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THE
NEW

CAL



STOOGA

Long a haven for spa-goers and outdoor adventurers, this once-sleepy Napa town is remaking itself on the wine, food and travel fronts.

BY STEVE HEIMOFF

In her day job, Elizabeth Cahill, assistant sommelier and maitre d' at Napa Valley's Auberge du Soleil, serves some of Napa Valley's priciest wines to well-heeled customers. But on her day off, you might find the Calistoga native hiking to the top of Mount St. Helena, which towers over the little town of 5,100, or just exploring the shops along Lincoln Avenue, Calistoga's main drag.

"Calistoga is really quaint," Cahill says. "It's a lot quieter than the rest of the [Napa] valley, not so hoity-toity. It's where the vines are, where the people who make the wines actually live."

For decades, Calistoga was considered the backwater of Napa Valley. "It was downscale," says Clos Pegase's proprietor, Jan Shrem, who moved there in 1986. Better known for mudbaths, trailer parks, its own Old Faithful geyser and a Petrified Forest, Calistoga stayed determinedly rural and old-fashioned, allowing St. Helena, and, later, Napa city itself, to define the valley's tony side.

Dr. Wilkinson's Hot Springs Mud Baths is still there, with its original sign from 1952, and locals still down meatball sandwiches at Boskos, as they have for decades. The town still holds its annual Fourth of July celebration, and the four mobile home parks within the city limits bring Calistoga an older population than you'll find downvalley. And if you're visiting during the holiday season, you can gaze in awe at what's probably the world's only Lighted Tractor Parade.

But the Calistoga of old is witnessing a renaissance, as change comes to the sleepy north valley. Even the recession isn't stopping visitors from exploring the new Calistoga.

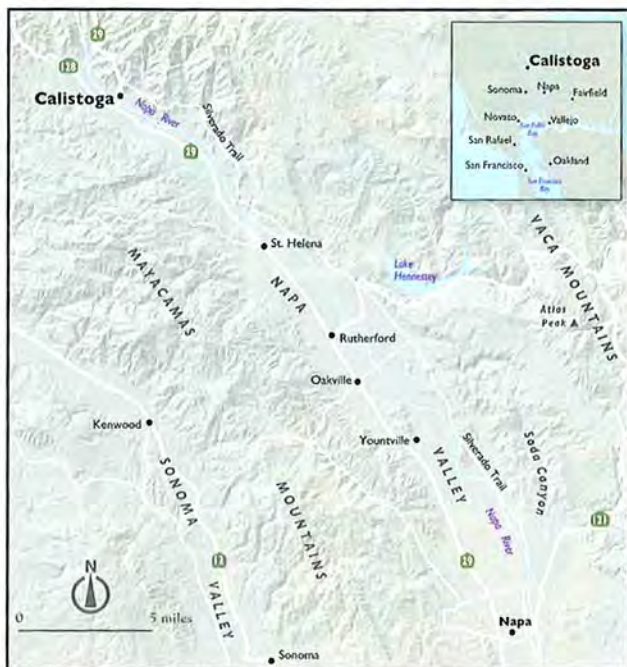
Upscale resorts are opening, and some of the best restaurants you'll find anywhere in Napa Valley are luring foodies. Wine lovers should note that a new generation of Calistoga wines is upping the ante, and for the first time ever, their labels will bear the "Calistoga" appellation which was officially approved (after years of bureaucratic and political wrangling) in March 2010.

Wine tasting wonders

Calistoga may have a different character than much of the valley to the south, but one thing is very much in common: "The main attraction is wine tasting," affirms Cahill. Chateau Montelena's tasting room, located a few miles from the village's center on Tubbs Lane, is one of the most popular stops, because of the beauty of the setting (stone castle, garden, lake), the quality of the wines and the variety of tastings offered: current releases, library wines and a Chardonnay tasting centered around the

PHOTO SEBASTIEN BUREL





themes and history offered in the movie *Bottle Shock* (reservations required for the library and *Shock* tastings).

Clos Pegase's visitors center, with its impressive, high-caliber artwork, also draws in the crowds on Dunaveal Lane between the Silverado Trail and Highway 29. Just down the street is Sterling, with their famous aerial tram. And just beyond that, far smaller but more intimate, is B Cellars' tasting room. Larkmead and Jericho Canyon also provide pleasant tasting opportunities.

