

36 Hours In Napa, Calif.

September 10, 2004 By DEBRA A. KLEIN

SAN FRANCISCANS have long ducked off Highway 29 to wait out the traffic with a stroll through one of downtown Napa's neighborhoods of wide streets, airy parks and gingerbread-style houses. But lately, there's been reason to linger a bit longer in this once sleepy town at the stem of the Napa Valley wine country. With hip eateries, a contemporary art museum on the revitalized riverfront and a 19th-century opera house now featuring a series of world music performances, downtown Napa has become a destination in its own right. Behind some of the oldest stone storefronts in California you can discover the newest flavor combinations, with-it clothing stores, and a sense that you've found something hidden, something on the verge of a boom.

Friday

4 p.m.

1) Park and Sip

There are two ways to reach Napa by car from San Francisco. One is traffic choked, the other so scenic you'll swear you've driven hours, not just 30 or 40 minutes from the Golden Gate Bridge. So head up Highway 101 and take your first wine-tasting break on the inviting terrace of the new Nicholson Ranch Winery (4200 Napa Road, 707-938-8822), where the view includes vine-covered hills, llamas and a dairy farm. Once in town, look for the sandstone facade of the Pfeiffer Building, Napa's oldest commercial building, which started life as a brewery in 1875. Inside is the Vintner's Collective (1245 Main Street, 707-255-7150), where a handful of small vineyards - from D-Cubed to Mi Sueno - offer tastings. The twist: The room feels like an urban cocktail lounge, with upbeat music and swank club chairs; \$10 for four tastes. Open until 6 p.m.

7 p.m.

2) Riverfront Dining

By day, the Napa General Store (540 Main Street, 707-259-0762), is a takeout shop, but Wednesday through Saturday, as the sun goes down, the tablecloths come out and it is transformed into the General Café restaurant, where you can dine on the patio overlooking the Napa River. Fans of San Francisco's most celebrated Vietnamese restaurant, the Slanted Door, will appreciate rediscovering Nam Phan, a former chef at the Slanted Door, and Judy Takasaki, a former pastry chef there. Try Vietnamese crepes (\$7.75) with pork, shrimp and bean sprouts and finish with Scharffen Berger chocolate cake (\$6.50), decadently topped with fresh berries and cream.

Saturday

7:30 a.m.

3) Early Bird Gets the Tomato

Roll out of bed and into the Napa Downtown Farmers' Market in a parking lot on First Street. Grab a coffee or select from 20 teas at the market's bakery, where you might find artisanal breads or fresh gooey granola bars from a local favorite, Sweetie Pies. While Napa's Tuesday market is well established, Saturday's is new, with just 20 to 30 stalls loaded with freshly harvested peaches, bushels of lavender and batches of locally pressed olive oil. Open through Nov. 20.

10 a.m.

4) Food, Glorious Food

Across the street is Copia: The American Center for Wine, Food & the Arts (500 First Street, 888-512-6742). In the three years since its opening, Copia, named for the goddess of abundance, has become a must-do for visiting foodies. The brainchild of Robert Mondavi, it is part restaurant and part museum, with a rotating assortment of gastronomic talks like "Chutneys, Sambals and Kimchees, Oh My!", wine tastings (noon to 4 p.m.) and exhibits about cuisine. Even those with only a passing interest in cooking will appreciate the finer points of haute cuisine after a small taste of the featured daily dish (look to the left of the information desk). Admission is \$12.50. Open daily, except Tuesday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

10:25 a.m.

5) Culture, Not Viticulture

If you plan at least a month ahead, you may snag one of the few slots available on the two-and-a-half-hour-long Saturday morning tours of the Di Rosa Preserve (5200 Carneros Highway, Napa, 707-226-5991; by appointment only, \$12), a sprawling collection of Bay Area contemporary art.

Among the highlights of Rene and Veronica di Rosa's collection are paintings, prints and sculpture by William T. Wiley, the father of Bay Area funk style. If you can't get a spot, stop in at the di Rosas' downtown gallery outpost, Off the Preserve! (1142 Main Street, 707-253-8300), to check out the changing exhibits, or to hear an artist lecture.

1:30 p.m.

6) Now You Can Eat

After the midday heat in the preserve, you'll welcome the cool comfort of the high-ceilinged Mayberry-meets-Metropolis décor of the Boon Fly Cafe (4048 Sonoma Highway, 707-299-4872). Fuel up on crisp beer-battered onion rings (\$6) or house-made macaroni and cheese (\$10), while rubbing elbows and sneakered feet with local toddlers, their well-dressed parents, and the baseball-capped Los Angeles weekenders staying in the cottages (\$295 and up a night) of the Carneros Inn.

2:30 p.m.

7) Scents for Your Linens

In Napa, shopping is more like visiting a permanent crafts fair, with store owners happy to chat. At Betty's Girl Boutique (1239 First Street, 707-254-7560), Kim Northrop has created an homage to her mother, Betty, in the form of vintage clothing restored so undetectably that it looks new. The freshly made body and linen sprays at the Napa Valley Soap Company (1506 Main Street, 707-257-1151) come in flavors like cucumber melon and white tea. They're a perfect tropical match for the rattan and mahogany furnishings at Main Element (1000 Main Street, 707-254-7131). At the Sweet Finale Patisserie (1146 Main Street, 707-224-2444), the complex and delicate confections actually live up to their good looks.

4 p.m.

8) Down by the River

The best way to appreciate the river that flows through downtown Napa is to grab an old-fashioned soda in a glass bottle and take a seat under a canvas umbrella behind the Napa Mill Building. The Napa General Store and the adjoining cafes and hotels were created from the shell of the Hatt Buildings, hulking brick industrial structures that made up Napa's once-famous wharves. Leave the deck to stroll an abbreviated riverfront path, or take a longer walk along the banks to catch a breeze and imagine Napa's heyday, when steamships and a railroad linked this regional hub to towns downstream.

7 p.m.

9) A Dinner Shared

The Spanish influence at Zuzu (829 Main Street, 707-224-8555) is evident in its heavy-on-the-wood décor, but the menu is modern California tapas, with small plates designed to share, like wild king salmon with fennel, arugula and herb salad (\$8) or Mexican corn soup (\$6).

8 p.m.

10) Curtain's Up

The Italianate Napa Valley Opera House (1030 Main Street, 707-226-7372), is just a short stroll down Main Street from Zuzu. The newly refurbished jewel box theater dates to 1879. A current series of world music performances includes, on Sunday, Quetzal, an nine-piece group blending rock, Mexican folklorico and Caribbean sounds. There is music elsewhere, too. At 8 p.m. on the first Saturday of the month, the Jarvis Conservatory (1711 Main Street, 707-255-5445) holds its open mike night when, for \$15, you can hear some of the Bay Area's most talented opera singers perform.

Sunday

11 a.m.

11) Walking Tours

The historic district is filled with interesting stories behind the elaborate Victorian, Eastlake and Queen Anne facades. At the Visitors Bureau (1310 Napa Town Center, between First and Pearl, Main and Randolph, 707-226-7459), you can pick up a Historic Walking Tours map (\$2). In the Abajo district, look for 19th-century residential architecture among the homes of the steamboat captains and industrialists who prospered in Napa in the 1880's and 1890's. Randolph and Division Streets have a jaw-dropping array of fussy period styles.