

# VALLEY

*World-class vineyards and wineries aren't the only draw card for epicureans in California's Napa Valley – the region is a foodie's heaven, from high-class fine dining establishments to cute bakeries and statement roadside diners. Joe Yogerst runs his eye over the major players.*

# HIGHS



A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT: THE RIVERFRONT  
AT NAPA CITY IS HOME TO THE THOMAS  
RESTAURANT & FAGIANI'S BAR





MAKING TRACKS AT  
ST. HELENA, NAPA VALLEY.



COOK ST. HELENA OWNER/  
CHEF, JUDE WILMOT

NORTHERN ITALIAN FLAVORS AT COOK ST. HELENA RESTAURANT



IT'S A SUNNY SUNDAY AFTERNOON IN St. Helena and a UPS man is ambling down Main Street in his iconic brown shirt and shorts. Only this isn't your everyday delivery guy – it's comedian Will Ferrell in one of the wacky personas he trots out in public. The locals chuckle but don't mob the man. They're used to celebrities. And in many respects, St. Helena is a celebrity in its own right.

Super-hip St. Helena personifies just about everything people love about the Napa Valley – great wine and good food set against a backdrop of vineyards, Victoriana and a nearly perfect climate.

Founded in the 1850s, St. Helena weathered Prohibition better than most of the valley and in the words of one writer has preserved “a small-town coziness so American it should be bottled and sold.”

It may not be the political hub of the Napa Valley, but St. Helena is certainly ground zero when it comes to wine and dine. The town is flanked by pioneer vineyards and landmark wineries – Inglenook, Beringer, Christian Brothers, Charles Krug, Schramsberg – as well as the cutting-edge modern vintners like Cade and Napa Valley Reserve.

Napa's rarefied food scene also revolves around St. Helena. Even fast-food is shi-shi in this gourmet haven – Gott's Roadside diner is renowned for its ahi tuna burgers, sushi tacos and wines that go surprisingly well with hot dogs and fries. Seven of the valley's eight Michelin star restaurants are within five miles of

downtown St. Helena, including the only three-star eateries in California -- The Restaurant at Meadowood and The French Laundry.

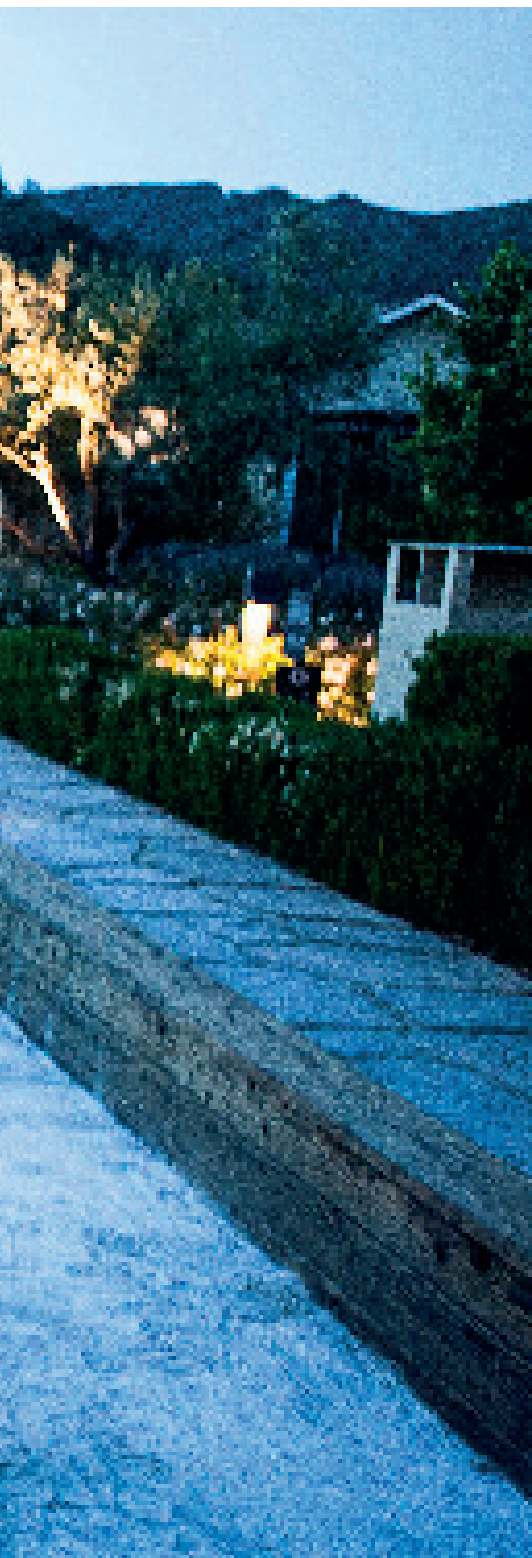
“We never ever, ever talk about Michelin stars,” says Meadowood chef Christopher Kostow. “Just because we got there once doesn't mean I'm going to hang up my knives and call it a day. There are loftier goals. There's a lot more growing to do. We are still not as good as we should be. I have 20 guys in the kitchen and you have to make them all see the big picture. One thing that's enables us to keep moving upward is my ability to articulate a vision to the guys in the kitchen.”

