

# ART ON THE GRAPEVINE

An influx of urban exiles to Napa's vineyard-latticed hills has culminated in appointment-only art collections and design-driven hotels to complement the cult vintages and cutting-edge cuisine. Josh Sens reports.

The vineyard-latticed hills of Napa Valley, an hour north of San Francisco, tend towards the bucolic year-round: the pink and white blossoms of spring make way for mustard blooms in summer and fade to glorious purple and yellow-green hues in November, when fruit hangs heavy on the vine. This is the heart of California's wine country, where agrarian roots run deep into the rocky soil, and where, in some places, the vistas have scarcely changed since the pioneering winemakers took up residence in the 1960s.

Yet for all its tranquil trappings, Napa has never been a static idyll; and now more than ever, the valley is alive with cosmopolitan currents. Increasing numbers of urban exiles romanced by the promise of a laid-back lifestyle – and usually armed with fortunes made in other fields – have settled amid the vineyards, bringing with them a demand for cultural sophistication, and sometimes creating it themselves. As a result, gone are the days when the only

prized local collections were of the kind best stored in temperature-controlled cellars. Museum-worthy exhibitions, accessible to the public by appointment only, have come to grace the walls of secretive "art caves" and ornament the grounds of exclusive wineries. And some wineries are beginning more and more to resemble, well, museums, their striking silhouettes occasionally the handiwork of prominent

American architects – among them Frank Gehry, whose wavy, woven-roofed Hall winery in the town of St Helena is currently under phase three of construction.

Wine country still retains much of its earthy essence; arbour-shaded picnic tables and quaint farmhouse tasting rooms remain an intrinsic part of the scenery (even if some of the other farmhouses on the surrounding hills sell for \$4m and \$5m



as a matter of course). But the region has evolved into a sort of hybrid, with signs of a newly urbane present grafting itself ever more conspicuously onto its rural past.

"The trend [at wineries] is to offer attractions that are experiential, not just transactional," says Michael Polenske, proprietor of Ma(i)sonry, an inventive art and wine collective in a restored stone farmhouse in downtown Yountville (the most

visited of the wine country's towns, which are strung along Highway 29). A former San Francisco-based financial adviser, Polenske opened Ma(i)sonry in 2008, the most recent addition to a stable of Napa assets that includes Blackbird Vineyards, the winery he purchased in 2003. The collective is what Polenske calls a "living gallery", designed to enhance the pleasures of art appreciation while turning the traditional tasting room on its head. Guests sample rarefied, small-production wines while lounging on leather couches or milling about the two-storey gallery space. Recent rotating exhibits have ranged from prominent Californian figurative artists to an installation by the Paris-based sculptor Jedd Novatt (represented in London by Tim Jefferies' Mayfair gallery, Hamiltons); and a selection of vintage Eames and Bertioia furniture is for sale as well. "In the past, you had more of the mom-and-pop operations, where you'd simply fling open your doors and let people taste your wine," says Polenske. "Now vintners are saying, 'Let's

Main picture: the Hess Art Collection Museum houses works by Dutch artist Armando (far left) and Robert Rauschenberg (from right, *Empire I*, 1961, *Tabernacle Fuss*, 1992, *Untitled* from the *Urban Bourbon* series, 1973, *Intermission*, 1996). Inset: the bucolic setting of Dana Estate.





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give them something different – let’s get Frank Gehry to design our winery instead.”

Those for whom the art trumps the wine are in the game, too. Ron Wornick is a former food scientist (among other achievements he invented freeze-dried ice cream for NASA astronauts) who retired to wine country with his wife, Anita, in 1995, conspicuously minus the usual winemaking ambitions. What interested the Wornicks was their collection, which includes work that has gone on loan to Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts and the American Craft Museum in New York, among others. Abstract wood carvings by Peter Voulkos, fanciful glass fixtures by Dale Chihuly, sculptures by the Colombian artist Olga de Amaral, and other works colonise their property so completely that they spill into the courtyard and the garden.

The wine the Wornicks produced, more or less on a lark, from grapes already on the premises (they let their grandchildren stamp them in basins), was tapped in 2005 after several wine industry colleagues informed Ron that his land had some of the most prized soil in Napa Valley. After hiring a skilled winemaker the couple launched the Seven Stones label and in 2008, its maiden release, a 2005 cabernet sauvignon, was declared a “rising star” by *Wine Spectator* magazine. By making an advance appointment, visitors can admire the Wornicks’ world-class art collection as well as the lush tannins and dark berry notes of one of California’s finest small-growth cabernets.

Still others are making news well beyond the Valley borders, even if they’re not interested in generating publicity. When prominent San Francisco collectors Norah and Norman Stone (the son of billionaire insurance magnate W. Clement Stone) began looking for a space to house the largest pieces in their collection a few years ago, they

found themselves in Napa Valley, where they eventually commissioned the building of an “art cave” – a structure unlike any other in wine country, and perhaps not replicated anywhere in the world. Cut through limestone rock, its dimensions are larger than most wine caves (at 26ft, roughly twice the height), its lighting is gallery-quality and its walls are vertical rather than rounded. The current installation of the collection – it rotates every few months – features conceptual works by emerging artists, such as a sculpture of a crouching figure composed of lights by Jorge Pardo, a word painting series by New York artist Ricci Albenda and a canvas by the late Steven Parrino, whose work has been exhibited at Palais de Tokyo in Paris and the Whitney Biennale in New York. Lest anyone harbour confusion about the level of seriousness the Stones bring to their endeavour, appointments to view the cave are restricted to curators and collectors bearing an introduction.

