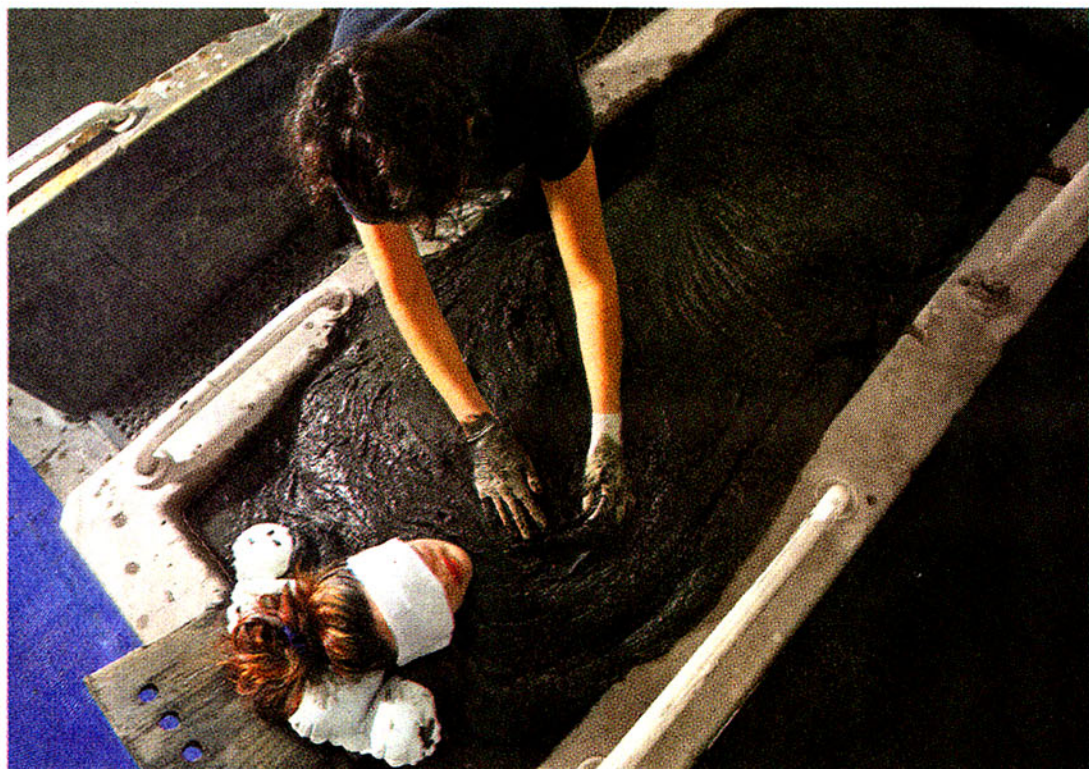


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Photographs by Jim Wilson/The New York Times

**BAKING TIME** A treatment at Indian Springs, above. In Calistoga, beds of mud are easy to find.

# What's the Right Napa Wine To Serve With Poached Tourist?

By GUY TREBAY

**T**HERE comes a time every August when the traffic streaming along Highway 29, the main artery through the Napa Valley, slows to the kind of rolling stop that one associates with the Hamptons. The promenade of wineries to which most day-trippers are headed, giddy with the prospect of overpriced tastings, could probably do as much business just by setting up roadside stands.

But not all travelers to the valley are tracking the circuit of half-glass pours and spit jugs. For more than a century, thousands have also made the trek to this town 75 miles north of San Francisco at the northern terminus of the Napa Valley hoping to reverse the effects of high-living by immersing themselves in primordial gunk.

Calistoga may be among the few towns in the immediate region not altogether dominated by the cult of

CALISTOGA, Calif.

the grape. It has vineyards, of course, and fusion restaurants and a certain inevitable amount of lavender soap boutiques. What it also has, though, is a civic identity dictated by the geology that defines so much of fault-riven California. For a millennium or so before viticulture came along, Calistoga was a proto-spa town, with hot springs, lava beds and ash mounds waiting to be exploited for their curative properties.

