposed.

And then there's the county jail, located directly across the street from Morimoto. "Once when we walked out of the restaurant, some prisoners called out to our 12-year-old daughter," said an

incredulous Rob Sinskey, a prominent local vintner (he owns Sinskey Vineyards), when I ran into him at Tyler Florence's cooking shop. "For Napa to really take off, they'll have to move that from right in the middle of downtown." ("It's never going to happen," his wife, chef Maria Helm Sinskey, cooed.)

Then again, perhaps these unsightly aspects suggest a protest emanating from some deeper town consciousness that refuses to care about catering to outsiders with generic architecture and celebrity chefs. Yet the emerging city changes the whole Napa valley in a compelling way. It allows St. Helena and Yountville to be just what

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they are—charming and quiet—without having to carry the burden as a source of entertainment for the entire region. It also functions as a fertile breeding ground—a transitional zone between urban San Francisco and bucolic wine country—for new facets of cuisine and culture. I used to drive past Napa because there was nothing to see. These days, for better or worse, it's becoming difficult to pass by Napa without stopping to see what's happening now. ■

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Jon Dabney behind the bar at Bounty Hunter, with a bottle of Pursuit Oakville cab at hand; on the sidewalk at Bounty Hunter, guests can pair beer-can chicken with one of the more than 400 wines on the list; the view from Farella Vineyard in Coombsville, just a few miles from downtown; enjoying a glass at the John Anthony Vineyards tasting lounge; waiting for a table at Norman Rose; Angèle, which opened in 2002, was one of the first restaurants to recognize Napa's potential. CENTER: The Vintner's Collective occupies the oldest building in Napa. It was built in 1875.

