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# Cheap thrills in Napa Valley

Splurge and save in Calistoga, where sipping and soaking don't have to break the bank

BY AMY WOLF | PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID FENTON



**TOP ROW** The valley's show of fall color is absolutely free; snare bargains worth drinking at the Wine Garage. **BOTTOM** Calistoga's very own Old Faithful.



**1** | **Ride a tram to sip with a view**  
I, for one, like a little funkiness mixed in with my fabulousness. Especially when funky costs less. That's why funky old Calistoga is my favorite destination in the fabulous Napa Valley. Now more than ever, it's a great place to go when you're craving a fix of good food and wine and a spa treatment or two. I recently spent the weekend finding thrills that can still be had on a dime.

## **1** | Ride a tram to sip with a view

At **Sterling Vineyards**, an aerial tram whisks you up a hill to a Mediterranean-style winery, where you wend your way along balconies and terraces that look out over the Napa Valley, stopping here and there to taste wines—starting with a Sauvignon Blanc and building up to a

Cabernet Sauvignon. 1111 Dunaweal Lane; [sterlingvineyards.com](http://sterlingvineyards.com)

**The tab:** From \$20 for tour and tasting, \$10 ages 4–20 for tour.

## **2** | Watch California's own Old Faithful spout off

Who knew Calistoga was home to a natural geyser that shoots 50 to 75 feet into the air every 40 minutes? As Snoopy says as he looks at the geyser in the framed Charles Schulz cartoon hanging on a nearby wall, "Wow." 1299 Tubbs Lane; [oldfaithfulgeyser.com](http://oldfaithfulgeyser.com)

**The tab:** \$10; \$3 ages 6–12

## **3** | Go wine touring on two wheels

The **Calistoga Bike Shop** takes the hassle out of wine tasting by bike. Sign up for



Dr. Wilkinson's Hot Springs Resort puts you in the heart of town. LEFT Vineyards off the Silverado Trail.



the Calistoga Cool Wine Tour and along with your bike rental, you'll get help planning a route, wine pickup at the end of the day (so you don't have to lug your bottles), tasting fees waived, and roadside assistance if you need it. 1318 Lincoln Ave.; 707/942-9687.

**The tab:** \$80

## 4 | Stock your cellar

The laid-back **Wine Garage** is a former gas station filled with small-production wines, many from less-famous regions like Lodi, Paso Robles, and Amador, all under \$25. The owner negotiates prices, so you can find some great deals. The best bargain of all: For \$30, you get a half-gallon jug (equivalent to almost three bottles) filled from a "gas" pump that flows with various blends. 1020 Foothill Blvd.; winegarage.net

**The tab:** Under \$25 per bottle

## 5 | Hike into the hills

My biggest beef about most wine country towns is that it's hard to find a great hike. **Bothe-Napa Valley State Park** solves that problem with shaded trails through redwood and madrone forests and alongside Ritchey Creek. Plus it has a small spring-fed swimming pool that at \$3 is a heck of a lot cheaper than paying the day rate to swim at a resort. (Hurry—it's only open through Labor Day.) 3801 St. Helena Hwy. N. (State 29/128); 707/942-4575.

**The tab:** \$6 parking, \$3 swimming

## 6 | Storm a castle

With five towers, a moat and drawbridge, a frescoed chapel, a torture chamber, and gargoyles, the medieval **Castello di Amorosa** is the stuff of Hollywood. You can get a gander on a 90-minute tour, which includes a five-wine tasting. Reservations required; 4045 St. Helena Hwy. N.; castellodiamorosa.com

**The tab:** \$30

## 7 | Have an ick-free mud bath

At many bargain mud baths, everyone wallows in the same mud, but at the **Lavender Hill Spa**, in a prim little lavender cottage, you get a freshly drawn tub of hot water sprinkled with volcanic ash, sea salts, and lavender oil. Marinating in this mix is what swimming in a volcanic geyser might feel like. Afterward, cool down on a table while an attendant massages your feet. Reservations required; 1015 Foothill Blvd.; lavenderhillspa.com

**The tab:** \$75 for bath and massage

## 8 | Swim under the stars

After 7 p.m. at **Calistoga Spa Hot Springs Resort**, you can soak in a series of spring-fed pools for less than half the usual fee. And unlike at Indian Springs down the road, you don't have to book a spa treatment to get access to the pool. The 104° water makes floating under a sky full of stars feel just right. 1006 Washington St.; 866/822-5772.

**The tab:** \$10

## 48 hours in Calistoga

**GETTING THERE** Calistoga is 85 miles north of San Francisco International Airport; 26 miles north of Napa on State 29/128.

**FRIDAY** Check in at **Dr. Wilkinson's Hot Springs Resort** (from \$225; 1507 Lincoln Ave.; drwilkinson.com), where some motor-lodge-style funk is still intact though recent renovations have made it plenty comfy. Head to **Sterling Vineyards** for a tram ride and tasting, then have dinner and a microbrew at the down-home **Calistoga Inn** (\$\$\$; 1250 Lincoln; 707/942-4101), with live tunes nightly. Soak under the stars at **Calistoga Spa Hot Springs Resort**.

**SATURDAY** After a latte and scone at **Calistoga Roastery** (1426 Lincoln; 707/942-5757), get your morning exercise at **Bothe-Napa Valley State Park**. Hit **Bosko's Trattoria** (\$\$; 1364 Lincoln; 707/942-9088) for the lunch-time special (pasta or half-sandwich plus soup or salad; from \$8). Shop at the **Wine Garage** and catch a tour at **Castello di Amorosa**, Calistoga's showiest winery. Have dinner at **Flat Iron Grill** (\$\$; 1440 Lincoln; 707/942-1220), where the "no corkage fee, never ever" will save you substantial bucks.

**SUNDAY** Rent bikes from **Calistoga Bike Shop** and ride and taste along the Silverado Trail. For lunch, soak in the autumn sun on the patio at **Solbar** (\$\$; 755 Silverado Trail; 707/226-0850), set between the pool and twin bocce ball courts at the Solage Calistoga resort on the edge of town. Drive north of town to see **Old Faithful Geyser of California**, then enjoy the quintessential Calistoga experience, a mud bath, at the **Lavender Hill Spa**.