

CALMING CALISTOGA

Meet and relax in Napa Valley's wellness, fine-dining & wine town

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CALL ON CALISTOGA

Hot springs, wine, fine dining and gorgeous venues make this town at the north end of the Napa Valley a place you want to know.

BY JANET FULLWOOD

LONG BEFORE it became known for wine, this little town at the north end of the Napa Valley was famous for the hot springs and geysers that bubble up from volcanic soils at the base of 4,342-foot Mount Saint Helena.

Sam Brannan, California's first Gold Rush millionaire, recognized a new kind of gold when he saw it. Envisioning a resort town to rival fashionable Saratoga Springs, New York, he was said to have bragged at a dinner party that he would transform the region into the "Calistoga of Sarifornia"—meaning, of course, the Saratoga of California.

The slip-of-the-tongue name stuck, and so did its reputation as a spa town. Calistoga today is a wellness, fine-dining and wine destination with an unhurried feel, a broad range of venues to accommodate meeting and event planners—and more on the horizon.

Hang Your Hat

Calistoga's 43 lodging properties range in scale from intimate, two-room bed-and-breakfasts to luxury resorts like **Solage Calistoga**, an 89-room property with a recently revamped and enlarged Michelin-starred restaurant (Solbar) and 15,000 square feet of flexible, indoor-outdoor meeting space. Two new luxury properties of similar size, one managed by Four Seasons is going up on the site of the former Silver Rose Inn, the other a hotel and residential development called Calistoga Hills, are slated to open over the next few years.

In the meantime, a healing economy is making itself felt in projects like the recent

PHOTO: IVAN MILLER

expansion of **Indian Springs Resort**, a historic 18-acre property on the grounds of Brannan's original Hot Springs Hotel. Seventy-five new guest rooms were added in 2014, upping the count from 41 to 116 and opening new opportunities for group functions. Two new meeting spaces, Reflection and Rivers, can accommodate 60 people each, more if their French doors are opened to patios outside. A new 1,200-square-foot Event Barn targeting corporate gatherings is set to open this spring. Also new are a wedding garden, a yoga studio and Sam's Social Club, a 90-seat restaurant with extensive patio seating, outdoor fire pits and a rustic-American menu.

Indian Springs' vintage bathhouse, dating to 1862 and offering mud baths, massages and facials, received an update as part of the expansion project. So did the geyser-heated swimming pool, in continuous operation since 1913, that remains the resort's aaah-inducing centerpiece.

"We're a casual, put-your-feet-up kind of place," says General Manager Brian Rios, pointing out lawn areas where summertime guests gather to play bocce ball, croquet and shuffleboard. "We get all kinds of folks, and we're not trying to be pretentious. The beauty of this property is its range of accommodations, from motel-style rooms to our new lodges and two-bedroom bungalows. We also have two rental houses in the top price range."

Word of mouth is what drives business at Indian Springs, Rios adds. The resort, known for more than 80 years as Pacheteau's and still called that by old-timers, historically has done "no marketing whatsoever," Rios says, and they like their "hidden-gem" status.

Another hidden gem is **Calistoga Ranch**, a 50-room, 157-acre celebrity and politico hideout that is a fixture on many a "best resort" list. The property was acquired in late 2013 by Auberge Resorts, which also operates the famed Auberge de Soleil down-valley in Rutherford. Pricey and private are the keywords here, even when it comes to the Lakehouse restaurant, which is not open to the public. A high-end cabernet sauvignon produced from an on-site vineyard is likewise available only to guests.

"We cater to a lot of celebrities and high-level meetings, and privacy is a huge factor," says Mike Moran, director of sales and marketing. Groups gathering for business meetings or social events are required to reserve at least one guest suite, but can otherwise be accommodated at venues ranging from

a tucked-away two-room executive lodge to various lawn, terrace and vineyard settings. A 1,175-square-foot wine cave hung with chandeliers can be configured to accommodate everything from an intimate rendezvous for two to a seated dinner for 50.

"Our typical meeting size is about 20," Moran says, adding that resort buyouts are common. "A trend now is that a company or celebrity will buy out the entire resort, but only 10 people show up. That's what we cater to—the really, really high end."

