

# California Travel Girl

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Art, wine, and a castle in Calistoga

I couldn't believe my eyes: a real castle, looking like a fugitive from 12th-century Tuscany, rising in the hills outside Calistoga. Castello di Amorosa is the brainchild of winemaker Dario Sattui, a true visionary who long ago fell in love with the ancient castles of Italy and simply decided to build his own version of one. It took 15 years and \$30 million, and the result is simply awe-inspiring.

I took a tour led by Sattui himself, a tall, silver-haired man of boundless energy and contagious enthusiasm. We started by climbing up high on the crenellated parapets and worked our way down into the dungeon (yep, complete with 'the rack' and an iron maiden) passing wine-filled oak barrels along the way—the castle battlements disguise a working winery.

Along the way, Sattui told the 'backstory' of the castle as he dreamed it up: "Here was where the castle was attacked, burned, and rebuilt using different stone," he notes. And I can see a difference in the stonework. "And there above the windows, you see the different patterns, showing how the carvings were done over a period of years as the styles and craftsmen changed," he adds. Sattui says all this with a twinkle in his eye, knowing that I'm going along with his imaginative tale. And that's part of the fun of the guided tours (offered daily); even the regular guides add fuel to the imaginative potential of the place.

We end our tour in the tasting room, sampling some of Castello di Amorosa's 13 fine Italian-style (natch) varietals. The Pinot Grigio is sublime but the Sangiovese, rich and full-bodied, makes me weak in the knees.

The castle is actually Sattui's own creation, not a replica of anything in existence. Which, of course, makes it just the latest and biggest work of art in Calistoga. Later, we explore more of Calistoga's artsy side downtown. At Calistoga Pottery, on Foothill Boulevard, I meet two potters who paint a unique ash glaze on their plates and cooking vessels, leaving the pots with a cool shine. The ash is a uniquely 'wine country' product, made from the residue left after local grapevines are burned each winter.

Ca'toga Galleria D' Arte on Cedar Street features the works of Carlo Marchiori, another visionary that some would dub eccentric; he offers tours of his Palladian villa that's a vast gallery of his trompe l'oeil frescoes, statuary, Roman-style ruins and fountains. Tours are offered Saturdays at 11 (May-October), but it's wise to book well ahead.

By evening, my friends and I are walking past more art—charming new outdoor murals painted on walls of a tiny alley—on the way to apps and drinks at bar Vino on Lincoln Ave.; the pancetta-wrapped dates and fried calamari with pequinillo pepper aioli get our taste buds fired up. Then it's across the street (Lincoln Ave.) for dinner at Brannan's Grill. The menu focuses on fresh ingredients in classically-influenced dishes: Spanish onion soup with Manchego cheese crouton, honey Chipotle glazed pork loin, Gorgonzola polenta. Heaven!

By the end of the day, full of fabulous wine and food (and having trashed my diet), I vow I'm going to exercise more restraint tomorrow. But as I check into the small and chic Chanric Inn on the hillside above town, I'm enveloped by wonderful scents. Co-owner Ric (a trained chef), is already working on part of tomorrow's brunch menu which will feature—get this—roasted butternut squash bread, poached fresh figs with creme anglaise, and chived eggs on fontina toast with mushroom duxelles and white truffle oil. But I'm not worried. Hey, if they can build castles out of imagination in Calistoga, then surely calories don't exist here either, right?