

VALLEY OF THE KINGS

With its world-famous wines, breathtaking views and rich cultural scene, Napa Valley is the jewel in California's crown. **Jake Townsend** raises a glass to the region's many beguiling qualities.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GUY AROGETTI FOR OZAMA

Napa Valley's famed striped rows of green vines stretch as far as the eye can see.

Roiling grey-blue clouds stretch across San Francisco Bay and brief morning rain showers give way to the waves of early commuters coming and going on the gritty-slick sidewalks. It's the perfect way to begin my trip to California's Napa Valley, for this urban scene, at the cutting edge of culture and commerce, highlights what makes Napa so different. It is fitting that one of the world's most beautiful and important centres for winemaking would be just a stone's throw away, and yet it is a world apart. Divided by a chasm of time and sensibility, its existence has depended upon the ever-churning engine of growth taking place here in San Francisco – just an hour's drive away.

I can think of few things more enjoyable than an extended spin through Napa Valley to experience those magnificent wineries and the verdant landscape in which they sit. As that elusive Northern California sun begins to peak from behind these swollen clouds, we set off.

Although San Francisco's legendarily snarled traffic prevents us from exiting in third gear, after snaking through Golden Gate Park and suddenly entering the majesty of the Bay Bridge in all its crimson might, we speed up. A jaunt across the bridge and it's quickly into the golden hills that serve as the gateway to that other, slower California. The city gives way to the pastoral as Highway 101, the legendary ribbon of road that carries so many millions for so many miles, stretches out into the middle distance and on to wine country.

Fog dissipates and we take to the undulating curves of the highway. Fresh ocean-clean breezes whip through the open windows and permeate the senses. These ocean winds, part of that invisible fabric of climate and soil that together create Napa's rich fertility, roll across the coast and into the valley and are responsible for so much of its success.

In winemaking, the concept of terroir – the intangible essence of time and place transferred from weather to soil, soil to grape, grape to glass – is at the very heart of those ineffable qualities that together create exceptional wines. There is a reason that, when considering one wine over another, it is origin that is often discussed first, even before varietal or winemaker. Napa is among a small group of unique places that, in a synthesis of land, sun and moisture, consistently produces some of the world's most important wines.