And so they were. Among the dozen or more spas that now operate here are places that make available almost all the usual items from the international menu of self-indulgence. There is Brazilian waxing. There are French clay mask treatments. There is Hawaiian lomi-lomi and Thai and Swedish massage.

But wedged stubbornly along Lincoln Avenue, Calistoga's main drag, are a handful of small resorts and time-stopped hotels, holdouts from another era and its health and beauty ideals. At places like Indian Springs, Dr. Wilkinson's Hot Springs Resort or Golden Haven — and for roughly \$100



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# What Wine Goes With Poached Tourist?

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— visitors can embark on a treatment known to the ancient aboriginals, to the Gold Rush miners, to creaky invalids, to the back-to-the-earth hippies who once camped in the nearby redwoods. They can take a mud bath.

The positive medical effects to be derived from lying half-buried in a concrete sarcophagus filled with heated sludge are far from proven, yet it is the rare individual who claims to gain no benefit from hunkering down in a tub of mud.

So it was that I found myself padding naked across the smooth concrete floors at Dr. Wilkinson's, headed for a white-tile trough filled with dark and steaming sludge. The mud bath at Dr. Wilkinson's is not, in fact, all mud but a mixture of volcanic ash and Canadian peat moss, not unlike the stuff used to pot an African violet.

"Some places use a lot of mud, too much, really," explained a manager, Martha Magana. "That's why you get the feeling it's going to suck you in."

The precise numbers of those who are sucked in, one way or another, at Calistoga each season are not easily come by. "We don't collect that kind of information," said Kent Domogalla, the administrator of the Calistoga Chamber of Commerce.

But most anyone on Lincoln Avenue is happy to inform you that visitors come all the time and from around the world, particularly Japan. They do so in settings that range from the kooky midcentury therapeutic atmosphere of Dr. Wilkinson's, which opened in 1952, to the efficient high-end chic of the restored mission-style complex at Indian Springs, which has been around since 1871.

Among the mud bath clients, 80 percent are couples and 15 percent families, said Erin Donnelly Furtney, the director of Indian Springs. The ratio of the sexes, Ms. Furtney added, "always skews two-to-one, women to men."

It is still true, of course, that wineries remain the top destination in the Napa Valley, Mr. Domogalla said, citing a recent study of local tourism conducted by Purdue University. "But spas are No. 2, and not just the old mud spas — the massage oil, the salt scrubs, the whole range of hedonism slash health."

What one might even call a boom in the hedonism/health business can be detected along a piney stretch of the old Silverado Trail, where Auberge Resorts, the owners of the valley's five-star Auberge du Soleil, are building an 89-room hotel called Solage. Alongside yoga and Pilates and diet-conscious menus, Solage will feature a "mud tasting room" that daintily refers to the old-style treatments without requiring anyone to bare it all and sink in. "It will be more like, 'Bring a friend and slather mud on each other' than immersion mud," Mr. Domogalla said.

Mud immersion very likely got its start among the Wappo Indians, the earliest inhabitants of this valley abundant in warm springs, geysers and friable prehistoric ash. In one version of local legend, the Wappos were said to have called the area "Land of Health-Giving Springs," a name that suggests early publicists were hard at work. The exploitation of Calistoga's thermal springs for their curative effects had a fine run of nearly a century after the Gold Rush. But the mud bath spas hit a se-



Photographs by Jim Wilson/The New York Times

**SET, THEN RINSE** Amanda Booth emerges from a treatment at Indian Springs, where the baths use pure mud.

rious slump around the 1970's, and for the next decade received few visitors and even less press, beyond the occasional snippet in magazines devoted to alternative therapies.

"While the idea of soaking in a hot spring sounds appealing, the idea of sinking into a tub of mud may not," a correspondent for *Arthritis Today* wrote in 1999. And, for a brief time at Dr. Wilkinson's, I felt I could understand why.

Was it that the peat mixture smelled sulfurous and made one disquietingly buoyant, less a part of Mother Earth than some indigestible tidbit she kept trying to spit up? Was it the claustrophobic heat, the tiled trough, the sense that, minus the

framed pictures of palm trees, one might have been in a holding pen at the county jail?

