

# Visiting the valley

Ever wanted to blend your own wine? Or combine tasting with a tour of an ancient arms collection? If you're looking for wine tourism with a difference, Napa Valley has several options. By Katie Kelly Bell



During a trip to California's Napa Valley, one can expect brilliant sunshine, eucalyptus-scented air, a density of Michelin-rated fine dining and a bevy of award-winning winemakers. One can also expect crowds. The crowds are just part of the experience now. Yet there are still opportunities for those who seek something beyond the usual shuffle of shouldering your way up to the tasting room bar, fending off elbows and handbags along the way. Wineries are answering the demand for intimate, high-quality tasting experiences. And as is the case with wine, each of these experiences has a personality all of its own. We'll leave it to you to decide which best suits your style...

## The Intellectual Conn Creek and Judd's Hill

YOU'LL NEED YOUR full mental faculties to take on Conn Creek's expansive and award-winning blending room experience. Guests are invited to work with 15 different barrels of Cabernet Sauvignons to create a blend of their own to take home. The wines used are the same as those considered for the winery's flagship Bordeaux blend, Anthology. The room itself is a temple to terroir, with photos of each Napa appellation accompanied by soil samples in glass containers and corresponding barrels of Cabernet Sauvignon.

Your guide for the two-hour session instructs you on how to break down the process of tasting different terroirs in order to craft the blend that will please your palate most. Once you've whittled down your Cabernet selections, it's time to taste through

**Above: gourmet dining on Auberge du Soleil's terrace. Left: Conn Creek (top) and Judd's Hill (bottom) both offer a chance for visitors to create their own wine blend**

the blending grapes: Malbec, Petit Verdot, Merlot and Cabernet Franc.

If discerning nuances among 15 different appellations sounds intimidating, you might prefer the smaller-scale but similar experience at Judd's Hill. You'll have fewer wines to choose from for your blend, but more opportunities for involvement. Participants are invited to join in everything from hand-harvesting and barrel selection to blending and bottling. You'll also create a barrel, or several barrels, of your own.

Owner Judd Finkelstein has contracts with growers throughout the valley, so you'll have access to a range of fruit from appellations including Stags Leap, Rutherford, St Helena and Oakville. During the ageing process, Finkelstein encourages visits from the barrel owners so they can taste the wine as it matures – he's currently babysitting roughly 100 barrels for

different clients. He also offers a single-day blending camp for those who just want a few bottles as opposed to an entire barrel.

**The Intellectual should stay at:** Milliken Creek Inn and Spa. The luxurious, contemplative, zen-like surroundings are within walking distance of the town of Napa – where you can indulge in museums, shopping and dining.

**Below: try 15 different Cabernet Sauvignons from across Napa Valley at Conn Creek. Right: wind down in one of the five-star cottages at Auberge du Soleil**



## The Epicure Antica Napa Valley and Round Pond Estate

THE LONG, WINDING drive up to Antica will reward you with pristine views of Atlas Peak and some of the valley's most charming hospitality. The site really does resemble a Tuscan hillside, and hospitality manager Kim Wiss will tell you this is one of the reasons why Piero Antinori selected it. Honey bee hives, olive groves and wine caves are all part of the experience (by appointment only). The caves are some of the only in Napa that are permitted to grow mould – as they were built before the Government edict that all caves must be coated in a mould-repelling substance. After an exploratory tour, you'll be invited inside to Antinori's own family table. Here you'll taste the wines, sample the vivid fruitiness of the estate olive oil, try some honey, nibble on