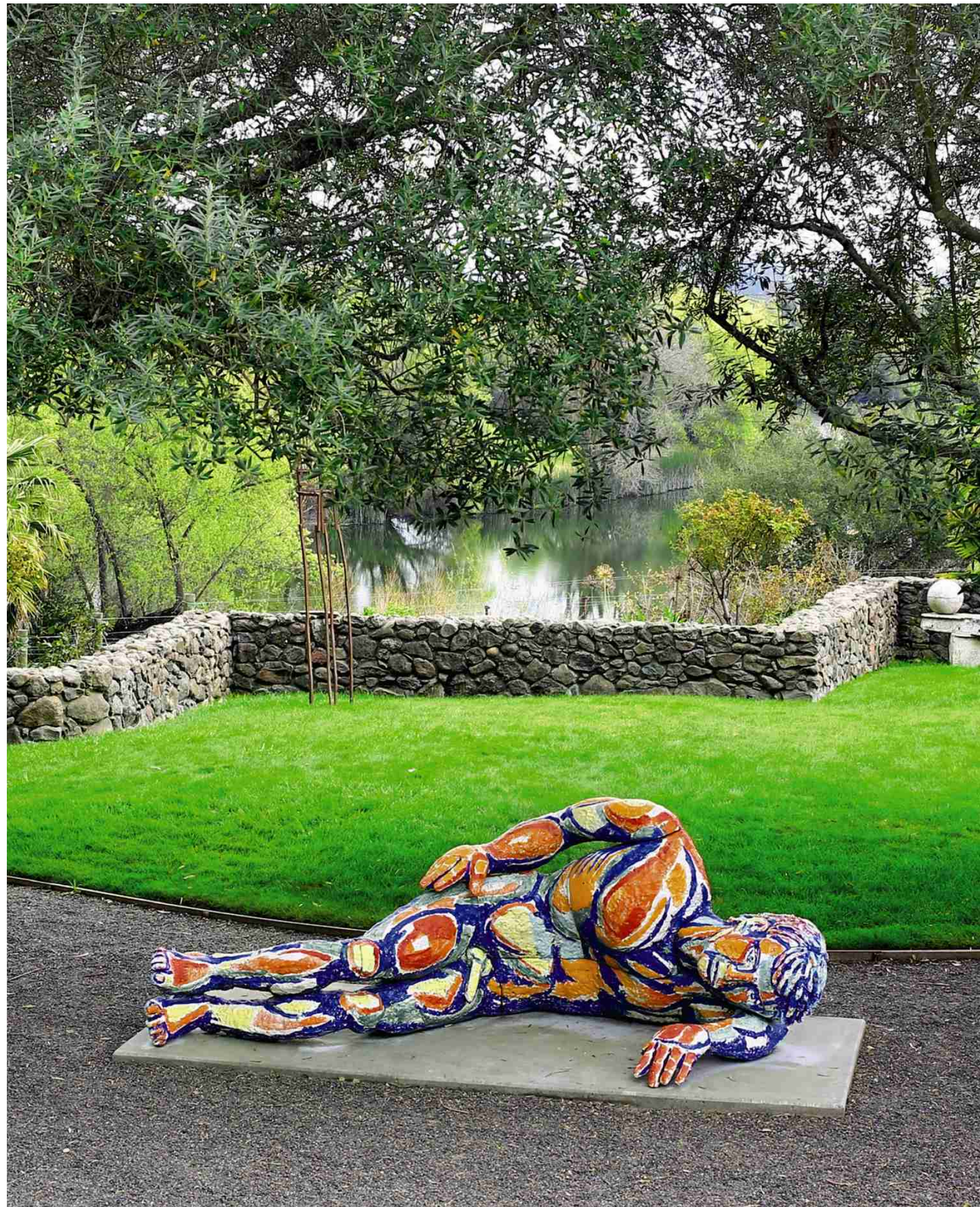
(Clockwise from top) The Hess Collection of contemporary art; cool cellars keep wine at optimum temperature; the renowned Auberge du Soleil; Napa Valley's stunning scenery and open roads.



For the uninitiated, Napa is as much a concept as it is a physical location. Like so many appellations, Bordeaux, the Dordogne and Chianti among them, this place is really a collection of tiny hamlets, lovely small towns and what seems like a patchwork quilt of strung-together vineyards – rows of vines like great green corduroy blanketing the region.

A trip to Napa should always start with a check-in at one of the new and newly refurbished luxury hotels located in and around the towns that serve as focal points: Napa itself, Yountville, Calistoga and St Helena. The Auberge du Soleil, having recently been revamped, provides a well-situated base from which to spend a few days exploring the area and immerse oneself in all things wine. Built into a dense hillside landscape, the Auberge du Soleil resembles a luxury mountain village, with rooms and suites surrounding a main building, where the hotel's Michelin-starred restaurant is nestled away. Guests looking for more privacy often book either the Maison Loire or the Maison Champagne, each one a freestanding building that features views of the vineyards beyond Rutherford Hill.

The recently updated menu at the Auberge du Soleil restaurant reflects a focus on contemporary French cuisine seen through a California lens and an emphasis on regional produce. Seated near the roaring fireplace in a room lit by glowing candles, the six-course *prix fixe* menu paired with expertly curated wines makes for a heady experience. If you can't get a table there, try the Lucy Restaurant, at the Bardessono hotel, famed for its fresh, innovative cuisine.



An early morning begins with the winding drive down on to the Silverado Trail road. Although Highway 29 is the most popular route through the Valley, the Silverado Trail runs parallel to the highway and is often much less congested. While a number of great local wineries run along this scenic route, the inimitable Harlan Estates is the first stop of the day. This legendary winery has consistently produced some of the most lauded red wines of the past two decades and, although not open to the public, it will open its gates to a select few. The estate itself, located in the rolling hills of Oakville, is situated on a promontory above a valley floor. With its hilltop vantage point, Harlan is among the loveliest locales from which to gain some perspective on the unique topography that produces such exceptional grapes and extraordinary wines.

