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What to do in Napa Valley | Wine Country Travel Guide With Renee Dee

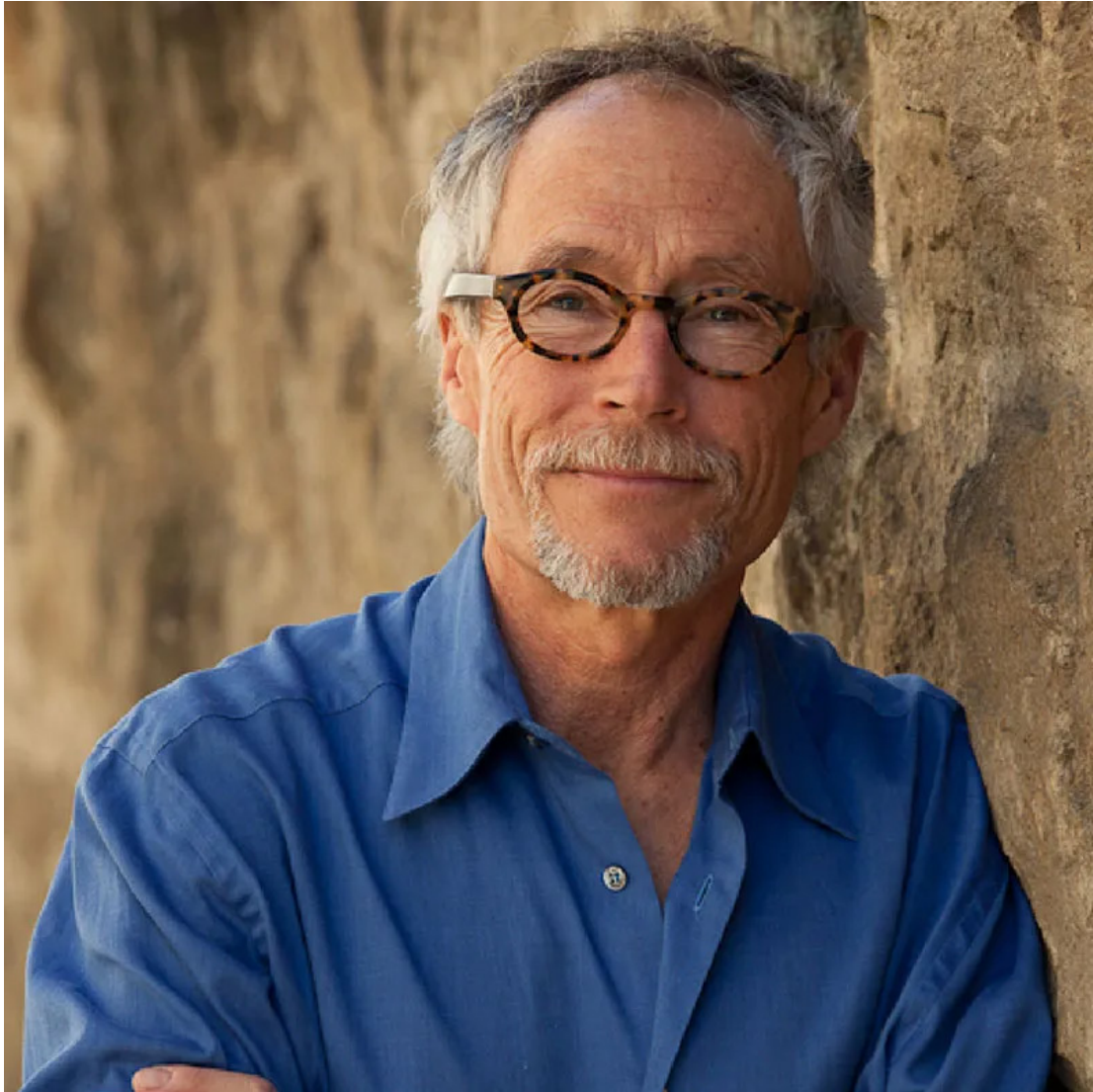
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Photography courtesy of Meadowood Napa Valley

From St. Helena to Yountville, this girls' trip is an essential travel guide to what to do in Napa Valley wine country filling your days with top-shelf experiences.