Tucked in a thickly wooded canyon on the outskirts of St. Helena, Meadowood is renowned as much for an elegant and intimate dining experience as the modern California cuisine that earned its Michelin tribute. The prices are also legendary: the constantly changing chef's tasting menu is \$500 per person when the eight to ten dishes are paired with local wines.

Meadowood has also carried service to new heights with an almost bespoke outlook on dining room demeanor. “The best thing we can do is listen to our guests,” Kostow continues. “We have tons of people with allergies, tons of people with dietary restrictions and to be able to take good care of those people is the true essence of hospitality. A lot of high-end restaurants have this idea that we have one menu and go fuck yourself if you don't like gluten. Which is very common now... and I think so misguided.







LEFT: SUNSET BOULES AT SOLAGE, CALISTOGA.  
ABOVE: FARMSTEAD AT LONG MEADOW RANCH

Frankly, if that's your attitude, don't charge a lot of money for it. Luxury is not about serving foie gras and truffles. Luxury is about the specificity of the idea and the flawlessness of the execution. And hopefully, if we are operating correctly, that's what we are doing."

The Farmstead restaurant in St. Helena offers a completely different take on Napa Valley dining, a rustic, down-home ambience that blends barnyard decor and incredibly creative cuisine. Part of 650-acre Long Meadow Ranch (LMR), the gourmet eatery grows its own produce, makes its own wine, honey and olive oil, and raises the livestock that eventually wind up on your plate in nouvelle California dishes like carpaccio of LMR beef with arugula, goat cheese, citrus and toasted almonds or brick-cooked chicken with rancho gordo beans, greens and salsa verde.

"We're into big flavors," says executive chef Stephan Barber. "It's really simple, straightforward cooking. We don't do a lot to the ingredients. We let them speak for themselves. I

try to get the cooks as much as possible involved in the gardens and ranch. We have the advantage of being able to go out there and picking exactly what we need every day." Born and raised in Kentucky, Barber has infused the menu with Southern touches like jambalaya (made with San Joaquin Delta crawfish), beef grillades with grits and Tabasco sauce, and Wild Turkey bourbon ice cream. "You need to eat about a quart to get a buzz," he jokes of the latter.

Staying true to its rural vibe, the Farmstead dining room is set inside an old barn decorated with antique ploughs, hay hooks, poultry feeders and other farm equipment. Pandering to locals as well as visitors, the Farmstead bar offers a weekday Growers' Happy Hour that attracts a good crowd of local vintners, farmers and ranch hands. Farmstead may not be your typical Napa Valley experience. But the atypical is what's in these days. And the offbeat blend has been a huge hit: in 2013, Long Meadow Ranch won a global award for innovative wine tourism.





