

A FRESH APPROACH TO TRAVEL, LIFESTYLE & TECHNOLOGY

VERVE

THE KING OF COMEDY

Exclusive interview
with Ricky Gervais

MARK WEBBER

FORMULA ONE
MEGASTAR
TALKS LIFE IN
THE FAST LANE

EXPLORE...

- ALPINE ADVENTURES
- INDULGE IN NAPA
- EXTREME CITY BREAKS
- STOCKHOLM GUIDE

CONQUERING EVEREST

BRITISH MOUNTAINEER
BONITA NORRIS TELLS HER STORY

VERVEMAG.CO.UK
DECEMBER 2010 | ISSUE TWO

WINTER STYLE // MP3 DOCK REVIEW // FASHION HOUSE HOTELS // TRAVEL GADGETS

CALIFORNIA DREAMING

World-class wineries, sensational spas, incredible restaurants and top-notch shopping: Napa has all you need for the indulgent break of a lifetime. Move over Tuscany...

|||||

WRITTEN BY JILL STARLEY-GRAINER



‘LAND of plenty’ is how the Native Americans described Napa Valley, a sentiment as true today as it was back in the eighteenth century. Located ninety minutes north of San Francisco, Napa is a glorious, sun-drenched playground for grownups - bursting with fine wine, gourmet food and sophisticated leisure pursuits. Nestled amid the verdant mountains, the valley’s four main towns – Calistoga, Napa, St. Helena and Yountville, each have their own distinctive charms.

Foodies must pay homage at the internationally acclaimed eateries of Yountville, whilst oenophiles will be absolutely spoilt for choice in this world-famous wine region (which is home to almost four hundred wineries). Shopaholics are guaranteed to be seduced by the chichi St. Helena, and both spa and nature lovers are in for a treat in woody, rustic Calistoga. Buzzy Napa meanwhile (the largest town in the valley), offers a little of everything and is expanding at a rate of knots.

If you’re new to Californian wines, start at the top. Far Niente (farniente.com; tour and tasting, \$50) is one of America’s most esteemed wineries. The tasting is pricey, but it’s more than worth it to sample the outstanding Cab Savs and Chardonnays on offer. For Champagne lovers, the esteemed Schramsberg winery is a must (schramsberg.com; tour and tasting, \$40).

The superior pedigree and idyllic setting make this the perfect place to sample some of California’s most delectable sparkling wines. Culture vultures should head to the Hess Collection (hesscollection.com; gallery,



free; tasting, \$10; Tour of the Palate, \$50) to take in its world-class collection of modern art, accompanied (of course), by a tippie of some top-quality wines. The generous pours at most wineries make driving impractical, and given that there is no viable public transport, it’s worth working out an alternative way of getting from tasting to tasting. Classic Convertible Wine Tours (antiquetours.net; from \$120/hour per car) will make sure you travel in style, chauffeuring you around in

beautiful classic cars (and more importantly, leaving you free to quaff).

Take a break from the wineries to indulge in an old Napa Valley tradition – getting mucky. Since the 19th century, tourists have been visiting Calistoga’s spas to slather on the local volcanic mud, which is said to work wonders on all manner of ailments, from skin complaints to arthritis. Try it yourself with a Mudslide at the luxurious Solage Calistoga spa (solagecalistoga.com; \$98 for one hour).

Feel like walking on air after your treatment? Do it literally with an exhilarating hot-air balloon ride – a hugely popular activity in the valley, despite the requisite pre-sunrise start. Six companies offer the experience with prices around \$200 per person for a one-hour ride. Bocce ball is another favourite valley pastime. Similar to bowls and petanque, and with the added advantage of



LEFT IMAGE Chardonnay and Cab-Sav from Far Niente winery
 ABOVE Hot air ballooning over Napa Valley
 ABOVE A room at Hotel Yountville
 TOP RIGHT Fennel dish from Ubuntu restaurant (courtesy of Elijah Woolery)

leaving one arm available for supping, it is the perfect way to while away a sunny afternoon. Many of the wineries and hotels have courts, or you can use the public courts at Veteran’s Park in Yountville (townofyountville.com; \$10 for one hour).

With so many fine hotels scattered through the valley, choosing where to sleep is as much a chore as a pleasure. Looking for that quintessential American B&B? Try Hennessey House (hennesseyhouse.com; doubles from \$139, B&B.) Get back to nature at rustic-luxe Calistoga Ranch (calistogaranch.com; doubles from \$650,



room only), with its gorgeous cedar-clad cabins scattered up the tree-filled hillside. Boutique hotel White House Inn (napawhitehouseinn.com; doubles from \$225, B&B) has a pool, small spa, concierge and chef, plus all the warmth and hospitality of a traditional American B&B without the faux Euro-style of many of the valley’s five-star establishments.

Gourmands will need at least a week to sample Napa’s award-winning eateries. After several years in the top five of many ‘World’s Best’ lists, Thomas Keller’s restaurant The French Laundry (frenchlaundry.com; minimum two-month advance booking essential), is still turning out exquisite French-Californian cuisine. At \$250 for the ten-course menu, it’s reasonably priced when compared to some of the world’s other top restaurants, but the wine list can get rather costly so it’s worth bringing your own – even with the \$75 corkage. Another must-visit is Michelin-starred Ubuntu (ubuntunapa.com), an innovative vegetarian restaurant with trendy vibe and truly extraordinary food (that even die-hard carnivores adore). For a great atmosphere and some authentic California-style comfort food, make like the locals and head to Cindy’s Backstreet Kitchen in St. Helena (cindysbackstreetkitchen.com). Be sure to sample the scrumptious mushroom tamales with grits or *pollo loco* (that’s crazy chicken) with avocado salsa.

Max out your credit cards on St. Helena’s small-town Main Street, with its cute boutiques and quirky shops or get a blast of retro America at WJ Guigni Grocery Co, where you’ll find old-fashioned sweets and candy bars along with a deli making delicious (and pleasingly cheap) sandwiches. To really indulge, visit Foot Candy, a firm favourite with A-listers looking to expand their designer shoe collections. Great shopping, superb wine and unbelievable food...Napa, we salute you. 🍷