

9 Things You Didn't Know About Napa (But Shouldn't Miss)

By Lena Katz

Whenever another wealthy wine aficionado visits Napa and compiles an “insider tips” list with pointers like “Attend Auction Napa Valley and you’ll brush shoulders with Thomas Keller!” everyone who grew up in the North Bay (a subregion of the San Francisco Bay Area) heaves a big sigh. I know, because I’m one of them. I grew up on a hill in Carneros — which is actually its own subappellation, in neither Napa’s nor Sonoma’s fiefdom — back when it was all Quonset huts and Oreo cows and endless tall golden grass, as far as the eye could see. Officially I was on the Sonoma side, but — insider tip here — Carneros didn’t want anything to do with the regional politicking, and neither do a lot of either county’s denizens.

Napa County is unfairly pigeonholed as a destination for the 1 percent today, and I blame the people who insist on highlighting only the expensive, snooty side of it. In fact, the county is multifaceted, quirky, and not exclusively populated by billionaires. When I was a teenager, we mostly knew it for the mental hospital. “If you see a person walking down Highway 12,” said our parents, “don’t pick them up. They’re probably a mental patient.”

That’s kind of hard to believe now, but it does remind me of a side of Napa that nobody talks about anymore: the down-to-earth side, where things aren’t always perfect. The world saw glimpses of this after the August 2014 earthquake: It wasn’t only millionaires crying over lost collectibles but small business owners struggling to comprehend that a huge part of their livelihood had been crushed to rubble. (Only four downtown Napa businesses were still closed due to earthquake damage as of October 2014. So thanks for your concern, but really, it’s business as usual.)

3. Sometimes, you actually have to bring a coat.

If you get invited to a wine-cave dinner in Napa County, it will get cold. OK, this isn’t specific to Napa — wine caves everywhere are cold — but it’s easy to forget that in Napa because it gets so baking hot in the summer (and also because most of us aren’t hanging out in wine caves enough to know the temperature). Friendly tipster Don Shindle, general manager of the Westin Verasa, reminds us, “Dining in a working wine cave is like being in a slightly warm refrigerator.” So throw something warm over that little black dress or shiver all evening long. You’ve been warned.

9. There's no Disneyland, but there is a castle.

I can't believe I actually have to say this, but a manager at the Westin Verasa begged me to emphasize: Please don't ask hotel staff how to get to Disneyland. It's an eight-hour drive away! Look at your Google Maps, people! Put away this foolish pipe dream, and take the kids to Castella di Amorosa, instead. It's a winery and castle combo, but you can just tell them it's a Disney castle. (And you wouldn't be lying: The Disney movie *Bedtime Stories* was filmed there.)