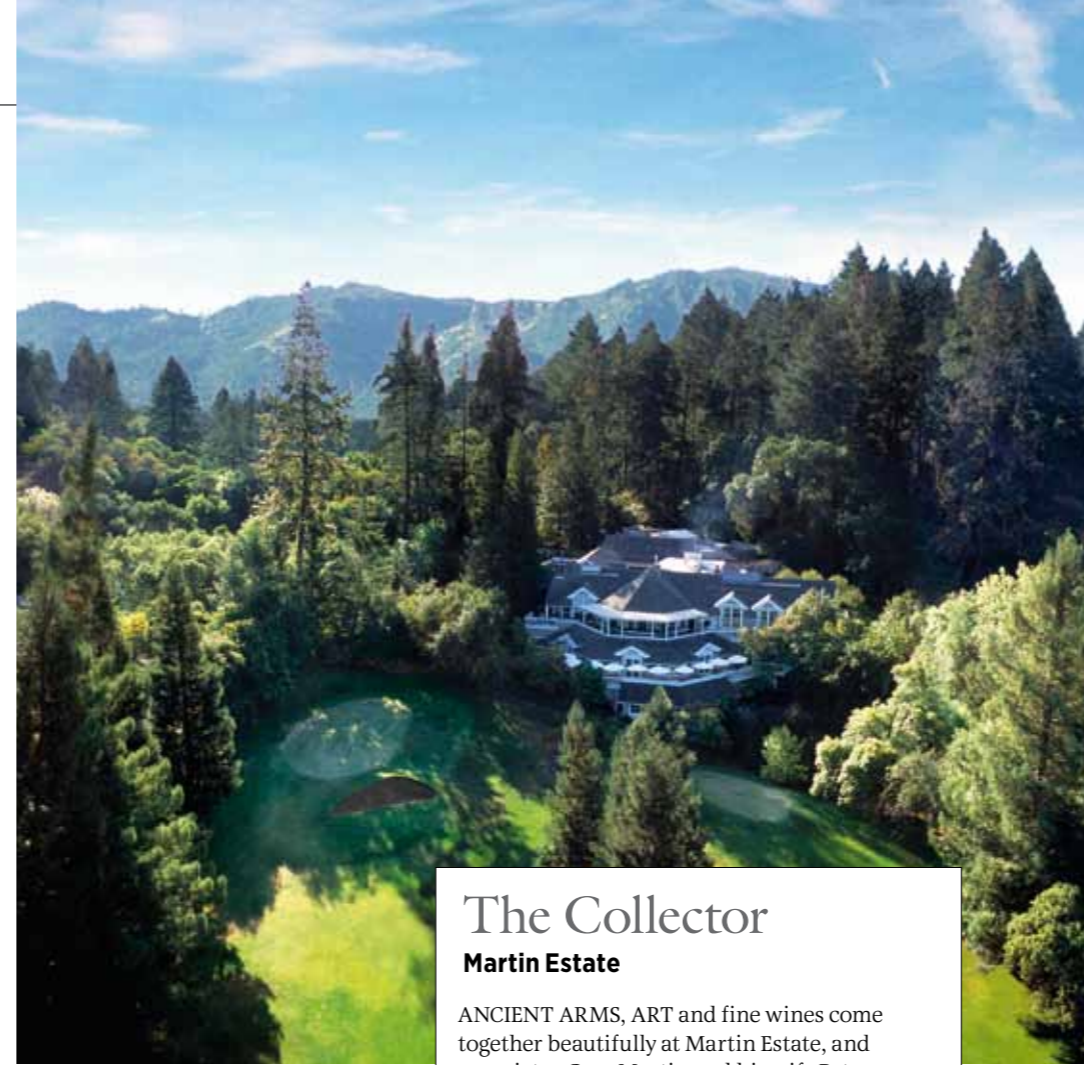
charcuterie and enjoy the views.

Round Pond in Rutherford, meanwhile, specialises in wine and olive oil, and on creating unique wine-and-food-pairing experiences. The best of these is the Garden to Table Brunch with chef Eric Maczko. It begins with tea and coffee served in the organic garden, followed by a cooking demonstration. Here, Maczko discusses in depth the artful game of pairing wine with food. You can also book the 'A Day in the Life' experience during harvest time, for a hands-on day of winemaking combined with a private tour of the olive mill.



**The Epicure should stay and eat at:** Auberge du Soleil. The five-star, hillside cottages offer some of the valley's finest views. This resort specialises in gourmet pampering, serving up exquisite meals (pea tendrill risotto, local lamb tartare) poolside or on the resort's legendary cliffside terrace.





Clockwise from left: the Crystal Cellar at Ramond Vineyards; Meadwood resort; La Toque restaurant

## The Adventurer Raymond Vineyards

RAYMOND'S THOROUGHLY UNORTHODOX owner, Jean-Charles Boisset, invites guests to experience everything from a biodynamic gardening tour to an invitation-only experience in the velvet-clad Red Room lounge. Start in the Corridor of Senses, where a line-up of a dozen or so atomisers encourages visitors to inhale the varying aromas found in Napa Valley wines. Just down the hall is the Library Room for exclusive vertical tastings of Raymond wines, including some dating back to 1974. The Rutherford Room boasts dirt samples artfully displayed in glass apothecary jars (you're invited to sniff them all) and offers a comprehensive view of the Napa Valley appellations.

Learn to appreciate the effects of air on wine in the sleekly styled Crystal Cellar with its mirrored bar,

stainless steel walls, Baccarat chandeliers and collection of Baccarat decanters. Guests sample the range in Raymond's District Collection, which includes Cabernet Sauvignons from Oakville, St Helena and Rutherford.

