

A valley worth bottling

February 15, 2009



Welcome signs ... a twist on the traditional spa bath at Doctor Wilkinson's Hot Springs Resort.

A nice cab sav and a spa win over Barry Divola.

Tim shakes my hand and tells me to take off all my clothes, have a hot shower and step into a bath full of hot mud. As Tim is a bath attendant at a place called Doctor Wilkinson's Hot Springs Resort, I comply with my new acquaintance's orders. Two hours later, I'll be glad I did.

A couple of days earlier I'd driven 90 minutes north from San Francisco to get to Calistoga, a town in the middle of Napa Valley wine country. My new home base was the Chanric Inn, a seven-room B&B run by Chan and Ric (thus the place's name), a couple who moved here in 2006 from Seattle. Ric is a chef who prides himself on creating a different three-course brunch every day.

In the morning, after freshly brewed coffee, it was off to take in a bit of wine history.

I drive out of downtown Calistoga, past gently rolling hills and valleys covered with grape vines, and 10 minutes later pull up at the place that put California wine on the map.

At Chateau Montelena, an impressive ivy-covered stone fortress, we learn about the cheeky 1973 chardonnay that beat the French at their own game.

A wine sampling in the chateau tasting room costs \$15. Being a red man, I find the 2004 cabernet sauvignon particularly appealing. After getting another splash just to make sure, and trying a handful more wines, I have to drag myself away to avoid turning a "tasting" into a "tragedy".

The staff direct me to the nearby Jade Lake on the property. I amble down among the vineyards and find the tranquil water fringed with reeds and weeping willows. Completing the picture are swans and ducks as well as landscaping with a pagoda and footbridge.

Then it's back to the car to get to Fulton, 30 minutes west, for a garden tour at Kendall-Jackson Wine Centre. Our guide meets our group in the foyer and takes us to the nearby culinary gardens that produce most of the ingredients for the wine-food pairings for which Kendall-Jackson is renowned.

The thinking goes like this: when wine experts talk about aromas and flavours, they often use "descriptors" that include fruits, vegetables, herbs or spices. So, in the garden devoted to cabernet sauvignon, for instance, you'll find cherries, plums, blackberries and blackcurrants. In turn, these are used by the in-house chefs in producing the sampling plates for the wine-food pairing.

In a private room upstairs, our group is introduced to Matthew, a fast-talking chef from New York. He runs us through the half-dozen glasses of wine and the corresponding food he has prepared. My favourite is a 2006 pinot noir paired with thin slices of duck topped with a "mostrada" (strawberries

blended with mustard seeds). By the time a cab sav is paired with cocoa-dusted chocolate cream balls, my head's swimming.

The next day starts at 4.30am - it's up, up and away in a beautiful balloon to see the sunrise.

"It could take 50 minutes," our captain, Jonathon, tells us when asked how long we'll be in the air. "It could take an hour and a quarter. It could take days. Just depends on the wind."

Unfortunately, a marine fog has drifted in, blanketing the wine country in a white shroud. Plan B is to drive to open farmland 30 minutes away in Yolo, the neighbouring county. Our balloon, Voyager, is waiting for us. Inside its red, blue and yellow fabric are 96,000 cubic metres of space - room for a lot of hot air. Then 14 of us climb into the wicker basket and, as Jonathon blasts the burners, we slowly rise, eventually reaching a height of 609 metres. The sun has already peeked over the Sierra mountains and Sacramento to the east, while to the west we can see the fog drifting down into Napa Valley. We drift silently over the patchwork fields of corn, alfalfa, almonds and walnuts. A glider whooshes between us and our two sister balloons, Freedom and Liberty, and the pilot dips his wings as he passes.

Almost an hour later we gently descend and land in a field to get picked up, then we're driven back to the Napa to have a champagne breakfast and share stories with our fellow balloonists. A sprightly woman tells Jonathon that this is her birthday present from her son and she turned 80 today.

"Happy birthday," he says. "But I'm afraid you're not the oldest passenger I've ever taken up there. That was a 106-year-old. Come back in 26 years' time and I'll let you fly for free."

It's later that afternoon that I find myself at Doctor Wilkinson's up to my neck in hot mud. With cucumber slices on my eyes and an aromatic face mask, I hang suspended in the hot gooey mix for 12 minutes. My muscles relax, my body warms up, my skin tingles and I feel strangely weightless.

The mud bath is followed by a long shower (that mud can get really clingy), a bubbling mineral spa bath, a sit in the steam room, a cooling lie-down wrapped in fresh cotton sheets and finally a half-hour massage. After two hours, I float back into the lobby with a smile, feeling like I've just emerged from a 12-hour sleep. I'm unsurprised to learn that Doctor Wilkinson lived to be 89.

Finally, it's dinner - a big farewell under a blanket of stars on the patio of the nearby Calistoga Inn. I enjoy a couple of local beers - I've had my share of wine. I barely make it through my door at the Chanric Inn before falling asleep. The last thing I remember thinking is: "What's for brunch tomorrow?"

The writer was a guest of California Travel & Tourism Commission.

TRIP NOTES

Getting there

United Airlines flies to San Francisco every day. By car, take the scenic route across the Golden Gate Bridge on Highway 101, then Highway 37 towards Vallejo and Highway 29 towards Napa. Driving time is about 90 minutes.

Staying there

The Chanric Inn, 1805 Foothill Boulevard, Calistoga, CA. Phone 707 942 4535. See thechanric.com.

Further information

Chateau Montelena, 1429 Tubbs Lane, Calistoga, CA. Phone: 707 942 5105, see montelena.com.

Kendall-Jackson Wine Centre, 5007 Fulton Road, Fulton, CA. Phone: 707 571 8100. See kj.com.

Balloons Above The Valley, 603 California Boulevard, Napa, CA. Phone: 1 800 464 6824, see balloonrides.com.

Doctor Wilkinson's Hot Springs Resort, 1507 Lincoln Avenue, Calistoga, CA. Phone: 707 942 4102, see drwilkinson.com.

Further information

Phone California Tourism on (02) 9361 0660 or visit visitcalifornia.com.au.

Source: [The Sun-Herald](#)

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