

Food & Wine - Hidden, Affordable Napa Valley

Writer Tilar Mazzeo takes a salsa lesson at Ceja Vineyards, visits a tasting room on the tailgate of a jeep and otherwise explores Napa's intimate, unstuffy side.

By Tilar Mazzeo, Food & Wine - April 2009

My husband and I lived in Sonoma for six years. I loved our life, and I loved Sonoma, so much so that I wrote a travel guide to Sonoma's small family wineries. Then, in 2007, my husband announced over dinner one night—and with heartbreaking appetite—that he wanted a divorce. I fled to New York for nine months, but I had to return to California because I had promised my publisher another travel guide, this one to the small family wineries of Napa.

I wasn't eager to spend time in Napa: I thought of it as the land of flashy second homes and huge wine estates. But in the month I spent there researching, I saw a different side of the valley—a place that's vibrant, young and far more accessible and friendly than I'd embarrassingly assumed.

To help me get started on the Napa book, a friend recommended I try the breakfast tasting at Andrew Lane, a family-owned winery that's open to the public by appointment. So one morning at 8 a.m., I met with vintner Drew Dickson for the "Cheval Blanc breakfast"—named in honor of the famous Bordeaux château. This included English muffins topped with his friend's homemade Cabernet Franc jelly (the grapes are from Andrew Lane's vineyard) and a glass of Andrew Lane Merlot. "Every day a holiday, every day a feast," Dickson toasted, lifting a line from his old football coach at St. Helena High School.

We tasted our way through the Andrew Lane portfolio—which, at under 2,000 cases a year, is still superboutique and ultrapremium. But Drew is no elitist. Indeed, he is leading a movement to bring Beaujolais Nouveau-inspired wines to Napa Valley—along with the harvest parties celebrating the young wines' release. What I really wanted to know was how to get in on the festivities—six days of stomping grapes and celebrating the crush. Drew explained that to get an invitation, people just have to e-mail him an order and sign up for his allocation list.

Drew suggested I visit his childhood friend and good buddy Trent Ghiringhelli, who has a small winery in the Pope Valley, for possible inclusion in my book. (It turns out half the winemakers in the valley grew up together.) He promised the backcountry winemaker's tour and tasting that Trent offers by appointment would be unforgettable.

Pope Valley is up in the eastern hills above the Napa Valley floor, so Trent—the proprietor of Heibel Ranch Vineyards and a fourth-generation Napa native—suggested that I meet up with him at his parents' house in St. Helena. As we bounced along in his pickup on the way up to the estate on Howell Mountain, Trent told me about how his grandparents used to run Napa's Aetna Springs Resort, an old Hollywood haunt and a true piece of California history—Ronald Reagan announced his first run for governor there back in the 1960s. The family held on to 186 acres of the ranch, and Trent decided to turn the property into a vineyard. So far, he's planted two acres of certified-organic grapes. His goal is to expand to 15 or 20 acres someday, enough to make a few thousand cases of wine a year. For now, Heibel Ranch production tops out at fewer than 150.

We turned off the county road and headed up a dirt track a mile into the foothills. When the track petered out, Trent parked the pickup and moved our supplies into a baby blue 1963 U.S. military Jeep. Pretty soon we were looking down into Schwartz canyon, bumping over creek beds and driving through old stands of redwoods. After taking in the long valley views from the summit, we pulled in under a gnarled manzanita tree and opened up a bottle of his flagship Lappa's, a mostly Cabernet blend rounded out with some Zinfandel and Petit Sirah. Trent confessed that it can sometimes be hard to get people out here, where the "tasting room" is the tailgate of a Jeep. But when they come, he said, "everyone falls in love."

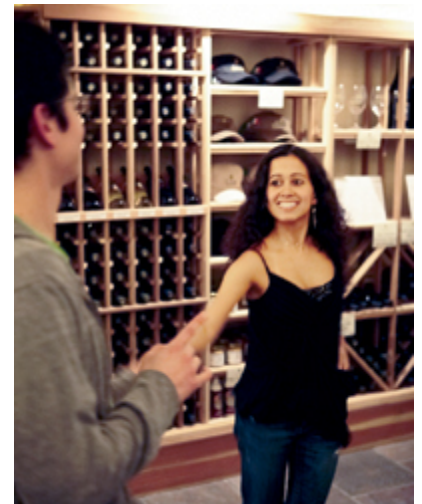
As I asked around for other favorite family wineries, another name that kept coming up was Amelia Ceja (pronounced say-ha), the charismatic matriarch behind Ceja Vineyards. The family's vineyards, and one of its tasting rooms, are in Carneros, the southern sub-appellation that Napa shares with Sonoma, which is delightfully cooled during the summer by breezes from the San Pablo Bay.