At Zahtila Vineyards, which produces a top Cabernet Sauvignon from Calistoga fruit, the rose garden is a floral paradise. Summers Estates, which has a tasting room on Tubbs Lane, is a good stop, especially for their Cabernets. Venge Vineyards is open by appointment; they make some of Calistoga's best wines.

One of the more spectacular new attractions is Castello di Amorosa, the Tuscan-style castle built by the Vittorio Sattui family. Cuvaison also lures in the tasters on the Silverado Trail, south of town. And while Schramsberg, one of California's top sparkling wine houses, can't really be considered a winery that produces wine from Calistoga grapes, they are officially in Calistoga, and their by-appointment-only tasting feature is educational and fun. Back in the center of town, round out your tasting experience with a visit to T'Anne Tasting Room, which features the wines of W.H. Smith along with a sensory class in wine appreciation.

Great outdoors, soothing mud

Since you can't taste all day, "Get a bike and ride around," rec-



Clockwise, from top: An impressive collection of modern art awaits visitors to Clos Pegase; Castello di Amorosa; Gary Stoffers, assistant tasting room manager at di Amorosa, pours a sample in the winery's brick-lined cellar; Chateau Montelena's elegant tasting room and impressive facade; the winery was completed in 1886.



BOTTLE PHOTO JON VAN GORDER; PHOTOS VICTORIA YEE

ommends Rich Sowalski, Clos Pegase's winemaker. The Calistoga Bikeshop is one place to rent a set of wheels. You can pedal out eight miles to Robert Louis Stevenson State Park, park your bikes and hike up the 10-mile round-trip trail to the 2,000-foot summit of the Palisades, a series of volcanic outcroppings where mountain lions prowl and raptors soar overhead.

People still come to Calistoga for the thermal baths and mud soaks. When Solage, a resort with a spa and restaurant, opened a few years ago just south of town off the Silverado Trail, it raised some eyebrows: It was at the "wrong" (upvalley) end of Napa, and not even in the hills, like Meadowood or Auberge, but on the less-scenic flats. But when *Condé Nast Traveler* rated it the top spa in America, and reviewers raved about the food at Solage's restaurant, Solbar (which earned a Michelin star), both became hits.

And it drew attention to the many spas that abound along and around Lincoln Avenue. Some of the better ones include Lincoln Avenue Spa, Golden Haven Hot Springs Spa, Lavender Hill Spa and, of course, the famous Dr. Wilkinson's.

The same thermal activity that heats the mineral waters of the spas is responsible for the Old Faithful Geyser. It's not quite in the same league as the geyser of the same name at Yellowstone National Park, but it's right on Tubbs Lane, so if you're driving there, it's worth a stop.

The dining is fine

"Sitting out there on Solbar's deck, on a nice day or warm summer night, is great," says John Harris, proprietor of a new Calistoga brand, Rarecat. "Life just doesn't get any better." Solbar, the restaurant at the Solage resort, is expensive, with entrées ranging between \$23–\$36, but wine prices are fair, with an extensive by-the-glass list, and sommelier Bradley Wasserman's cocktails are locally famous (try the lemon-scented gin and Champagne cocktail called La Résistance).

Top: Eclectic shops line Lincoln Avenue, Calistoga's main drag. Middle: Sightseeing by bicycle is popular with both visitors and Napers like Jack Gingles, Mayor of Calistoga; Dr. Wilkinson's vintage sign reflects Calistoga's past. Bottom: Massages are offered in a 1920s Pullman railcar at Mais Oui Massage and Spa Train at the Calistoga Train Depot; Bicycles of all varieties can be found, for rent, at the Calistoga Bikeshop.



