



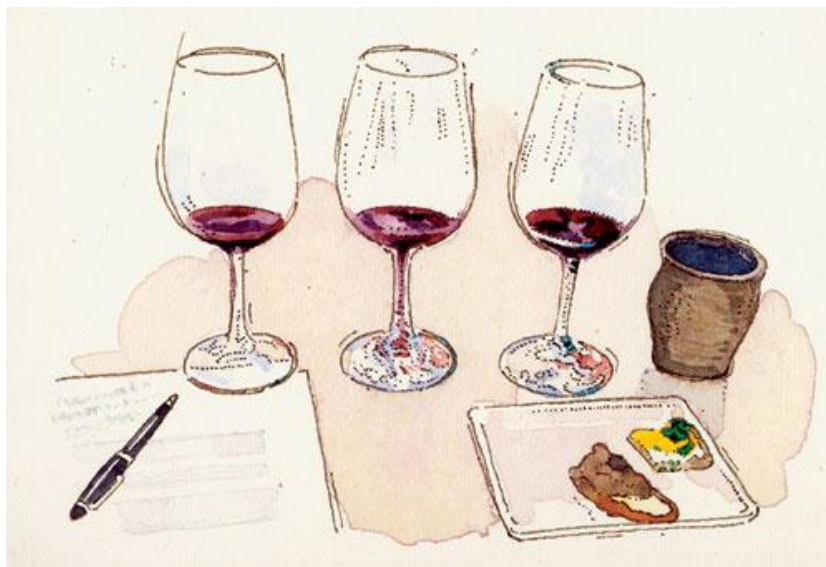
## DAY1

Fresh off a flight into San Francisco International Airport, pick up a rental car and head north on Highway 101. You should cross the Golden Gate Bridge (named for the Gold Rush, not its rust-colored paint job) to arrive at your first tasting appointment around .You'll pass cow farms.

It's said that winemaking is 45 percent cleaning, 50 percent moving stuff around, and 5 percent drinking beer. So top off the day with a pint.

Highway 121 hangs a right at Big Bend and takes you east into Napa County. If you've never been here before, you may well be surprised by your surroundings, since it will quickly become apparent that many of the county's residents can't afford its high-priced wines. Locals call these parts Napalachia, a term perfectly embodied by the broken helicopter in a yard near your resort, the Carneros Inn ,where each cottage comes with its own wood-burning fireplace, entirely private heated porch, and outdoor shower.

About seven miles past Big Bend, turn left at a traffic light onto Old Sonoma Road. Richmond has arranged for the folks at Artesa Vineyards & Winery to greet you with a complimentary glass of sparkling wine at their hilltop aerie: When the Spanish Codorníu family decided to build an American outpost; they cut the top off the highest point on their new property, inserted a winery, and replanted the grass on the roof. The result resembles a half-submerged submarine.



Each tasting is one ounce of wine, so five tastings equal a full glass. Feel free to use the spit bucket, and take notes so you'll remember what you taste.

If you've never "tasted" wine before, keep one thing in mind: Taste is actually the last sense you use to appreciate wine. First, look at its color. Newer vintages tend to have a deeper, purple hue; a pinot noir will be paler than a cabernet sauvignon.



If it's a sparkling wine, watch it effervesce—the smaller the bubbles, the higher the quality of the wine. If you're tasting a still wine, swirl the glass. This pushes the liquid up the sides of the glass, increasing surface area and thus evaporation, maximizing the aromas, also known as the nose, or bouquet. You'll find that it's easier to get a graceful swirl when you leave the glass on the counter and make circles with your hand resting on the base. (By the second night of the trip, you'll find yourself swirling your water glass at dinner.) Dip your nose into the glass and think about what you're smelling. Cherries? Blackberries? Leather? Cigar smoke? Then tip a bit of wine into your mouth and let it glide over your tongue, hitting all your taste buds. Some people suck in a bit of air at this point, to further aerate the wine. Finally, either swallow the wine or spit it into the available bucket. Don't be afraid to ask whatever questions come to mind, no matter how silly they seem. After all, many wineries call their tasting staff "wine educators."



The bottle on the right, known as a Bordeaux bottle, is used for cabernet sauvignon, merlot, malbec, and sauvignon blanc. The one on the left, a Burgundy bottle, is used for chardonnay and pinot noir.

## **Day 2**

Take your two o'clock appointment at Bouchaine Winery, a classic Carneros chardonnay and pinot maker in the part of the valley known as the flatlands, where rolling fields of vines stretch in every direction. In contrast to the rather formal tone at Artesa, where a recording of chanting monks plays constantly in the barrel room.

Your appointment is just a few minutes away through a patchwork of grape fields at Ceja Vineyards, voted the best new winery in 2002 by the San Francisco Wine Appreciation Guild. Chances are you'll meet Ariel Ceja (pronounced SAY-ha) behind the tasting bar in the family's home; Ceja is the son and nephew of Mexican immigrants who started out working in the fields here and now own 113 acres of grapes..