I immediately connected with Amelia, a trim, elegant woman. As we settled in at a table overlooking the tasting room's back-patio rose gardens, she told me the story of how the Ceja family came to the valley as migrant farm workers in the 1960s. Amelia began working in the vineyards when she was just a girl, and on her very first day, she met both Napa legend Robert Mondavi and the man who would eventually become her husband.

But I quickly learned that the real story here is the salsa-dancing nights that the family hosts in their downtown Napa tasting salon. Amelia's son Ariel started tapping out rhythms to salsa records as a kid and took it up seriously while in college in Los Angeles. When he came home to work for the family business, he wanted to find a way to introduce others to the music. Last summer, he kept the doors of the tasting room open late and started giving free salsa lessons from 7:30 to 8:30 on Saturday evenings, followed by a couple hours of dancing.

He confessed with a laugh that at first, mostly women came by. Now a lot of guys turn up to show off a bit, he said, and "mingle with the señoritas."

"Napa doesn't have the greatest dance culture," Ariel conceded, but these days, the salsa lessons attract people who come all the way from San Francisco. The dancing starts out with salsa but is just as likely to end with bachata, merengue or cumbia rhythms.



There may not be much in the way of nightclubs in Napa, but there are other forms of after-hours entertainment. Up-valley—as the locals call the northern end of the Napa Valley—is the quirky little town of Calistoga. This hamlet is famous for its hot springs; that's no secret. But what only the locals know is that after 7 p.m., the entrance fee for the mineral-water pools at the Calistoga Spa Hot Springs is a mere \$10. This is the place to find winemakers and industry insiders once the tasting rooms close. After dark, the crowd is a mix of regulars and Eastern European bargain hunters, and people crack out wine bottles at the picnic tables next to the hot springs. If there's a nightlife scene in Napa Valley, this is it.

Some of the best places to interact with locals are their favorite restaurants. One night, I stopped off for a quick bite barside at Cook, a tiny bistro on Main Street in St. Helena that the county's winemakers consider "their" joint. The homemade pasta Bolognese was authentic small-town Italy, and I ended the meal with a perfectly dressed Caesar salad and a glass of the Frias Family Vineyard's crisp Sauvignon Blanc—one of my all-time Napa Valley favorites.

Lingering over my wine, I chatted with chef and owner Jude Wilmoth about where to find boutique-production sparkling wines in the valley. The Sjoebloom Winery's unexpectedly fabulous sparkling Cabernet? The Frank Family Vineyard's Blanc de Noir, a fantastic rosé? Feeling a little guilty about this crush I had going on Napa, I threw out my Sonoma favorite, Australian-born winemaker Michael Scholz's sparkling Shiraz, made up in the Alexander Valley at Wattle Creek Winery.

Another local institution—Jonesy's Famous Steak House—is overlooked by most tourists because it's next door to the regional airport, where private jets land. Here, Bay Area entrepreneurs close deals over a couple of cocktails after a weekend in wine country, and Napa natives take the family for special occasions, ordering hand-cut steaks and opening a bottle of something brought from home (the corkage fee is low—just \$8 a bottle).

At the end of the month, I was surprised by how hard I had fallen for Napa Valley. I had thought about moving back to Sonoma, but now, I was starting to consider buying a place in Napa. The next day, I mentioned this to my real-estate agent back in Sonoma. "Napa," he said, "Napa? You don't want to live over there." With a laugh, I told him, "I don't know about that," and promised to call him later. His next message on my answering machine had an edge of panic, and I didn't pick up.

Tilar Mazzeo is the author of *The Widow Clicquot: The Story of a Champagne Empire and the Woman Who Ruled It*, as well as the travel guide *Back Lane Wineries of Sonoma* and the forthcoming *Back Lane Wineries of Napa*.