Walkable Downtown

Part of Calistoga's charm is a walkable downtown that still reflects the diversity of the community. Neighborhood bars, a Mexican market and a supermarket catering to locals share space along Lincoln Avenue with upscale boutiques and eateries. "Obviously there are changing dynamics in Calistoga, but we're very focused on keeping a small-town feel and sense of community," says Carolyn Hernandez, public relations and marketing manager for the Calistoga Visitor Bureau.

Many Calistoga lodging properties, including Indian Springs, are within walking distance of downtown culinary hotspots including Calistoga Kitchen, an intimate, 34-seat (plus patio) eatery with a small private dining room; Brannan's Grill, a larger venue with seating areas that can be sectioned off for groups; and Calistoga Inn, whose welcoming creek-side patio, strung with lights, is packed every night in summer.

New as of spring 2014 is **DOMAINE**, a second-floor event space, formerly an IOOF dance hall, washed in soft light and a neutral palette customizable to almost any look. Owner Gina King, who also operates a full-service event marketing company, concentrates on sommelier-led events with a twist.

"We're focused on the experiential," King says, detailing food pairing workshops and sensory wine-tastings that incorporate music, tea, fruit, aromas and other elements. "Groups are able to learn in a relaxed environment that gets them to think about wine in different ways. We like to introduce them to small-production wineries that may not have tasting rooms. We find that people are much more adventurous when there's guidance."

Wineries Large and Small

The modern era of winemaking in the Calistoga region took root in the 1960s with pioneering names like **Schramsberg Vineyards**, which found

NICE TO KNOW

► Charles M. Schulz-Sonoma County Airport, 30 minutes from Calistoga in the city of Santa Rosa, is served by Alaska Airlines with flights to and from Seattle, San Diego, Portland and Los Angeles.

► Up to a case of wine packed for shipping flies free on Alaska Airlines flights originating from Sonoma County Airport.

► The Calistoga Shuttle is a free, on-demand, door-to-door shuttle service for guests staying at any of 43 lodging properties within city limits. Residents and visitors staying elsewhere can use the service for \$1 per ride.

► The Calistoga AVA (American Viticultural Area) is the northernmost wine-growing region in the Napa Valley. It covers about 7 square miles, was established in 2010 and is characterized by hot days, cool nights and volcanic soils.

► More than 50 wineries operate within the Calistoga AVA.

► Calistoga is Napa Valley's No. 1 spa town, with more than a dozen establishments offering massage, eight with heated mineral pools and nine offering volcanic-ash mud baths.



Top: The Castello di Amorosa winery, a 107-room castle, is a sought-after special event venue by night. Bottom: On calm days, visitors can enjoy a close-up view of Calistoga's Old Faithful geyser from a hot-air balloon.

worldwide fame with its sparkling wines, and Chateau Montelena, whose chardonnay took top honors at the historic 1976 Judgement of Paris wine competition, an event fictionalized in the 2008 movie *Bottle Shock*.

Wine tourism was still in a nascent state when another of those visionaries, English expatriate Peter Newman, who founded Sterling Vineyards in 1964, built a hilltop

winery and visitor center styled after the white villages of Mykonos, Greece. A gondola ski lift installed in 1973 has provided a novel means of reaching the 314-foot summit, providing panoramic views along the way.

Sterling is one of the Napa Valley's most popular wineries, drawing about 200,000 visitors a year, says Wendy Johnson, coordinator of group events. Tours for both individuals

CALISTOGA BY THE NUMBERS

1,000,000+ VISITORS PER YEAR

5,100 POPULATION

1862 FIRST HOTEL OPENED

686 HOTEL ROOMS

2.2 SQUARE MILES

and groups are self-guided, with signage, videos and observation decks, so visitors can take in as much information as they desire. Tasting stations interspersed along the route encourage lingering. A showstopper venue for intimate luncheons and dinners is the Ansel Adams Room, seating 36, where images from the famous photographer's 1959-1960 photo essay "The Story of a Winery" line the walls. The South View Terrace can accommodate 150 at outdoor umbrella tables and the Honey Locust Lawn is available for larger catered affairs.