GETTING FRESH AT SOLAGE, CALISTOGA



SOLAGE, CALISTOGA



FIT FOR FOOD AT THE THOMAS RESTAURANT, NAPA



DINER ROOM - GOTT'S ROADSIDE, ST. HELENA



LIGHT STOP, FAGIANI'S





MOMENTS TO SAVOR AT FRENCH BLUE, ST. HELENA



PLATTERS OF TASTE AT THE GOOSE AND GANDER, ST. HELENA



THE RESTAURANT AT MEADOWOOD'S COMFORT ZONE





THE RESTAURANT AT MEADOWOOD CHEF,  
CHRISTOPHER KOSTOW

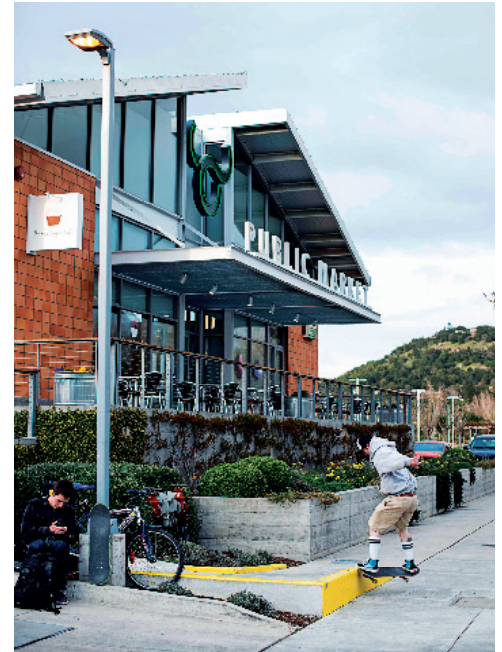
The creative vigor and entrepreneurial spirit you find in St. Helena and Yountville has spread all the way down the valley, reenergizing towns that missed out on earlier waves of the wine revolution. Downtrodden and largely ignored a decade ago, Napa City has emerged in recent years as the new place to hang in the valley, especially its cool riverside bars and restaurants.

Founded in 1847 when California was still part of Mexico, the town flourished during the Gold Rush as a place to guzzle and gamble, the waterfront lined with steamboats from San Francisco. The modern wine rush shifted attention to St Helena, Yountville and towns up the valley. But Napa refused to roll over the die.

Napa City's resurrection started in the early 2000s with the redevelopment of the old brick warehouses of the Riverfront district and Napa Mill into trendy restaurants, shops, waterfront housing and the Napa River Inn hotel. The vibe spilled over onto Main Street, where historic buildings that were boarded up just a few years ago morphed into hip hangouts.

The Thomas restaurant and Fagiani's Bar, located in a wonderfully restored historic building on the riverfront, personify the renaissance of Napa City. Named after a boarding house which once occupied the three-story brick structure, The Thomas serves up an intriguing range of California cuisine. Among the specialties are grilled heritage pork chops with a pear-saffron glaze and Tuscan kale; artichoke chips with green garlic aioli sauce; and wild mushroom mousse with a homemade whiskey jelly and sourdough bread. Before or after dinner, grab a cocktail in the ground floor or breezy roof garden.

"The thing that enticed me to move back to the valley was the ability to get in touch



INTERESTING FINDS ARE AT OXBOW  
PUBLIC MARKET, NAPA CITY

with local farmers and actually grow your own food," says Jason Kupper, chef de cuisine at The Thomas and a veteran of celebrity chef Thomas Keller's Bouchon restaurant in Yountville. "Our food is globally inspired but with little twists or spins like za'atar oir chimichurri sauce or Aleppo peppers. We want to create dishes that stay in people's memory."

The sporting ladies and gambling houses of the past aren't back. But the city's riverfront area flaunts plenty of other distractions including summer evening concerts in the Veteran's Memorial Park amphitheatre and headliner comedy and concerts at the Uptown Theatre, a meticulously restored Art Deco gem on Third Street.







*“The valley has everything at its disposal for a chef. Anyone can buy organic vegetables and serve farm-to-table. But to commit yourself to trying to understand those things and apply the resources to them . . . it’s a very lofty enterprise, a very ambitious one and a very challenging one. But in the end the product is very specific, very special. A grand stage is what this is. Napa Valley is the new definition of luxury.”*

CHEF CHRISTOPHER KOSTOW



Latest addition to the riverside scene is the Oxbow Public Market. Modeled after the highly successful Ferry Building Marketplace in San Francisco, the aromatic emporium features dozens of different artisan food outlets and organic produce stalls. The selection ranges from duck, spinach and goat cheese tacos to handcrafted chocolates, ice cream, charcuterie meats and fresh oysters.

"We're down at Oxbow every day," says Kupper. "The kitchen staff meet early in the morning and we go as a team. You see a lot of interesting produce there. Like the Asian pears we buy from this guy who sells the produce his parents grow on a small farm. And free range organic eggs from heritage chickens. We like to support small, local farmers."

"We were able to do something really special here," says Kostow of the region's evolution into a culinary destination. "The valley has everything at its disposal for a chef. Anyone can buy organic vegetables and serve farm-to-table. But to commit yourself to trying to understand those things and apply the resources to them . . . it's a very lofty enterprise, a very ambitious one and a very challenging one. But in the end the product is very specific, very special. A grand stage is what this is. Napa Valley is the new definition of luxury." ■