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A Taste of Napa, on a Budget

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Like a robust zinfandel and delicate oysters, Napa Valley and frugal travel aren't exactly an ideal pairing.

Or so I thought. Despite Napa's reputation as a pricey destination for wine lovers, over two days last month — during peak fall harvest season, no less — I managed to visit seven vineyards, taste about 30 vintages, learn more about wine than I ever imagined (including how to punch down the cap of skins into a vat of crushed grapes) and not starve — or go homeless. I even had an affordable meal at a restaurant (of sorts) run by Thomas Keller, perhaps the most celebrated chef in America. It was not, alas, at the French Laundry, where the tasting menu for one with two modest glasses of wine will run about \$325. In fact, that's about as much as I spent on tastings, meals and lodging combined during my two days in California wine country.

The key to a successfully budget-friendly visit to Napa is picking your wineries carefully. You can eliminate many simply by price: many tastings reach \$50 or more a person. Try to stick to the \$10 and \$15 tastings, some of which offer two-for-one deals if you go to napatouristguide.com/napa-on-a-budget, download the [Winery Finder app](#) or pick up coupons at the Napa Valley Welcome Center (visitnapavalley.com/welcome_centers.htm).

But don't be too stingy. The tasting at Tres Sabores (tressabores.com) was the most expensive I did: \$25 a person. But given what came with it, it ended up a bargain.

That memorable "punch down" took place during a tour and tasting at the winery, a tiny operation owned by 59-year-old Julie Johnson. Ms. Johnson, her hands purple, interrupted our seven-person tour to ask if we wanted to pitch in some labor. Handing us an apparatus that looked like a giant potato masher, we took turns driving the thick cap of grape skins, buzzing yellow jackets hovering above them, into the juice below. Punching down the skins as they rise to the top, I learned, is vital to maceration, the process by which red wine gains its color and tannins. It is not, however, vital that visitors do it — one of the experiences that made Tres Sabores so great.

Among the others: climbing up a ladder and peering down into a steel tank that does a mechanized version of the punch-down, sampling zinfandel grapes right off the vine, visiting the sheep and guinea hens that provide fertilizer for the vineyards and admiring the pomegranate trees that attract the hummingbirds that gobble harmful insects (and provide fruit for Ms. Johnson's pomegranate paella). Of course, we also tasted her wines (but not the paella).

Even if you know nothing about wine — and I know little — you can go a long way simply by choosing small-scale wineries as far into the hills as possible. For a group, Tres Sabores may be too expensive; as a substitute I'd recommend the tiny Nichelini Winery (nicheliniwinery.com), in the same family since 1890. With a coupon, the tasting is \$15 for two, and while there's no tour, there are tables for picnic lunches and even a bocce court.

My next piece of advice: Be flexible, especially when offered a specific tip. My first night, I dined at the bar of Il Posto Trattoria (ilpostonapa.com) in the town of Napa, a reasonably priced restaurant more popular with locals than visitors. I ate an elegant \$12 bowl of house-pulled spaghetti with beef-pork-veal meatballs and a vibrant tomato sauce. The bartender, Miguel, suggested I head up into the hills to Pride Mountain Vineyards — so I did.

Going to Pride (pridewines.com) is the very opposite of visiting one of the highway-side wineries along the valley's two main roads, the St. Helena Highway and the Silverado Trail. It's so far up a winding mountain road that the Napa-Sonoma county line runs right through its rolling vineyards. (To properly pay their taxes, they have to keep two sets of books, tracking the exact percentage of Napa grapes and Sonoma grapes that go into each blend.)

At our tasting (\$15), our guide, Nikki Lamberti, started by having us try a 2012 viognier with a floral nose and notes of honeysuckle and tropical fruit — or so I was told and subsequently found plausible. (I've always found people who talk this way about wine absurd, but I was trying to learn.) Then she whisked us off to watch a worker load bunches of cabernet sauvignon grapes into an astonishingly efficient machine that crushed and destemmed them, and into a maze of caves burrowed into the hillside, where she had us taste a 2012 merlot directly from the barrel. It was quite tannic, unusual for merlot — the result of the thicker skin that grows when you raise grapes at higher elevations. Who knew? (You, perhaps. But I didn't.) Thicker skin can also mean a deeper color. "We get purple teeth very quickly around here," Ms. Lamberti said.

Since I was driving, I did a lot of spitting and dumping (which bothered me far less than I thought) and made sure to eat hearty meals (which bothered me not at all).

The day I went to Pride and Tres Sabores, I picked up lunch at Ad Hoc Addendum (adhocreastaurant.com/addendum), a little shack behind Thomas Keller's Ad Hoc that serves \$16.50 box lunches Thursday to Saturday only. I chose the astonishingly juicy buttermilk fried chicken, which came with spongy corn bread, potato salad and coleslaw. Dinner that night was far cheaper: \$1.50 beef cheek tacos, the only choice at Tacos Chavez, a decades-old business operating from a truck in the lot of a convenience store at 75 Coombs Street in Napa.

None of this is to say that you should skip the bigger wineries — just choose well. Take the multilayered experience at the Hess Collection Winery (hesscollection.com) — again, up a winding road from the highway. A four-wine tasting is \$10 (\$5 with the two-for-one coupon). But you also

get three stories of Donald Hess's contemporary art collection to roam, and, if you're lucky, get a tour with their senior wine educator, Bob Becker. We were bombarded with wine trivia (only 4 percent of California wine comes from Napa) and got a lesson on how toasted barrels affect the flavors of the wine they hold.

During the tour, something apparently clicked. In the tasting room a few minutes later, I was saying things like "I'm sensing cherry, and a note of cinnamon." The menu disagreed, and the people next to me laughed, but it was progress.

CHEAP SLEEPS

The biggest challenge to a frugal weekend in Napa Valley is lodging. But there are a few low-cost, utilitarian spots (all in the town of Napa) whose cheapest rooms cost \$90 to \$100 plus tax, including the **Wine Valley Lodge** (winevalleylodge.com), the **Napa Discovery Inn** (napadiscoveryinn.com), and the **Motel 6**.

After deciding my choices were basically equal, I got the price down by using hotwire.com, an "opaque" lodging site that slashes the price but doesn't reveal the hotel you've booked until you pay. I ended up spending \$77 a night (\$92 with taxes and fees) for the **Napa Discovery**, a decent, clean motel, with a very basic free breakfast of cereal, bananas, coffee and orange juice. (I also found a small handful of Airbnb.com rentals — rooms, not entire houses — for under \$100 a night.)