

Carneros on a Whim



The Carneros Inn poolside table courtesy Glodow•Nead Communications

By Annette Gallagher Weisman

Following a serendipitous path can be more rewarding than a guidebook, especially for destinations where it's difficult to make a bad decision – like Napa Valley. That's how my husband and I found ourselves touring for a day in Napa's Carneros region en route to San Francisco.

On our previous trip, we had stayed in Calistoga and toured virtually every winery on the Silverado Trail. This time Yountville was a tempting choice. The town is a foodie's dream: home to three of Thomas Keller's restaurants – The French Laundry; his bistro, Bouchon; and his more casual venture, Ad Hoc.

Impromptu decisions are great if all the dots connect, but they didn't in this case, and finding no vacancies in Yountville, we sought another location and found Churchill Manor, a bed and breakfast within walking distance of downtown Napa.

Arriving in the early afternoon, we buzzed around town looking for the perfect place to eat lunch. After all, being in the land of good food and wine, why waste the opportunity for a truly "happy" meal.

Parking karma ensued opposite a restaurant named Grace's Table, a family-owned bistro that prides itself on its "Global Kitchen." Diners' faces glowed with that lucky-to-be-alive expression, enjoying dishes ranging from Argentine empanadas to Tuna Niçoise plus unnecessary desserts one simply had to have.

Interested in exploring somewhere new, I asked fellow diner Dave Harmon about wineries he might recommend. Serendipity prevailed. He suggested touring nearby Carneros, where he's one of three partners in a small winery. We thanked him and promised to call first if we had time to visit.

The historic Churchill Manor was an oasis after a long day. True, if you are into Wassily chairs rather than rockers it might not suit your taste, but a claw-footed tub, a three-sided veranda, an inclusive bountiful breakfast and a comfortable, friendly ambience is hard to beat.

The town of Napa has a wide array of dining options, but we chose Morimoto's for dinner because I had never been to any of this famous Iron Chef's restaurants. The *piece de resistance* that evening was a large "crispy whole fish," which lay on the plate with his mouth and eyes wide open, made only slightly less intimidating by the accompanying spicy tofu sauce and papaya salad.



Photo by Annette Gallagher Weisman

A gourmet three-course breakfast at the Churchill Manor the next morning was worth lingering over. Guests' lively conversations bantered about the sun room as they discussed various day trips, including winery tours via limousine and another via the Napa Valley Wine Train, but we stuck to our plan of visiting Carneros.

It's a wonder Los Carneros Viticultural Area, established in 1983, doesn't have a split personality. At the confluence of Napa and Sonoma counties, Carneros is claimed by both regions. And despite being only 45 minutes from San Francisco, it feels rural and laid-back. The climate, too, is distinctive with its cool winds, thin soil and typically less rainfall, and is known world wide for its sparkling wine, Chardonnay, and Pinot Noir.

With many wineries and only one day to visit, we did not stop at wineries familiar to us. We even passed by the elegant mansion at Domaine Carneros, a replica of the Tattinger family's 18th-century Chateau de la Marquetterie. We could see visitors on its beautiful terrace, no doubt tasting the sparkling wine it's known for. Still, we drove resolutely on. Discovery was the name of our game.

We finally stopped at Bouchaine Vineyards, the oldest continually operating winery in the region. While Bouchaine was established in 1981, grapes have been grown on this site since the late 1800s. It principally

produces Chardonnay and Pinot Noir on its 103 acres, though it sources grapes from neighboring vineyards too. We sampled tastings from the Estate and Bacchus collections, taking note of our favorites to order later. The view from the veranda of the vines and San Pablo Bay in the distance was beautifully serene. Before leaving we asked if they knew Dave Harmon. They not only knew him, he made his wine there!

For lunch, we discovered The Boon Fly Café, a red barn-like building on Sonoma Highway, where we had fantastic American



Photo courtesy Glodow • Nead Communications

Kobe burgers with truffle fries. The café is part of a luxe resort called The Carneros Inn, which has another superb restaurant, Farm, open to the public. With its spa and 86 individual cottages, The Carneros Inn is luxurious and discreet, a good choice for celebrities known to stay from time to time as you can't even pass through the front gate without a code.

After lunch, we headed for Artesa Vineyards & Winery, situated on the highest point in Carneros. The glass-fronted building set into the hill, with a myriad of fountains and other architectural features, is eclipsed only by its stunning views. Opened in 1991 as Cordorniu Napa, it was dedicated to sparkling wine production. But now you can taste a wide variety of wines including Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Tempranillo and Late Harvest Gewurztraminer to be enjoyed indoors or outside on the patio.

Later that afternoon, we arrived at our day's final destination: Carneros della Notte, Dave Harmon's boutique winery occupying just six acres. Dave was there to greet us. He told us a bit about his fascinating life, including being a helicopter pilot, Michael Mondavi's chauffeur and the former owner of wine.com. A helicopter on the grounds was a tell-tale sign of his colorful pursuits.

Della Notte means "of the night," and that's when these grapes are harvested, "when the juice chemistry is more stable." We enjoyed the wines – mostly Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon – and were intrigued by a bottle with a uniquely carved etching of astronaut Buzz Aldrin. This memorable tasting was enhanced by



Photo by Annette Gallagher Weisman

the beautiful day and the warm greeting we received along with an array of cheeses and charcuterie. Sitting at this outdoor table one felt living in this region must be sublime.

Our visit in Napa was short, but we couldn't have enjoyed it more. What could be nicer on a summer's day than driving around Carneros with views of verdant rolling hills, acres of ripening vines, and occasional sightings of the San Francisco Bay shimmering in the sunlight? Over dinner that evening at Celadon in Napa, we agreed how lucky we were that the road not taken previously turned out to be the best way for us to go. 🍷



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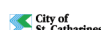
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