Like selling art, producing boutique wines isn’t really an intuitive path to quick profit, the \$175-a-bottle price tag on the Wornicks’ Seven Stones cabernet notwithstanding. At least not in Napa, where an acre vine plot can fetch as much as \$400,000. But as locals are fond of saying: around here, the best way to make a small fortune is to start with a large one. And many new arrivals come armed with just that, among them Hi Sang Lee, a Korea-based wine importer and food



distributor. In 2005 Lee purchased three prized vineyard sites in the Rutherford, St Helena and Mount Howell appellations, then pulled out all the stops in his quest to produce collection-worthy cabernet. He hired Philippe Melka, a French-born winemaker much esteemed in the Valley for his mastery of elegant bordeaux-style blends. He also enlisted Howard Backen, the architect behind several celebrated Napa wineries (cult cabernet producers Harlan and Ovid among them), to handle the design. Lee gave Backen what amounted to a blank cheque and a simple mandate: “Make me a really nice winery,” recalls Backen.

Backen came through with the Valley’s most stirring new attraction – accessible, like Seven Stones, only by appointment. Dana Estates in the St Helena appellation is built around a 19th-century farmhouse fronting a courtyard that’s balanced with “elements of fire and water”, as Backen says (fountain to the left; hearth to the right). Beyond it, a copper-roofed rotunda, home to Lee’s expansive private wine collection, stands at the nexus of divergent hallways, one leading to a library of Zen-like calm, the other to a clean-lined tasting room. A trip here is the antithesis of a tourist pit stop: tastings are few and far between and scheduled one at a time, while bookings in small groups for longer sessions result in an experience that has the feel of a private house party. It’s a sophisticated, filmic setting, without intrusions; the effect is one of being in the lair of a Bond

villain blessed with exceedingly good taste, and perhaps an oenology degree.

These convergences of art, architecture and wine aren’t without precedent in the Valley. In 1970 Margrit Mondavi (wife of Robert, founding father of the Napa wine industry) mounted a 5,000sq ft gallery on the estate that bears the family name. She still curates exhibitions, which evolve every two months and showcase works by the likes of Wayne Thiebaud and Earl Thollander.

Nearly two decades after the Mondavi gallery opened, Jan Shrem, a Lebanese-born former publishing magnate, christened Clos Pegase – a whimsical winery designed by Michael Graves, an elder statesman of American postmodernism. The building’s stone porticos and pawn-shaped pillars give way to sculpture gardens with works by Richard Serra, Henry Moore and Francis Bacon. Clos Pegase is open to the public without appointment, as is the Hess Art Collection Museum at the Hess Collection Winery, a three-storey showcase of contemporary art that was unveiled in 1989. Housed in the space are expressionist works by Robert Motherwell, photorealistic paintings by Swiss artist Franz Gertsch, and an installation of melted and cracked rocks by Andy Goldsworthy. And Swiss architecture giants Herzog & de Meuron completed work on Dominus Estate in the mid-Valley (sadly not open to the public) in 1997. But while these have been viable sidelights to tasting experiences – perfectly diverting to look at in between fruit-note comparisons – Seven Stones, Ma(i)sonry and Dana Estates have woven art and architecture into the Napa Valley experience in a more integrated way.

The increasingly worldly profile of those who come to experience Napa’s beauty has, of course, had more predictable – but no less welcome – reverberations on the hotel and restaurant scenes. Though Napa’s tradition of culinary excellence is hardly new, just how rapidly, and successfully, it has expanded is testified by the editors of the 2010 *Michelin Guide* for San Francisco, who were compelled to bestow a minor star-shower upon the Valley and, in many cases, upon its recent arrivals. One went to Ubuntu, a cult favourite of US food critics which opened in 2007 – a meat-free restaurant (the chefs use eggs and dairy but no other animal products) that doubles as a yoga studio (endeavour to refrain from eye-rolling until you’ve sampled the food, which is sublime). Another landed on Redd in Yountville, where chef Richard Reddington deals in contemporary Californian dishes. Quite predictably, the brightest constellation – three stars – landed just a few doors down, on Thomas Keller’s venerated French



Top: sculpture by Richard Deutsch at Seven Stones and (above) its cult cabernet sauvignon. Right: Ma(i)sonry winery in Yountville.

Laundry, where a signature dish called "oysters and pearls" – oysters, sturgeon caviar, tapioca sabayon – kicks off a nine-course tasting menu that lasts as long as some endurance sports. On a less rarefied level is his bistro, Bouchon, which opened in 1998, and two years ago Keller expanded his local reach yet again with a wildly popular family-style take on the all-American diner, Ad Hoc; both are on the same street as The French Laundry.