Harlan is known for its rare, small-batch vintages that have a rabid following and, as such, are able to command prices near \$1,000 per bottle. Proprietor Bill Harlan set out in 1990 to create a world-class, first-growth wine – and his first bottles set high marks that have consistently been met for the past 20 years. Over a decade ago, at the 2000 Napa Valley wine auction, a ten-vintage vertical of magnums sold for \$700,000. Bill Harlan and his associates are responsible for several Napa institutions, including Bond Winery and Meadowoods, a luxury resort and private club nestled in close proximity to his other properties.

By the afternoon, other destinations beckon and we're off again. Also located off the Silverado Trail but feeling like a world away is Araujo Estate in Calistoga. Founded by proprietors Bart and Daphne Araujo, the estate's wines are classic and powerful. The grapes are organically and biodynamically farmed at Araujo's neighbouring vineyards, which produce complex vintages. Although Araujo, upon first glance, is rather unassuming, venturing into the cavernous barrel rooms feels like entering a secret world. Like Harlan, the winery does not offer public tastings, but will open for select customers.

Then it is back again on the Silverado Trail, racing along the winding country roads toward Colgin Cellars. Founded by Ann Colgin, the winery has consistently produced cabernets and syrahs of singular quality. The property itself is located on a sloping mountain, with views into the valley and of the Mayacamas beyond. Nestled in a swath of land where the planted fields are shielded from the cold maritime winds rolling off the Pacific Ocean, this area is an ideal locale for noble varieties of unparalleled quality. Colgin wines, including IX Estate and Cariad reds, are among the most honest,

(Opposite) Sculptures on the di Rosa property provide a diverting detour.

STAY IN STYLE

FIVE FABULOUS HOTELS TO ENSURE A LUXURIOUS TRIP



Auberge du Soleil

Nestled on Rutherford Hill, with rooms spread among a lush, 33-acre property, this luxury hotel features 50 guest rooms and suites. The ten-time Michelin star-awarded restaurant Auberge is not to be missed. www.aubergedusoleil.com

Meadowood

Located in St. Helena on a private estate, Meadowood is old California luxury at its most authentic. Guests enjoy golf, tennis, swimming or simply relaxing at the 250-acre mountain preserve situated within minutes of the region's finest wineries. www.meadowood.com

Calistoga Ranch

Also part of the Auberge collection, this Upper Napa Valley Canyon luxury retreat has 50 free-standing guest lodges with floor-to-ceiling windows through which to admire the oak trees dotted throughout the property. The Lakehouse, its guest-only restaurant, is at the edge of a private lake. www.calistogaranch.aubergeresorts.com

Bardessono

This boutique hotel, situated in the quintessentially Napa town of Yountville, typifies the relaxed elegance that makes the area so unique. Its 62 guest rooms are all sustainably designed, and its Lucy restaurant and bar creates much-admired, locally sourced cuisine. www.bardessono.com

Milliken Creek

Tucked away in three acres of secluded grounds on the Silverado Trail, the twelve-room Milliken Creek has stunning views across the idyllic Napa River. Guests are promised relaxation in plush surroundings, including four-poster beds, open fireplaces and an on-site spa. While there is no restaurant, complimentary wine and cheese are served at sunset in the main house. www.millikencreekinn.com



(Top) Guests at Milliken Creek can relax in idyllic surroundings.

(Left) Floor-to-ceiling windows at Calistoga Ranch offer amazing views of the surrounding woodland.



neoclassically produced wines available today. These rich and powerful varietals are complex yet accessible to those who may not be able to discern the cherry or stone notes, but who simply love and appreciate special wines. We sip Colgin until the sun slips behind the hills and the high-moisture ocean breezes slip over the soil once again.

