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A DELICIOUS RETURN TO CALIFORNIA'S WINE COUNTRY

| BY ALONA ABBADY MARTINEZ

Last year's wildfires were the worst in California's history, killing 43 people and destroying 10,000 properties, with some wineries in Northern California among them. Yet, considering the catastrophic impact, overall, the wineries fared much better than expected, with only a few burning down completely. Vineyards actually served as firebreaks, protecting most properties from going up in flames. California's wine country is up and running and eager to share its award-winning wines with visitors. Here is a rundown for the perfect long weekend escape, starting at Napa Valley and ending in Sonoma County. Each vineyard listed is an easy 40-minute drive from the another, making it the ideal travel time to take in the picturesque landscape while reminiscing on vintage tasted and preparing for the next one to come.



CONN CREEK WINERY, NAPA VALLEY



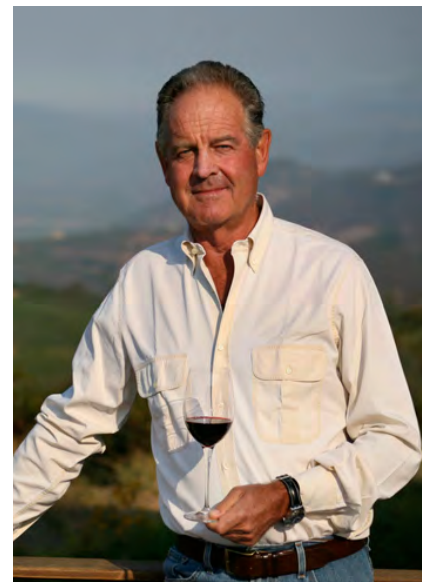
Start at this boutique Napa Valley winery for an unforgettable hands-on lesson in wine. Whether you aren't sure what kind of a wine drinker you are or you swear allegiance to one varietal, Conn Creek Winery's barrel blending experience is the best way to begin your wine journey. You'll get to play "winemaker for a day" by tasting Cabernet Sauvignon in a guided tasting, then blend any combination of Cabernets to your palate's liking. After that, adjust by adding other Bordeaux varietals like Cabernet Franc, Merlot, Malbec, and Petit Verdot. You'll get to play around a bit with several formulas, before committing to one personalized blend which you'll then get to bottle, hand-cork, and create a label for using blank labels and a rainbow of

markers. This one-of-a-kind experience not only allows wine lovers to have a first-hand look into the art of blending wines, but also learn about their own palate and preference to grape varietals and their nuances.





ANTICA, NAPA VALLEY



You'll have to make an appointment to visit this remote, picturesque vineyard perched atop the Atlas Peak District and it will be so worth it. The impressive winery belongs to the Italian Antinori family, who have been growing wines in Tuscany and Umbria for 26 generations, dating back to 1385. Today, the firm, which includes Antica, is run by Piero Antinori and his three daughters, Albiera, Allegra, and Alessia.

The climb 1,800 feet above sea level through par-

tially charred forest in these eastern mountains of Napa Valley is a reminder of how precariously close last year's fires came to the winery. Yet the lush and thriving vineyards prove otherwise, much in part to Antica's tenacious and dedicated Estate Manager, Glenn Salva, who helped create firebreaks that saved the property from approaching flames. Salva's charisma and clear love of these vineyards is a reflection of the Antinori's overall philosophy to create wines with passion, patience, and perseverance, a value that was carried over to California when the Antorini

family partnered with others to grow vineyards in Napa Valley in 1985. By 1993 the Antorini family had full ownership of the property. Even so, they took the time to cultivate and learn the land, releasing their first wines under the Antica label in 2007. Aside from the breathtaking views, you'll get to sample their extraordinary Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, and single-vineyard Townsend Cab in an effort to understand how perfectly this marriage between Italy and America is.



PATZ & HALL



Upon speaking to co-owner James Hall, one quickly learns that people, and relationships with them, is what has made Patz & Hall the renowned vineyard it is today. The idea for Patz & Hall began in the 1980s, when, Hall, who was an assistant winemaker at the time, struck a friendship with the vineyard's national sales manager, Donald Patz. They joined with Heather Patz and Anne Moses and created Patz & Hall in 1988. Fast-forward 30 years and this vineyard has become a must-visit destination known for its single vineyard Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