St Helena also has a cluster of recent openings to rival Yountville's. They include Market (wholesome Californian classics) and Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen, another diner-esque experience tweaked and refined for the New Yorkers and Angelenos who patronise it as habitually as locals.

Alongside the region's fine wine, food and art are some of California's (indeed, the US's) finest resorts, many of which have opened up and down Highway 29 in the past three years. Like the Valley's private art initiatives, they set new aesthetic standards for the region, with resolutely contemporary designs in distinct contrast to the styles that have come to characterise Napa lodgings (namely, overwrought French-Tuscan provincial manor and rustic-twee B&B). Solage, at the north of end of the Valley in the hot-spring-rich surrounds of Calistoga, has sleek minimalist rooms to complement the smart geyser-fed swimming pool (and Solbar, a Michelin-starred casual-chic bistro that puts a locavore spin on Californian cooking).

Calistoga Ranch, a sister property to Solage, is a significantly more luxurious affair; the resort's 48 free-standing lodges



tucked into the pine-shaded foothills offer refined and utterly private refuge, with outsized fireplaces, outdoor showers and expansive cedar patios that serve well for stargazing. Among the other on-property perks: a full-service spa secreted in a wooded canyon and use of a 550SL Mercedes Benz sedan.

Take the Merc for a spin on the Silverado Trail, a slim two-lane road that winds along the sylvan east side of the valley, and you reach the Poetry Inn, high in the hills overlooking the Stags Leap district, one of

**Top: art in the Stonescape "art cave" by Blake Rayne (on wall) and Scott Lyall (installation).**

Napa's most esteemed appellations. The inn itself has just five royally appointed suites with terraces overlooking the whole of the upper Valley; in the morning you can sit in your robe and enjoy the quintessentially Northern Californian sight of hot-air balloons rising through a thick blanket of ground fog on the plain below, over a three-course organic breakfast.

Napa's newest luxury resort, however, opened last February with top-tier credentials. Bardessono has a downtown Yountville address and eco bona fides firmly in keeping with the prevailing ethos in this part of the Golden State: solar panels provide the property with 40 per cent of its energy, the water in your bath is warmed by geothermals, panels of hydroponic

plants scale walls in the public spaces. But it's the strikingly contemporary design that most distinguishes Bardessono – wide swathes of travertine and local limestone meet at dynamically severe angles, and walls of floor-to-ceiling glass allow indoors and out to merge. It's chic, understated and undeniably worldly – yet another indication of a valley coming rather nicely of age. ♦

#### ARTFUL HARVESTS

Napa Valley is temperate year-round. Harvest season is late summer into autumn (August-October; dates vary).

**VINEYARDS: Clos Pegase**, 1060 Dunawear Lane, Calistoga (+1707-942 4918; [www.clospegase.com](http://www.clospegase.com)).

**Dana Estates**, +1707-963 4365; [www.danaestates.com](http://www.danaestates.com). **Dominus Estate**, [www.dominusestate.com](http://www.dominusestate.com).

**Hall**, 401 St Helena Highway South, St Helena (+1707-967 2626; [www.hallwines.com](http://www.hallwines.com)).

**The Hess Collection**, 4411 Redwood Road, Napa (+1707-255 1144; [www.hesscollection.com](http://www.hesscollection.com)).

**Ma(i)sonry**, 6711 Washington Street, Yountville (+1707-944 0889; [www.maisonry.com](http://www.maisonry.com)).

**Robert Mondavi Winery**, Highway 29, Oakville (+1888-766 6328; [www.robertmondaviwinery.com](http://www.robertmondaviwinery.com)).

**Seven Stones**, +1707-963 0993; [www.sevenstonewinery.com](http://www.sevenstonewinery.com).

**Stonescape**, [www.stonescapewine.com](http://www.stonescapewine.com).

**HOTELS:** prices are for a double room per night B&B. **Bardessono**, 6526 Yount Street, Yountville (+1707-204 6000; [www.bardessono.com](http://www.bardessono.com)), from \$550.

**Calistoga Ranch**, 580 Lommel Road, Calistoga (+1707-254 2820; [www.calistogaranch.com](http://www.calistogaranch.com)), from \$560.

**Poetry Inn**, 6380 Silverado Trail, Napa (+1707-944 0646; [www.poetryinn.com](http://www.poetryinn.com)), from \$550.

**Solage**, 755 Silverado Trail, Calistoga (+1866-942 7442; [www.solagecalistoga.com](http://www.solagecalistoga.com)), from \$405.

**RESTAURANTS: Ad Hoc**, 6476 Washington Street, Yountville (+1707-944 2487).

**Bouchon**, 6534 Washington Street, Yountville (+1707-944 8037).

**Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen**, 1327 Railroad Avenue, St Helena (+1707-963 1200).

**The French Laundry**, 6640 Washington Street, Yountville (+1707-944 2380).

**Market**, 1347 Main Street, St Helena (+1707-963 3799).

**Redd**, 6480 Washington Street, Yountville (+1707-944 2222).

**Ubuntu**, 1140 Main Street, Napa (+1707-251 5656).

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