It all started with a podcast that turned into a new friendship. Late last year, I had the opportunity to visit with the legendary Tor Kenward about his new book, *Memories of a Vintner*. In our conversation, he shared stories from his 50-year career working with other Napa notables like **Thomas Keller**, **Julia Child** and **Robert Mondavi**, and how they ignited the flame that turned Napa Valley into an exquisite culinary capital.



The podcast ended with Tor inviting me to travel to Napa Valley wine country again and say hello when I did. Leaving no generous invitation behind, I made plans for my trip. What I didn't know was that I would experience all the heights I'd hoped and discover a renewed love of the place that treated me so well.

Leaning on my ICONIC LIFE friendships, I landed in Oakland, and grabbed my Go Rentals SUV. An hour later, I was on local roads passing vineyard after vineyard, remembering some and remarking about the massive growth of the region since I last visited.

As we passed Grgich Hills on the left, I recalled meeting Michael Grgich on the last trip in his signature beret. This time around, I learned of the festivities and even got invited to his 100th birthday, clearly a triumph that speaks of the good living in Napa Valley wine country.

One the way to our resort, the very charming Oakville Grocery answered the call of our growling stomachs with gourmet salads, limited production cheeses and of course, bubbly by the glass. Sitting on the patio, overlooking vineyards and the Napa Valley Wine Train, we had no idea how good we'd soon have it.

We arrived at Meadowood Napa Valley, one of the most romantic retreats in California, and one of the earliest luxury resorts in Napa Valley, to find lush, tree-lined roads and charming, private grounds below the ridges of surrounding wooded canyons. The scenery looked as if it had been pasted from a travel guide.



The lodging, sprinkled across the canyon for privacy and serenity, combines the wine country's distinctive blend of rustic and refined materials. Our tree lined suite was light and airy with cottage-style interiors, a fireplace that can be used year-round and French doors opening to a scenic deck, perfect for morning coffee or a late-evening glass of wine after a long day of travel.



The resort staff was welcoming, as if we were staying at a friend's home. From the pool to the spa to Forum for dining, we felt immersed in nature in our local St. Helena accommodations. We checked in briefly, but then traveled to our first wine country appointment in Napa Valley, but of course, a tasting with our guide Tor at Wheeler Farms in St. Helena.

The winemaking center sits on 12 acres and includes gardens, orchards, a state-of-the-art winery, vineyards and a tasting room with open kitchen, from which savory canapés prepared by the culinary team were presented. We tasted a curated selection of wines with Tor, and thoroughly enjoyed the conversation with one of Napa Valley's ICONIC wine country figures. Tor treated us to his 2019 TOR Cabernet Sauvignon from Beckstoffer To Kalon Vineyard, earning 100 points.



Tor gave us an excellent overview of the region and the 16 viticultural areas of Napa Valley, including boutique grape growers who supply the best of the best fruit. This education formed the foundation for our deeper understanding of the area throughout the trip. Two hours later, before we departed, Tor introduced us to the only other man I wanted to meet on this trip...he randomly stopped by.

“Renee, you’re going to be pretty excited to meet this guy,” he said, introducing me to David Breeden, chef de cuisine at The French Laundry...the most coveted restaurant reservation on my bucket list and a key destination to add to your travel guide. Within minutes, my return trip to Napa Valley and a dream dinner in wine country were in the works. Who’s coming with me in September?

That evening, we dined at Forum on property at the Meadowood. The highly acclaimed Restaurant at Meadowood, former home of Michelin-star Chef Christopher Kostow, is closed right now, but plans are in the works for his return. We enjoyed a wonderful dinner, featuring local ingredients and top-shelf service. This would not be the only time during our trip to experience fresh, spring peas.

The next morning an exquisite spread of coffee, fruits and pastries were delivered to our outside deck to enjoy with chirping birds and soft breezes. This perfect start to my day led me up the road to the rustic spa house. Both the resort and spa received the Forbes five-star award, and this spa has officially received my personal praise as my favorite spa from the architecture to the interiors. Each treatment room is a suite with a full bath and aromatic steam shower.

