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Risa Wyatt, Special to USA TODAY August 27, 2013

Napa Valley Wine Trails: A Cabernet Odyssey

Napa Valley grapes rank as the aristocrats of American viticulture. While California produces 663 million gallons of wine, only 4% comes from the elite Napa grapes. In this wine wonderland, Cab has ruled as king ever since 1976 when Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon beat Bordeaux's best at a landmark tasting in Paris.

Despite \$1,500 per bottle cult labels and some extravagant architecture, much of Napa Valley remains resolutely rural. Residents enter their blackberry jam at the annual county fair, and 95% of Napa Valley wineries are family owned.

Most Napa wineries are open to the public, either for drop-in visits or by appointment. Although a few wineries still offer free tastings (including Sutter Home and Mason Cellars), fees are the rule: \$10 to \$50 or more. Many wineries waive the fee if you buy wine.

Wine tastings can spotlight not just superb vintages, but also expand your knowledge about wine, history and art, as is outlined in this itinerary.

Far Niente

"Il dolce far niente"—the Italian phrase loosely translates as "without a care." The words are carved on a stone winery founded in 1885 by a California Gold Rush pioneer. Abandoned after Prohibition, the property was bought in 1979 and gloriously restored by Gil Nickel.

Today the winery focuses on estate-bottled Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. Tours begin with a walk through the historic, tri-level winery – one of the valley's first gravity-flow designs – and a visit to the 40,000-square feet of wine aging caves.

Guests also stop at the Carriage House, which holds classic cars the late Nickel collected, including an original condition 1954 Bentley Continental R and a shiny red 1961 Corvette roadster. Following the tour, tastings highlight current releases with a seasonal cheese pairing.

Thirteen acres of spectacular gardens surround the winery – especially lovely in spring when thousands of azaleas bloom. Also noteworthy: 1,000 solar panels that float on pontoons in the irrigation pond, thereby offsetting the winery's power usage.