CLICK CALISTOGA

Lodgings & Spas

Calistoga Inn, calistogainn.com
 Calistoga Ranch, calistogaranch.com
 Dr. Wilkinson's, drwilkinson.com
 Golden Haven, goldenhaven.com
 Lavender Hill Spa, www.lavenderhillspa.com
 Lincoln Avenue Spa, lincolnavenuespa.com
 Mount View, mountviewhotel.com
 Solage, solagecalistoga.com [includes restaurant]

Wineries

Araujo, araujoestate.com
 B Cellars, bcellars.com
 Bennett Lane, bennettlane.com
 Castello di Amorosa, castellodiamorosa.com
 Chateau Montelena, montelena.com
 Clos Pegase, cloppegase.com
 Cuvaison, cuvaison.com
 Jericho Canyon, jerichocanyonvineyard.com
 Kenefick Ranch, kenefickranch.com
 Larkmead, larkmead.com

Shypoke, shypoke.com

Sterling, sterlingvineyards.com
 Summers, summerswinery.com
 T'Anne Tasting Room, whsmithwines.com
 Twomey, twomeycellars.com
 Venge, vengevineyards.com
 W.H. Smith, piedrahillvineyard.com
 Zahtila, zahtilavineyards.com

Recreation

Calistoga Bikeshop, calistogabikeshop.com

Restaurants

All Seasons, allseasonsnapavalley.net
 Barolo, barolocalistoga.com
 Boskos, boskos.com
 Brannan's, brannansgrill.com
 Buster's, busterssouthernbbq.com
 Cafe Sarafonia, cafesarafonia.com
 Calistoga Inn Restaurant, calistogainn.com
 Flat Iron, www.flatirongrill.com
 JoLè, jolerestaurant.com
 Solbar, solbarv.com

Less expensive, but probably the most popular new restaurant in town, is JoLē. “Their food is off the chart!” says Harris. Vintner Peter Heitz, who makes a range of Calistoga wines at his Shypoke Wine Cellars, says, “I honestly think JoLē is the best food in Napa Valley. It’s just like Calistoga—overdelivers by far.” Diners share small plates of savory items, like roasted turnips and carrots in a parsnip purée with mandarin oranges, olives and vadouvan, an Indian spice-based dish akin to curry. “I hate going to a restaurant where I can pick apart the dinner and figure out how they did it and do it at home,” Heitz says, adding, “But at JoLē you can never do that.” JoLē also has a great wine list, not strictly local, but you’ll find lots of interesting selections, with an extensive and reasonably priced by-the-glass list.

JoLē is attached to the Mount View Hotel & Spa, a small, upscale inn at the center of town that’s a convenient place to stay, with a variety of suite options. On the hotel’s other side is another new and stylish restaurant, Barolo, a little more casual than JoLē with less innovative fare, but a fun gathering place. Just up the street is the Calistoga Inn, a nightlife fixture for many years. “A great pub, and they have great beer,” says Joel Aiken, Beaulieu Vineyard’s former winemaker. “They have this little patio out back, by the creek, and you just hang out on a nice night.” Another place to check out, especially for the wine list, is All Seasons Bistro & Catering, which gets raves from locals, especially for the calamari.

So the area is a seesaw of the upscale and the down-to-earth. A visitor can opt to stay at the ultraluxe Calistoga Ranch, which is owned by Auberge Resorts. Its expensive lodges and suites are located in the hills above Calistoga. Afterward, he or she can saunter into Susie’s Bar, a throwback to a time when people smoked indoors, played music on the jukebox and shot a few rounds of pool; or Buster’s Southern BBQ & Bakery, where Buster himself grills up piles of pork ribs and tri-tip; or Brannan’s, a standby that’s been providing steady, consistent American fare for more than a dozen years; or Flat Iron Grill, a newish place in the center of town.

For a hearty breakfast, the hands-down most popular place is Café Sarafoonia. Spinach-portobello eggs Benedict with a mimosa is the perfect way to start the day.

Sarafoonia? The café derives its name from the process by which the town of Calistoga got its name. Depending on who you believe, that was either a careful and well-considered process or pure serendipity. Let’s go with the legend: In the 1890s, gold rush millionaire and town founder Samuel Brannan, while waxing enthusiastic about the area’s hot springs—and having a drink or two too many—declared, “I will make this town the Calistoga of Sarafoonia!”

Words may have failed him, but he succeeded in the endeavor, and the new settlers of Calistoga are continuing that success for a new, less rough-and-tumble age. 🍷

Top: The spacious outdoor deck at Solbar, located at the upscale Solage resort, offers fine dining al fresco; innovative small plates delight customers at popular newcomer JoLē.



To read about the terroir of Calistoga, go to winemag.com/terroircali

PHOTOS VICTORIA YEE