"Go to the edge, put your feet in, standing up, then sit down slowly," the spa attendant, Salvador Esparza, instructed, after first cooling the mixture by churning it with a long-handled spade. "I don't want you to overcook."

I did not mention this at the time, but it was probably too late by then. Having tried three different mud baths at three spas over four days, I had already been poached to a consistency chefs now recommend for halibut.

Whatever toxins had once coursed through my bloodstream had un-

questionably been leached and abandoned, along with what I used to think of as the outer layer of my skin. The bath medium is changed daily, I should probably add at this point, and kept germ-free with constant infusions of scalding water. All the same, I tried whenever possible to book early in order to be first in the tub.

And, while it took some getting used to, I found mud bathing to my liking. For a start, getting into the tub was really getting into it, as one patron wryly observed. "I'm so relaxed right now, if you hung me on a cross I wouldn't feel a thing," this same man unaccountably remarked, as he clambered from a tub looking like a creature from a 50's horror film. There is no doubt that by then I resembled some sort of swamp thing, too.

Our exchange happened to have taken place at Indian Springs, a fine and restful spa where the mud baths are pure mud, hot and weighty, and where the steady exhalation of a geyser adjacent to the resort's little pond provides a soundtrack infinitely preferable to the headache-inducing ululation of Enya or Navajo flutes.

"We don't have a four-page spa menu and do hot stones on your back one day and seaweed wraps with honey the next," John Merchant, Indian Springs's owner, said earlier, as the two of us sat on the porch of the stucco building situated on 16 arid acres fringed with 100-year-old olive trees and neat rows of squat and matronly palms.

"The magma we're sitting on is 4 miles deep, 13 miles wide," Mr. Merchant added. "The water we use comes from underground rivers rising through the bed of an ancient sea."

Released from the grip of the mud now, rinsed and strolling in the warm air, there was no escaping the feeling that I'd been cured of something or other, it hardly mattered what. I also felt that — although barely 20 minutes by car from the epicenter of the oenophile theme park the Napa Valley has become — I was briefly connected to another and older California. And by old I mean really, really old.

## A Tour of Therapeutic Burial Grounds

**CALISTOGA OASIS SPA**, 1300 Washington Street, (oasisspa.com), (707) 942-2122. Volcanic ash, imported peat moss and hot spring water, \$65. With massage, \$110 (25 minutes) or \$135 (55 minutes).

**CALISTOGA RANCH**, 580 Lommel Road, (calistogaranch.com), (707) 254-2800. Spa services available only to guests of the ranch resort. Known for the Calistoga Cure, 150 minutes, including exfoliation with a mineral salt body scrub, mineral mud bath, linen wrap, balancing polarity session and full-body massage, \$350 (\$280 for two hours).

**CALISTOGA SPA HOT SPRINGS**, 1006 Washington Street, (calistogaspaspa.com), (707) 942-6269. Warm mud bath, \$58. With massage, \$96 (30 minutes) or \$166 (90 minutes).

**DR. WILKINSON'S HOT SPRINGS RESORT**, 1507 Lincoln Avenue, (drwilkinson.com), (707) 942-4102. "The Works," a traditional mud bath with facial mask, aromatic mineral whirlpool bath, steam room and blanket wrap, \$75. With massage, \$119 (30 minutes) or \$159 (60 minutes).

**GOLDEN HAVEN HOT SPRINGS**, 1713 Lake Street, (goldenhaven.com), (707) 942-8000. Traditional mud baths, \$75 for an individual (one hour), \$98 for a couple. With massages, \$118 or \$145.



**INDIAN SPRINGS**, 1712 Lincoln Avenue, (indianspringscalistoga.com), (707) 942-4913. Traditional mud bath of volcanic ash and hot mineral water, \$75. Massage an additional \$45 (25 minutes).

**LINCOLN AVENUE SPA**, 1339 Lincoln Avenue, (lincolnavenuespa.com), (707) 942-2950. Not an immersion; self-application, \$85. With massage, \$128 (25 minutes) or \$155 (50 minutes).

PAULA SCHWARTZ