Wine may be the order of the day, but there are two exceptional contemporary art collections in the area that are worth carving out time to visit. The following day sees us heading away from the Silverado Trail and west toward the coast, crossing the highway on to Redwood Road to The Hess Collection, a startling find in the middle of these sleepy towns. As well as producing a lovely grüner veltliner and offering tours and tastings, the Hess estate houses a contemporary art museum founded by winemaker and entrepreneur Donald Hess. He began acquiring contemporary art in 1966 and has focussed on a select group of artists, among them Anselm Kiefer, Gerhard Richter and Francis



Bacon, collecting their work in depth. The museum is open every day and is not to be missed.

No less impressive and just around a few bends on the Carneros Highway is the di Rosa property. This surprising collection of art, situated near a small lake and in a series of purpose-built convex structures, has one of the world's most significant holdings of Bay Area art. Now a non-profit institution, this by-appointment-only museum has a nearly 2,000-piece collection of art by 800 regional artists, including Bruce Nauman, Jay DeFeo, Manuel Neri, Sandow Birk and Larry Sultan among them. And on view through 2 October is an exhibition of films, sculptures and other works by San Francisco artist Paul Kos.

The next vineyard beckons. Born of the rare, cool climate and rocky, mineral-rich soils unique to the Rutherford appellation, the exceptional wines of Quintessa are complex and entirely exceptional. High-elevation vineyards, coupled with geographical complexity, create wines of increased structure, flavour and minerality that are impossible to reproduce in wines made just below on the valley floor.

The 280-acre Quintessa estate is anchored by a striking main structure designed by Walker Warner Architects and built using materials that echo the local rocky landscape. Forming an ellipse behind which sit the rolling vineyards and nestled seamlessly into the hillside, the structure acts as a metaphoric representation of the winery's belief in the connection between its wines and the terroir that nurtures them.

Dozens of tiny blocks producing cabernet sauvignon, merlot, cabernet franc, petit verdot and carmenère, each with unique clones, soils and orientations, lend the area a mosaic of topographic possibility that produces fruit of astonishing variety. Agustin and Valeria Huneus, proprietors of Quintessa, make full use of their remarkable grapes that have consistently produced extraordinary wines.

It feels as if one could go from one winery to another indefinitely, but we head back to the Silverado Trail and San Francisco, away from this place where time seems to slow and, with it, the din of the city, glowing hot in the barely visible horizon.

Jake Townsend is a Los Angeles-based writer and luxury branding consultant.

(Opposite above) Quintessa's striking architecture is built into the land.

(Opposite below) Bardessono's Lucy Restaurant is popular for its locally-sourced cuisine.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD BARNES, FOUR SISTERS MNIS, DREW ALTIZER

FEATURED PROPERTIES

SOTHEBY'S INTERNATIONAL REALTY



WINE COUNTRY LUXE

CALISTOGA, CALIFORNIA

Situated just north of St. Helena in the heart of Napa Valley and surrounded by thousands of acres of preserved Land Trust, this private 40-acre compound embodies the essence of Wine Country luxury. A meandering driveway leads through cabernet vineyards and olive groves up to the elegant main residence, which is constructed of weathered cedar, stucco and native stone. Two guest-houses with a private pool complete this estate designed by Rela Gleason.

\$21,500,000 Property ID: GCJHK6 | sothebysrealty.com
Sotheby's International Realty – Wine Country East Napa Street Brokerage
Ginger Martin +1 415 516 3939



SOUTHERN CHARM IN NAPA

NAPA, CALIFORNIA

A gated, palm tree-lined drive leads to this stately five-bedroom home. This stunning knoll-top setting features panoramic vineyard views and includes a barn and guest house. A two-storey library with handcrafted woodwork, gourmet kitchen, dramatic staircase and wine cellar are among some of this residence's additional amenities.

\$5,995,000 Property ID: Z2CKVN | sothebysrealty.com
Gates Estates Sotheby's International Realty
+1 707 944 0888