In the Red Room, textural intensity is at its height with velvet-clad ceilings, leopard-skin rugs, Baccarat chandeliers, and diversions such as billiards and pinball. In utter contrast to the dimly lit, speakeasy Red Room atmosphere is the Theatre of Nature – a free ambling, self-guided homage to the power of biodynamic farming. Raymond is a sensually overwhelming experience guaranteed to dispel any fit of boredom.

**The Adventurer should dine at:** La Toque. This Michelin-rated, glossy and stylish modern restaurant specialises in bold wine and food pairings such as Grüner Veltliner with hamachi crudo, Asian pear, yuzu emulsion and dashi gel.



## The Collector Martin Estate

ANCIENT ARMS, ART and fine wines come together beautifully at Martin Estate, and proprietor Greg Martin and his wife Petra welcome pre-arranged appointments. This family-owned operation crafts Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet rosé and a Port solely from their 2.8ha estate. Each hand-crafted wine shines with structure and refinement, but a visit here yields more than just elegant reds; it's also home to Martin's stunning arms collection.

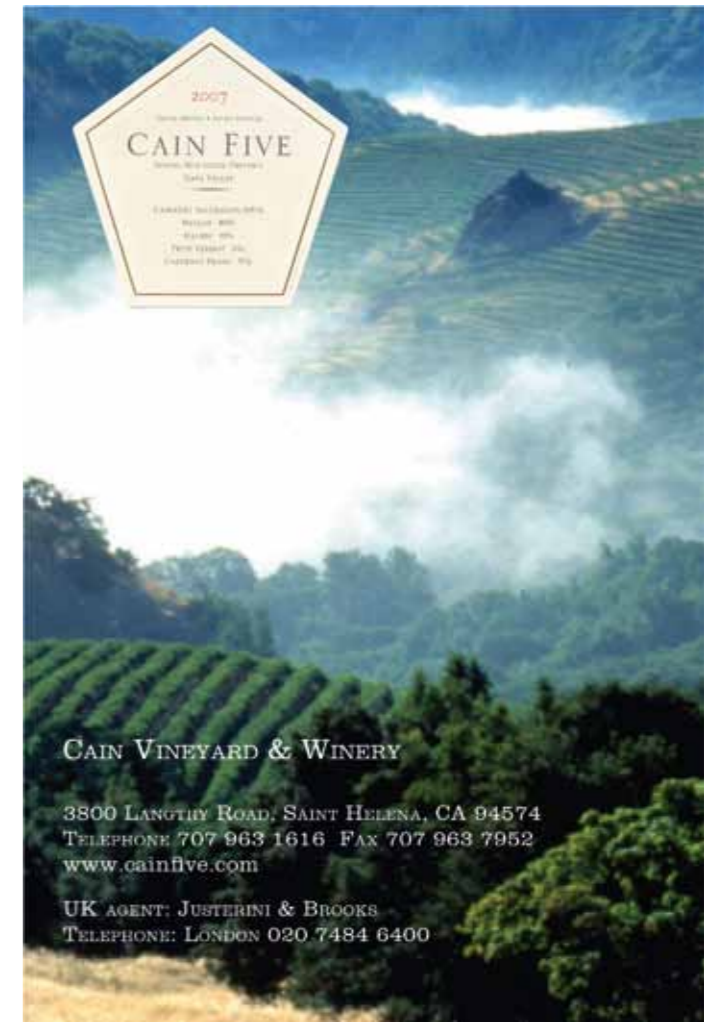
His Napa property is a temple to ancient weaponry, including Chinese hand cannons, medieval suits of armour, antique pistols, Napoleonic swords, and more. Touring the home, which is a piece of Napa history in itself (Georges de Latour produced his first Beaulieu Vineyard wines here), you'll fall under Martin's spell as he recounts tales of arms and the arts.

**The Collector should stay at:** Meadwood resort. There are two Master Sommeliers here to cater to your every wine whim, and a war chest of fine wines to enjoy in the three-Michelin-starred dining room.

## Contacts

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**Auberge du Soleil** [www.aubergedusoleil.com](http://www.aubergedusoleil.com)  
**Conn Creek** [www.conncreek.com](http://www.conncreek.com)  
**Judd's Hill** [www.napamicrocrush.com](http://www.napamicrocrush.com)  
**La Toque** [www.latoque.com](http://www.latoque.com)  
**Martin Estate** [www.martinestate.com](http://www.martinestate.com)  
**Meadwood** [www.meadwood.com](http://www.meadwood.com)  
**Milliken Creek Inn & Spa** [www.millikencreekinn.com](http://www.millikencreekinn.com)  
**Raymond Vineyards** [www.raymondvineyards.com](http://www.raymondvineyards.com)  
**Round Pond** [www.roundpond.com](http://www.roundpond.com)

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