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CALISTOGA: A GEM OF A TOWN

by joseph schmitt

On the north end of Napa Valley is the picturesque town of Calistoga, California. Famous for its nearby wineries, great food, hot mineral waters and artistic offerings, this little gem of a town seems to have retained much of its charm of yesteryear. The walkable downtown and surrounding area is also fun to explore on bike as you take in the small town's progressive vibe. It's hard to miss the friendly demeanor and an overriding holistic approach to eating and drinking, as well as relaxing and exploring—all such things we travelers live for.

Where to stay:

Solage (solagecalistoga.com) is a new brand from Auberge Resorts that debuted in Calistoga in 2007. The accommodations are cozy cottage-like studios that scatter the property amidst native grasses and large oaks. The stylish communal atmosphere found throughout the resort's 22 sprawling acres is complimented by the beach cruisers found outside each studio. The 130-foot adult swimming pool and hot tub mirror the nearby family pool with hot tub and cabanas. The Yoga & Movement Studio is a beautiful addition to the state-of-the-art gym, while nearby hiking, biking and jogging trails round out a balanced fitness menu. With less than 90 suites and studios on such a large, open property, the privacy and exclusivity one finds here comes at a fraction of the price of her more famous sister hotels.

Chateau de Vie (cdvnapavalley.com) brings a touch of Bordeaux to Napa Valley with its quaint bed and breakfast accommodations and surrounding Cabernet Sauvignon vineyards. Proprietors Felipe Barragan and Peter Weatherman deliver personal touches, such as a freshly prepared seasonal breakfast and afternoon cheese and wine service. Peaceful, understated elegance abounds on lush grounds, shaded outdoor patio dining and a heated pool and spa. Located just minutes from downtown Calistoga, the intimate property with its first-class amenities is a prime choice for romantic endeavors.

Where to dine and drink:

Brandon Sharp, executive chef at Solbar (solagecalistoga.com/dining), harvests vegetables, fruits and



Inside Pride Mountain Vineyards Cave



Pride Mountain Vineyards in Napa Valley

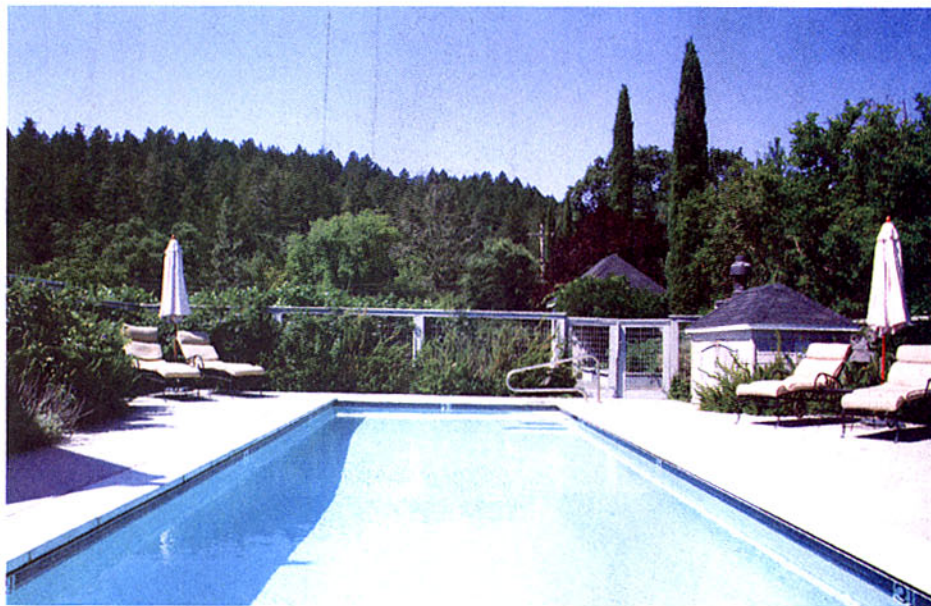
herbs from an extensive onsite culinary garden, and has brought his southern style of cooking by way of an outdoor smoker. His new interpretation of "wine country cuisine" is enjoyed in a decidedly relaxed and social environment, either poolside, on the patio or inside the bistro's communal dining room and bar. A popular gathering place for local winemakers and other residents, Sharp's delectable offerings at Solbar pair nicely with lively conversation and meeting new friends.

A common approach to cooking in Calistoga is the use of fresh and local ingredients. You won't find much in the way of fast food or chain restaurants here.



Owner / Chef Felipe at Chateau de Vie

The husband-and-wife team (chef and pastry chef, respectively) at JoLé (jolerestaurant.com) shows us what a restaurant should be—independently owned and operated with updated family recipes and food that comes right from the farm to the table. Their wine menu offers three sizes from which to choose: by the glass, a small carafe, or full bottle. You'll also find a nice selection of Old World (European) wines as well as New World and Napa Valley selections. Save room for desert and consider pairing the Bing Cherry and Almond Turnovers with a Sonoma County Port or the Coconut Cream Pie with a Riesling Spätlese.



Pool views at Chateau de Vie Bed and Breakfast



Exterior, Chateau de Vie

What to do:

A calling card for Calistoga is its abundant hot mineral springs and mud baths. There are a number of full-service spa resorts in town, most verging on the rustic and homey side of the luxury scale. The 20,000 square-foot Spa Solage (www.solagecalistoga.com/spa) offers its own unique version of a mud treatment, in a social and casual, yet high-end setting. Mudtenders mix proprietary Solage Mud with essential oils and on-tap geothermal water to create a customized mud. Mud treatments begin with a self-application (for individuals and couples) of the mud in a heated room, followed by a long hot soak

in a mineral tub, and then finished with a twenty-minute rest in a state-of-the-art relaxation chair with vibration therapy and sound healing elements. Spa guests can further relax in either the co-ed or clothing optional outdoor hot mineral pools.

A memorable way to experience the local scenic beauty is by air with Calistoga Balloons (www.calistogaballoons.com). Take in the views of Mt. St. Helena and the adjacent Palisade Cliffs as you ride the early morning ribbons of warming air over the Napa Valley. Staying closer to land, Solage guests can take advantage of their personal beach cruisers to ride into nearby downtown for dining, shopping



Private patio at Solage



The sexy adult pool at Solage with cabanas.

and entertainment. Known for their diverse production of fine estate-grown wines from their 235 mountaintop acres that straddle the county line of Sonoma and Napa, Pride Mountain Winery (www.pridewines.com) provides a truly memorable tasting experience. For a nominal fee, visitors begin their tasting adventure in the main tasting room with a floral Viognier and a well-rounded Chardonnay. Outside, the mountain and valley views are stunning, with seemingly endless rows of vines that stretch beyond the horizon. A tasting guide also delivers you inside their 23,000 square foot labyrinth of caves, where the barrel aging process is in full swing, as you sample some of their fruit-forward Merlot and cave-fermented Cabernet Sauvignon.

It goes without saying that the most popular activity in Napa Valley is wine tasting. It's important to keep in mind when planning a "tasting visit" to Calistoga that the wineries are very spread out across the valley, and some favored boutique wineries' tasting rooms are by appointment only.

While you can easily freestyle your way through Napa Valley with a simple map and some direction from your hotel's concierge, a car service should be considered for maximum enjoyment. These professional drivers know the valley, they know the wineries, and they allow you to taste more wine than if you were driving.