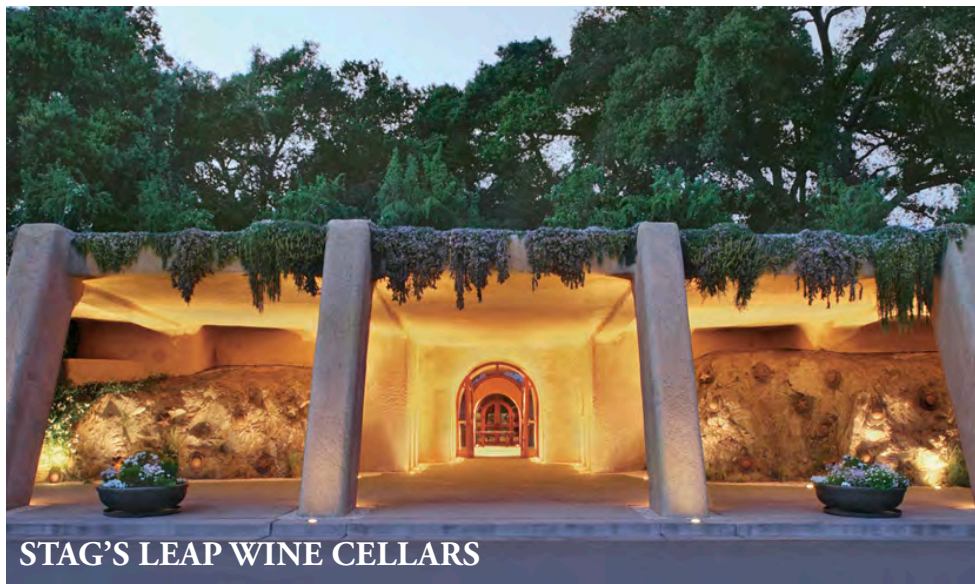
Make sure to reserve for their "Salon Experience" (\$75) which runs Thursday through Sundays and features six Chardonnay and Pinot Noir single-vineyard-designate wines. This intimate experience accommodates up to 9 people and pairs the wines with canapés such as mini shrimp taco with pineapple salsa, burnt orange and mezcal pâte de fruit on pink peppercorn shortbread, and Moroccan spiced lamb with cranberry carrot slaw on sweet potato.

They also offer a stylish drop-in tasting bar that offers more casual seated tastings as well as a

gorgeous terrace where guests may relax and take in the views.

Patz & Hall is located at 21200 8th Street East, Sonoma, CA 95476

For reservations please phone the Sonoma House Concierge at 707-931-2440 or email at info@patzhall.com or book your reservation online at <http://www.patzhall.com/>



STAG'S LEAP WINE CELLARS



WINES

A visit to California wine country would not be complete without a visit to Stag's Leap Wine Cellars, not to be confused with Stags' Leap Winery, a nearby vineyard with almost identical name. The name of this vineyard originated from a native Wappo legend of a stag leaping to escape hunters. According to the tale, the stag jumped through a prominent "v" shape between the mountains behind the property known as the Stag's Leap Palisades, and hence came the name.

Stag's Leap is famous for taking first place in the prestigious Judgement of Paris in 1976, only four years after the vineyard was established. There, its 1973 S.L.V. Cabernet Sauvignon won first place, having surpassed top French wines in a blind taste test led by French wine experts. The victory catapulted, not only Stag's Leap, but all of California into the winemaking limelight, making California a serious contender in the world wine map from that moment on.

The winery has recently opened a large, modern visitors center with even a mini-museum showcasing the famous bottle that took the fated 1st place award. Visitors can view the correspondence sent back and forth between France and California before being drawn to the extraordinary view of the vineyards framed by the commanding mountains in the back.

There are several tasting packages available beginning with the Estate Collection Tasting Flight (\$45 per person) which showcases the vineyards FAY and S.L.V. estate wines, two extremely different, yet equally alluring wines. This tasting includes the highly collected CASK 23. Reservations are required for groups of five or more.

For a bit more exploring, Stag's Leap offers the Estate Wine Tasting & Cave Tour (\$75 per person) which offers a tasting as well as a tour of the impressive underground modern caves where the majority of the wines are stored. Reservations are required.

The Fire & Water Tour and Tasting (\$95) includes a guided tour of the winery as well as a seated tasting accompanied by small bites. (Reservations required.)

The Cellarius Kitchen Experience with Chef Travis Westrope (\$175), is the winery's latest option. Guests are treated to a tour of the caves before enjoying a sit-down feast at the property's Cellarius Kitchen. Chef Travis Westrope pairs Stag's Leap's finest wines with seasonal and locally-inspired dishes, explaining each pairing along the way. Dishes have included beet-stained Atlantic salmon with sour grape caviar, lemon aioli, asparagus and heirloom squash salad (paired with 2015 FAY Vineyard Estate Cabernet Sauvignon), Mexican coffee pork belly, popcorn "grits", espresso agrodolce, and peach mostarda (paired with 2015 S.L.V. Estate Cabernet Sauvignon), and porcini dusted elk loin, squash blossom pesto, haricot verts, crispy morel mushrooms, and almond foam (paired with 2015 CASK 23 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon). Advance reservation are required and there is a maximum of 12 guests.