Most Napa vines are pruned into a T-shape and attached to a trellis (as shown on the left). Some older vines, though, are still head-pruned (as on the right), which forces the plant to support itself.

Once you've had your fill of Ceja's wine and spirit, head back toward the Carneros Inn. The restaurant's exterior approximates its name, but the dining room is San Francisco chic, with neon-backlit wine racks and a glass-fronted kitchen that turns out simple but elegant dishes highlighting local products. If it's a romantic occasion, request one of the leather banquettes by the fireplace.



The best part of the hot air balloon ride is the silence; you can hear dogs barking from hundreds of feet in the air.

### **DAY3**

You are expected in Yountville at six this morning, dressed in layers. Why? You've got a sunrise appointment for a ride with Above the West Ballooning). About an hour later, you'll return to a convenient landing spot for a sparkling-wine breakfast.

Soon enough, it'll be 10 a.m., time to head to your first tasting of the day, at Frazier Winery. The route here will take you past residential sections of the town of Napa (be prepared to share the road with farm equipment and horse trailers). The hills are dotted with cattle and wine estates, and the manicured greens you'll see on your way to Frazier are the Napa Valley Country Club's fairways.

Caves are perfect for storing and aging wine. They maintain a temperature of about 58 degrees, with high humidity levels that reduce evaporation.

. More promising is the Oxbow Public Market , next door, which just opened last December and is slowly attracting local purveyors to its artisanal food stalls inside and farm stands outside.



If it's more wine you're after, Patz & Hall will be an entirely different tasting from the others so far. You might think you're at the dentist when you enter the tasting salon—an impression that wouldn't be entirely inaccurate, since one of the owners was once a dental hygienist. The salon is located in a corporate suite outside downtown Napa, and there's no view of undulating grapevines because, well, Patz & Hall doesn't own any grapes. Instead, it contracts with a number of growers to produce the fruit for its chardonnays and pinot noirs, many of which are single-vineyard bottlings.

Growers use wind machines—in this case, fashioned from an airplane's propeller and engine—to blow cold air away from the grapes during a freeze.

The salon feels like a rich friend's pied-à-terre (although you'll find portraits of the winery's star growers instead of family photos), and you'll sit down across the table from Patz & Hall's wine educator for a private sampling of three whites and three reds. Unlike at many other tastings, all are poured in separate glasses so that you can compare, say, the 2002 Mendocino Chardonnay's tropical fruit bouquet to the 2005 Carneros Chardonnay's floral nose.

The tasting table at Swanson, which seats eight, is made of Moroccan thuya wood inlaid with African agate.

Keep an eye out for Opus One on the right. It's the child of the 1979 partnership between Napa's original wine ambassador, Robert Mondavi, and Bordeaux powerhouse Baron Philippe de Rothschild—and a rather odd-looking child at that, emerging from a grassy field like a half-excavated Mayan temple. Charging \$30 for a single pour, Opus One is overpriced and overrated. So too is Far Niente, hidden from view to your left, where the tour guide's spiel is as slick as a Seattle street. Although Swanson's rococo salon might seem similarly pretentious at first, the tongue-in-cheek paintings and exuberantly pink walls are anything but. This is the Swanson clan of frozen--entrée fame—now a big player in the Napa wine world. Swanson Vineyards started in 1987 with merlot—an unusual choice for this part of the valley—and today produces a wide range of wines. Its merlot, pinot grigio, and "Alexis" cabernet blend are available nationwide, while the chardonnay, rosato, sangiovese, syrah, petit syrah, and dessert wines are available only through the salon and wine club. You'll be able to try about six different bottlings at the tasting this morning, each paired with caviar, cheese, or chocolate.

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That's not wine: Round Pond stains the middle of its oak barrels red to mask the messy wine drips that often occur.

Beaulieu Vineyard's newest (and as yet still family-owned) neighbor is Round Pond, a seven-year-old producer of cabernet sauvignon and nebbiolo. Its brand-new winery building, sitting at the end of a palm-lined drive, is the valley's most recent addition of note. Your 3:30 engagement is just across the road at Round Pond's olive oil operation, but take a few minutes to check out the neighboring Napa Valley Grapevine Wreath Company. Here, a grape-growing family turns



its refuse into artwork: After the vines are pruned each winter, owner Sally Wood and her team weave the cabernet cuttings into wreaths, wine holders, and even reindeer.

The sombrero is one of the Napa Valley Grapevine Wreath Company's most popular designs and an ode to the many Mexican laborers who keep the valley running.

When Ryan MacDonnell, daughter of Round Pond owners Bob and Jan MacDonnell, declared that she wanted to make olive oil, they brought in a Florentine mill master, Marco Mugelli. He trained Ryan and her brother, Miles, and oversaw the installation of a full complement of Pieralisi mills, crushers, and extractors, thus creating the Round Pond Olive Mill. No olive spends more than 45 minutes traveling from tree to mill, and that freshness is evident in the little blue glasses of oil you'll be asked to swallow straight, as olive oil judges do in Italy. You'll also be given tastes of the company's blood orange and Meyer lemon simple syrups, as well as two red wine vinegars (no, not the runoff from the Round Pond wine). Once you've sampled the unadulterated oils, your host will bring out trays full of cheese, bread, and produce straight from the MacDonnells' biodynamic garden for a midday feast.