Sterling may be perched like a castle on its hilltop, but a real castle sits on another hilltop less than a mile away. Castello di Amorosa is a Tuscan-style medieval edifice built over a 15-year period at a cost of more than \$40 million. It was the dream project of fourth-generation winemaker Dario Sattui, who imported the materials from Europe and employed European craftsmen to piece it all together. The spectacular 107-room castle, which opened to the public in 2007, is a top Napa Valley tourist attraction by day and a special event venue by night. A maze of terraces, courtyards, apartments and halls are available for gatherings; the Great Hall, a dramatic space whose walls are covered in medieval-style frescoes, is a favorite. "Every event includes something in the Great Hall, either dining or dancing," says Jason Powell, the Castello's event manager.

Like other Napa Valley wineries, the Castello's event permit mandates a wine-education element for all events, even holiday parties so over the top they get written up in the national press. Many luncheons, dinners and receptions for corporate groups of 15 to 300 are held at the castle with a food and wine educational focus, says Powell, adding that only twice a year are gatherings for more than 300 people legally permitted. The largest so far, he notes, was a party



The Calistoga Inn, with its welcoming homespun dining room, is one of several properties within walking distance of downtown.

for 900 Google employees and guests.

Another landmark Calistoga winery is **Clos Pegase**, known for its imposing Michael Graves architecture, award-winning wine and dramatic Cave Theater, an underground venue with a stage, stellar acoustics and space to accommodate nearly 250 guests. Long-time former owner Jan Shrem, who built the winery in the 1980s and sprinkled it with sculptures and other art from his extensive collection, sold the property in 2013 to Sonoma-based Vintage Wine Estates, taking most of the art with him. His “temple to wine” continues to be a top Napa Valley event venue, however—and it’s also one of only a half-dozen wineries in the valley permitted to host weddings.

The Clos Pegase Harvest Room, with its soaring ceilings, stone fireplace and handsome tile floors, is a favorite venue for private dinners for up to 50 guests, says Mary Hotaling, director of hospitality. Other indoor options include the larger Cask and smaller Reserve rooms. Outside, vineyard and courtyard picnic areas can be reserved for group functions, as can the Cypress Lawn, known throughout the valley for hosting summertime musical events, weddings and an occasional gala.

Not all wineries in Calistoga are big and

showy. On the understated side is the new **Tamber Bey** tasting room at Sundance Ranch, a performance horse-training facility whose former indoor arena now serves as a 36-tank custom-crush facility for Tamber Bey and 20 other labels. The horse connection is fitting: Owners Barry and Jennifer Waitte are top competitors in the world of endurance horse riding. In 2013, Jennifer placed second in the sport’s most prestigious event, the Tevis Cup, a 100-mile equestrian marathon that attracts riders from around the world. Barry, a veteran of the finance world, turned to winegrowing in the 1990s, founding the Deux Chevaux Vineyard in 1999 and Tamber Bey, named after his first two Arabian horses. The Calistoga addition to their stable of offerings features a wood-paneled equestrian-themed tasting room and a handsome breezeway/courtyard, where corporate lunches and receptions can be staged.

Two to Watch

A bit off the radar for most planners are two venues offering authentic but very different tastes of the upper valley. **Old Faithful Geyser of California** is one of only a handful of geysers in the world that erupts on a “faithful” schedule, in this case every 30 minutes. It’s the centerpiece

of a family-friendly 6-acre tourist attraction undergoing a makeover under the vision of Koray Sanli, whose partnership acquired it in 2013. Groups are welcomed with shaded seating areas, picnic grounds and, for the kids, a collection of exotic livestock. On the drawing board: a winery, culinary gardens, geology museum, petting zoo, deli, barbecue, event center and other facilities accommodating corporate groups and social gatherings.

Closer in, within walking distance of downtown Calistoga, expansion plans are also in the works for the 63-acre **Napa County Fairgrounds**, site of many a community event and a growing roster of cycling, running and novelty competitions such as the Mudder of All Weekends, held in March. Facilities include three large exhibit halls, a nine-hole golf course, an auto-racing speedway and an RV park. Much more is on the drawing boards, including meeting and conference facilities. “We’re very excited about the possibilities,” says Charlene Moore, CEO of the Napa County Fair Association. 🍷

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