Lastly, the release of the 2015 FAY Cabernet Sauvignon this month marks 25 years of FAY. The FAY vineyard was planted by Nathan Fay in 1961 and was the first planting of Cabernet Sauvignon in what is now referred to as Stags Leap District. In honor of this anniversary, Stag's Leap Wine Cellars will be hosting a special seated tasting highlighting their latest 2015 FAY along with several vintages from their wine library. The special tasting will run from June 1, 2018 through December 2018. Reservations are required for this special 1-hour tasting and the price runs \$125 per person.

There are several lovely terraces to sit outdoors, sip wine, enjoy the awe-inspiring views, and perhaps catch a selfie with Stag's Leap in the background.

Stag's Leap is located at 5766 Silverado Trail, Napa CA 94558; 707-261-6410; [Stag's Leap](#)



Where to Stay & Where to Dine



NAPA: ARCHER HOTEL

A boutique hotel located in the heart of Napa, Archer Hotel offers an urban modern vibe that includes large flat-screen TVs, Nespresso coffee machines, and, in true wine country fashion, a wine cooler. There's also a hip outdoor rooftop bar called Sky & Vine which offers a 360-degree panoramic view of the valley with plush seating. The 7,000 square foot space features natural design elements of reclaimed wood, metal and stone, has hanging string lights, fruitless olive trees surrounding stone fire pits and lounge seating. It opens at 7:00am, so one can enjoy a cup of coffee before starting the day and serves breakfast, brunch, lunch, and dinner, with dishes like avocado toast with beet and horseradish-cured salmon, cucumber, watercress, and cured egg yolk or chilled artichoke salad with spring vegetables, watercress, and quinoa puffs.

Brunch features a spinning doughnut wheel and brioche French toast with spice battered, strawberry, basil, and whipped mascarpone.

Renowned steakhouse, Charlie Palmer Steak is located in the main floor of the hotel where celebrated chef Charlie Palmer shapes, what he calls, "Progressive American" cuisine inspired by the surrounding Napa Valley agricultural and viticultural regions. Steak lovers rejoice: this is the real deal. Opt to share 21-day dry-aged porterhouse or bone-on tomahawk steak for two and be sure to add on foie gras just because you can. But first, begin with the short rib pastrami or pig ear pad thai. Sides are plentiful and hard to stick to just one, so go for ordering several and sharing as well. Try the creamed spinach with garlic crumbs, assorted wild mushrooms with caramelized onions, and Yukon gold potato puree.

1230 1st St., Napa, CA 94559; 707-690-9800

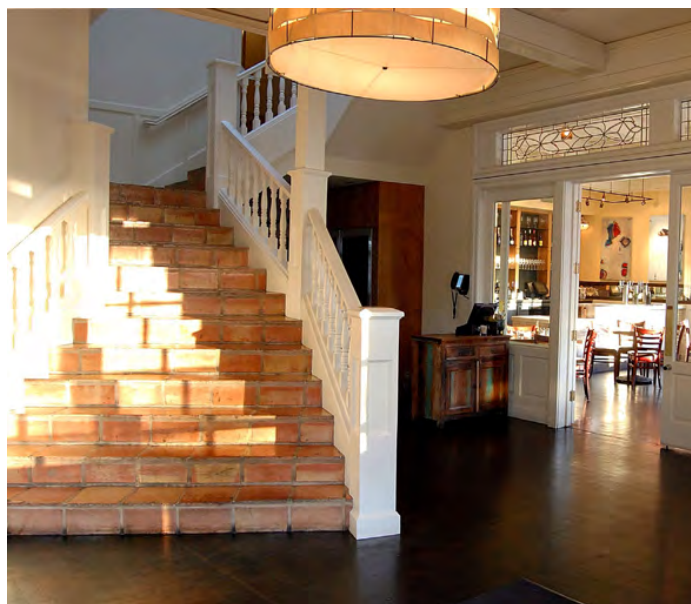
<https://archerhotel.com/napa>



THE LODGE AT SONOMA RENAISSANCE SPA & INN

Located within walking distance of quaint Sonoma Plaza, a shopping and dining mecca, this recently updated rustic-chic property serves as the ideal springboard for exploring Sonoma wine country.

1325 Broadway at Leveroni and Napa Roads, Sonoma, CA 95476
707-935-6600; The Lodge at Sonoma Renaissance Spa & Inn



EL DORADO KITCHEN

Executive chef Armando Navarro prepares California-inspired local farm and ranch fresh fare in a straight-forward manner. Locals flock here, and understandably so. The communal table, large windows welcoming natural light, and casual ambiance are part of the appeal. A spectacular wine list and exquisite dishes like scallop and soy glazed pork belly, seafood paella, and Petaluma chicken, house made sausage, polenta, mole sauce, and sous vide egg keep folks coming back.