Then it's time to head up-valley along the winding Silverado Trail and check in to Napa's grande dame, Auberge du Soleil . Opened as a restaurant in 1981 and expanded to include a hotel four years later, the French-flavored property is nestled into a hillside along the Vaca Range. The two rooms in the main house are the smallest and might get a little noise from the restaurant underneath, but you'll save money and get the best sight lines on the vineyards.

At the Round Pond Olive Mill tasting, you'll sprinkle red-wine vinegar onto a sugar cube, which neutralizes the sourness so you can taste just the fruit.

After you've settled in, head back to sleepy Yountville to dine at the restaurant of Auberge du Soleil alum Richard Reddington. His two-year-old Redd is minimalist but unpretentious when it comes to both design and dishes. Consider putting your fate in the chef's capable hands with the five-course tasting menu, and, if ordering à la carte, leave room for the scrumptious desserts. It would have been more convenient to stay at Yountville's Vintage Inn tonight, but most hotels in the valley require a two-night minimum, and you'll want to be situated farther north for the rest of your trip.

#### **Day 4 (Sunday): Northern Napa Valley**

If you associate the Beringer name only with white zinfandel, Dean Busquaert would like to have a word with you. He'll be hosting your 10 A.M. private tasting of the brand's top tier of reserve wines—chardonnays, merlots, petite syrahs, and cabernet sauvignons—made from the best lots of the company's grapes. Many cost a great deal more than that white zin. Reversing one more common misconception, Busquaert will share his unusual philosophy of food-and-wine pairing: No, red wine doesn't always go with red meat. Beringer Vineyards is the oldest continually operating winery in the valley—it produced sacramental wines during Prohibition—and was the first to offer tours back in 1934. The Rhine House, the rambling Victorian that greets you on



your way up the driveway, was built by Frederick Beringer in 1884 to remind him of his family's home back in Germany.

Your tasting will take place in the Beringer family's wine cellar, deep within the hand-dug caves (there are bottles here from the 1940s and '50s)—or in the Rhine House, once it's completed a renovation in a few months. As if to outdo the Beringers, the gothic Greystone Winery was built next door in 1889; at the time, it was the largest stone winery in the world. Today it houses the Culinary Institute of America's California campus. And if you peek across Highway 29, you'll see the much newer industrial facility where Beringer now churns out one million cases of wine every year.

Chef Todd Humphries is famous for his mushroom dishes, and wine director Rob Renteria sorts his selections into such whimsical categories as Women Winemakers We Love and what's New in the Old World.

The J.C. Weinberger Winery—now the William Cole Winery—is steeped in history. After its founder became St. Helena's first murder victim, his wife was anointed the town's first female winemaker.

From here, you might want to stroll a mile up the History Trail to Bothe-Napa Valley State Park, where you can hike among towering redwoods for a few hours, or try your luck getting into William Cole Vineyards.

You'll pass right by the aforementioned Charles Krug's winery to get to your 5 P.M. cooking class at the home of chefs DJ and Kent Nielsen, who live about 20 minutes away in a breathtaking spot overlooking Napa Valley. Whether they are sausage stuffing or cheese making). They'll then serve you the results—along with complementary wines—while you watch the sun dip below the valley's far horizon

#### **Day 5 (Monday):**

Perhaps you'll recognize the "Candle-log-ra" light fixtures from the Martini House: Both the restaurant and the winery are owned by culinary entrepreneur Pat Kuleto, who has six other restaurants in the Bay Area..

The livestock you'll see grazing on the Kuleto Estate are raised for "culinary purposes."

Others had deemed the steep, scrubby hillsides unplantable, but winemaker Dave Lattin has coaxed delicious cabernet sauvignon, sangiovese, syrah, zinfandel, and rosato out of them. Your



appointment grants you a food-and-wine tasting and a tour of the grounds, including a barnyard full of sheep, turkeys, and rabbits..

Drive another mile or so up the Silverado Trail to Kelham Vineyards where the last tasting of your trip awaits. Ebullient mother hen Susanna Kelham will personally present you with a lavish food-and-wine pairing to enjoy on the family's patio, overlooking 10 acres of cabernet. Husband Rawson Kelham has been farming 60 additional acres down in Oakville, near Swanson Vineyards, for 47 years. His cabernet, merlot, petit verdot, and sauvignon blanc grapes used to be bottled by Cakebread, Mondavi, and others but now go into the Kelhams' own wines, crafted by sons Hamilton and Ronald. Especially interesting are the vertical tastings (which means you'll be trying different vintages of the same wine) of cabernet sauvignon and merlot.

You have dinner reservations tonight at the hotel's Michelin-starred restaurant But first linger on the terrace with a drink for a last glimpse of the valley, to savor all that you've seen, smelled, and tasted over the past few days.