I enjoyed the signature massage with the Essential Journey add-on that included a consultation with my knowledgeable therapist, who offered tips on daily habits for well-being. The service started with a steam shower for which I selected my own personalized scent. About 15 minutes later, I was immersed in a heated spa bed, where I had an expert massage followed by an organic cold-pressed juice and meditation time in the garden.

I walked my highly relaxed self to the pool. Rather than chase around and spoil the relaxed state, I stayed at the pool all afternoon to enjoy the fresh air and quiet surroundings. Later that day, I was introduced to Kelli White, the director of the Meadowood Wine Center, who has developed a robust offering of wine experiences, classes and tours to elevate your Napa Valley wine country trip.



We recently heard that PRESS had earned its first Michelin star, so we knew that tasting menu had our name on it. The high ceilings with beams and a fireplace centerpiece felt so Napa Valley to us, exuding high-end wine country vibes and boasting the largest collection of Napa wines in the world, thanks to Samantha Rudd. We were impressed by Chef Philip Tessier, who presented a beautiful tasting menu that night, starting with, yes, fresh green pea gremolata as a palette cleanser.

A tip: When offered a caviar pretzel at PRESS, say yes. It's an enhancement to the menu, but memorable and decadent. We enjoyed kucchi oysters with green fig mignonette and whipped coconut water, squash blossoms with Parmigiano Reggiano and American Wagyu with horseradish leaf and morel jus. We finished with a decadent chocolate dessert with hints of orange and olive oil sorbet. The service and the plating were equally impressive and I highly recommend it.



Following a decadent, let's admit it, calorie-laden meal, we embarked on two of Napa's best pastimes to burn the calories...so to say...hiking and wine tasting (hey, there can be a lot of walking and arm lifting when touring a winery.)

With the bar set oh, so high, we traveled to a friend's vineyard, Silver Trident in Yountville. With their guide, we had our first-ever craft potato chip pairing with wine in a Ralph Lauren Home gallery. The entire town of Yountville is charming and home to so many wonderful restaurants, like Thomas Keller's Ad Hoc, Bouchon (where we dined that night) and La Calenda.

You can't visit Napa Valley wine country without stopping at the oldest, most ICONIC destination, Silverado. The 150-year-old landmark began as a private estate and now boasts two championship golf courses, three swimming pools, tennis and a 16,000 square-foot spa. We dined at the Grill for lunch and returned to the mansion bar later. Renovations are underway at this historic spot with announcements coming soon.

As we continued our wine tasting journey, the goal was quality over quantity, filling our glasses with good wine and our hearts with great conversation.

Given that we had been tasting and drinking 100-point wines for the first half of our trip, our concierge recommended Lithology, near Meadowood for a tasting in the exquisite Alejandro Bulgheroni Estate.

Our host that afternoon shared that Napa Valley wine country has some of the most diverse soils of any wine region in the world produced by the movement of the earth's plates. Lithology is named for the study of the rocks that make soils, particularly in this region. They call their wines terroir-driven wines inspired by the soil. And we enjoyed the full-bodied, earthy wines we were served.

With a bold goal by the team to produce the best wines in Napa, we tasted four wines—
100 points, 99 points, 98 points, 99 points.



Who could go home and drink wine after this entire trip?

We finished our trip with a truly lovely tour of an exquisite winery with beautiful gardens, a bucolic farm table under a canopy of grapevines and a modern tasting room over a pond. We visited the wine cave and grounds of Rudd Winery, and the story of the family's commitment to quality and passion for wine was an inspiring end to a beautiful trip of the Napa Valley wine country.

Leslie Rudd fulfilled a dream by getting his hands on exactly the property he wanted, and his wife, Susan, oversaw acres and acres of manicured gardens and stunning outdoor spaces. Today, their daughter, Samantha Rudd (yes, owns PRESS) oversees the winery with an eye towards organic farming. The wines had a depth comparable to the experience on property.



This idyllic spot was the perfect capstone for a trip that surpassed our expectations and inspired me to make this travel guide. The judges have given it the maximum number of points.