

The Napa Valley

By Suzanne Wright

I get a whiff of strong grape as I travel down highway 29, the spine of the Napa Valley. On either side, wineries flourish, in America's most prolific wine-growing region. October in Napa is like May in Atlanta, warm and sunny and dry. It's harvest or "crush" time, which brings to mind the antics of Ethel and Lucy in a famous *I Love Lucy* episode, crushing grapes with their bare feet inside a large cask.

I am in the Napa Valley for a food and wine conference, but also to spa, sip, sup and slumber in style. My base is a sprawling estate in the heart of a private 250-acre valley shaded by oaks, pines, redwoods and maples. An inky ribbon of asphalt hugs a vineyard on the left, winding up through a forested area as you approach the gate. You've arrived at Meadowood.

This prestigious Relais & Châteaux property is kind of like a swanky camp for adults—adults with deep pockets. Eighty-five cottages, suites and lodges are nestled among the woods, which blend native and landscaped elements. The simple, New England-style architecture features white dormers, gabled roofs and wide porches. Interiors feature high, beamed ceilings, white wainscoting, French doors, sleigh beds and stone fireplaces, lending the rooms the elegance of a quiet country manor. Thoughtful touches in the bathroom include a candle and bath salts.

Rest and relaxation are utmost at Meadowood. But if you are feeling ambitious, there's Greet the Day yoga at (yikes!) 6:15 a.m., croquet on a championship course, nine holes of golf, tennis, hiking and biking. Want to picnic? The chef will pack your lunch. Want to learn about wine? The resort employs a wine tutor, who will educate you in the virtues of "liquid poetry." A daily flyer placed on your bed at turndown lists the Valley's activities.

After a full day of classes, I returned to the resort to a Chardonnay Rosehip Mud Wrap. First, I am coated in a delicious-smelling concoction that resembles chocolate mousse, then wrapped and finally, I shower off. Next, Tova, who looks like a winsome grandmother and hails from Norway, uses her powerful, intuitive fingers to knead my sore muscles. When I comment on her technique, she says, "no butterfly wings" here, meaning she doesn't perform a wimpy massage. I am a grateful limp noodle when I leave.

I dine outdoors that night at The Restaurant. Potted rosemary on the table perfumes the air. I love the wine list: it's in alphabetical order. Even better: every bottle can be poured by the glass for a fourth of the bottle's cost. Payton, my knowledgeable server, gladly substitutes a couple of wines I am interested in trying that I can't find at home; I decide on the Vintner's menu, six courses with paired wines. I nibble a creamy lobster and mushroom risotto and pan-roasted squab with fig salad under a velvety black sky punctuated by stars. Cucumber sorbet is a cheeky palate cleanser; I finish with duck and a cheese course. I retire before dessert.

The next day, I lunch at Taylor's Automatic Refresher, a much-revered drive-in at the edge of St. Helena. In operation since 1949, they serve shakes, burgers and somewhat soggy garlic fries on picnic tables in the parking lot. Fortified, I drive to Hess Select, which houses one of the area's finest contemporary art collections. Afterwards, I tuck into Copia, The American Center for Wine, Food and The Arts. Julia's Kitchen, named for Julia Child, is just one of the attractions; there are also gardens, changing exhibitions, educational programs and a wonderful gift shop. On the day I visit, there's a fantastic Buddhist-inspired mandala made from 20,000 multicolored bottle tops, lids and corks.

I head back to Meadowood for a Valley Stone Massage. Tova uses both hot basalt and cool marble stones in long strokes to ease away tension. The spa, while not as elaborate as some you may encounter, has a smiling, good-natured staff that makes you feel as if you are the only guest on the premises. I'd consider forgoing the fancier treatments and let Tova or her husband Arnie give you a terrific massage.

I spring for dinner at La Toque, a \$170 experience of orchestrated sophistication. The room is almost Shaker-like in its spare elegance; low-key sommelier Scott circles the room with aplomb, pouring wines and waxing eloquent about the charms of each bottle. Course after course, revelations appear: summer bean salad with silky, smoked Sonoma foie gras; vaguely sweet halibut with braised fennel; a subtle duck breast with apple and calvados; fork-tender lamb loin; ripe cheese served with walnut bread; a miniature blueberry tart with cherry ice cream. Time slows in the Valley when you eat a six-course meal and it is a decadent pleasure.

I happily fall asleep with the French door open, crickets chirping.

First stop of the new day: another winery with a famed art collection, Clos Pegasse, which has fantastic wine caves vs. cellars and a monumental Henry Moore sculpture that greets you upon arrival. Then, lunch at The Martini House, its russet wood interior aglow like a ski lodge. Savory veal cheeks with small tiles of root vegetables and lovely golden cornmeal crepes with white corn ice cream and huckleberry compote leave me buoyant. I pop into the wonderful Oakville Grocery and buy a half dozen interesting wines, along with a hunk of cheese and some salami.

For my final meal, I choose Roux, a tiny restaurant run by a husband and wife team on Main Street in St. Helena. Once again, I surrender myself and my waistband to a four-course tasting menu, paired with wines. There's genuine warmth and affection from the servers and owners, who delight in introducing me to each label, each course. The deep claret walls dotted with stark white plates are a witty touch. Everything is splendid.

On the five-minute drive back to my cottage—I'm looking forward to a long soak in a hot tub—a deer literally is caught in my headlights as I wind my way through the property. I brake and smile. Good wine, good food, good lodging and a deer. Slumber comes easily.

