



Downtown Napa

LEARNED SOMETHING ALREADY. Spitting wine isn't easy.

You'd think you would, you know, just spit. But it turns out, like so much else involving wine, it's a bit complicated. Spit buckets aren't especially large, and they sit on counters in nice public places full of nice adults. You do not just haul off and spit.

I'm grasping this inside the Wineries of Napa Valley tasting room, a friendly wine shop on an outdoor mall. It's one of ten tasting rooms in downtown Napa, and if Hank and I are going to survive the day standing, we need to spit.

Hank is smooth. He leans over. *Voosh*. Wine is gone. Me, I lean over and try not to splash. I just open my mouth carefully. Wine dribbles into the bucket. It also dribbles down my chin and onto my shirt. I look to Hank for support.

"Nice," he says.

The woman pouring for us is sympathetic. "I haven't really gotten the hang of spitting either," she says. "I usually just avoid it."

First helpful hint for a wine tasting tour: Don't wear white clothes. Dark colors are just a consistently good idea with everything wine.

That's what we are up to, a search for everything wine. My best

friend and wine mentor, Hank, and I are on Day One of our Quest to sample in every one of the tasting rooms in Napa Valley. We are optimistic, without knowing exactly why, but that's how we operate, that our expedition to discover and absorb Napa—the heart and essence of American wine country—will also lead us through the whole vast, vibrant world of wine.

Hank already knows a lot of it. He lives in it. He's the executive wine buyer for Nugget Market. Whatever I know, I learned from Hank. I'm hoping to expand my horizons on this Quest, maybe get to feel like I'm connected to Napa and that wine world, too. But right now, I'm working on fundamentals: basic tasting and spitting technique.

I turn to Hank. I'm counting on him to carry me through the rough patches over the next few months, which, at this rate, look like they'll be considerable.

"You have to put something into it," he says when the wine lady walks down to the other end of the little bar. "Not a lot, but something. And aim for the side of the bucket; you don't want splashback."

I'm holding the 2001 Goosecross Napa Zinfandel. I think it's pretty good, but I'm focusing on other things. I'm also not convinced I can tell if it's good because I'm not convinced you taste the wine the same when you spit. Hank has already explained why I'm wrong, but that discussion is beyond me at the moment.

So, Hank's doing what he can. "Work on getting it all over your tongue," he says. "Leave it there a few seconds. Then put some effort into the spit."

I sip, swish it around a little, and try not to sound like I'm gargling. I lean over. *Voosh*. Dribble. Still, it's better. I solve my problem by putting on my black sweater. Dark colors. I'm telling you.

At the other end of the wine bar, there's now a middle-aged couple from Ohio. They walked over from the Napa Valley Visitor's Center next door. This tasting room is a common first stop for newcomers to Napa, and to wine tasting. The people working the tasting bar have both the attitude and apparent endurance for it. The wine lady who ignored my spitting woes now good-naturedly explains to the couple how to look for flavors in their Sauvignon Blanc. She says think about how it smells and what the fruits might be. "You'll taste all kinds of things like melon and apricot in the wine," she says, and to her credit, without sounding like a grade-school teacher.

"You mean they put apricot in the wine?" the very nice Ohio woman asks.

"Why do they call it a finish?" the very nice Ohio man asks.

I feel suddenly expert again. It seems like a good time to move along.



IT'S MARCH AND WE'RE STARTING OUR trip in Downtown Napa at the bottom of the Napa Valley. It's a town that just began latching onto the wine boom after forty years of merrily steering millions of tourists out to Highway 29 on its western edge, and keeping its Victorian mansions, blue-collar core, and anonymity to itself. Then, in the mid-1990s, Napans—they seriously call themselves Napans—had a communal epiphany. “All those cars heading up the valley,” they more or less said, “are full of money.”

The city bounced back with a rush of redevelopment, a push for high-end restaurants, boutique hotels, and a shiny new walking mall. Now, Napa has two dozen Zagat-rated restaurants and a charming little California-style downtown, its wood and brick facades and refurbished historic buildings coexisting with the mall's modern earth tones and vaguely grape themes.

Downtown Napa is also happily, for our purposes, lousy with wine tasting rooms. Many of them are like Wineries of Napa Valley, shared storefronts for wineries too small to have rooms of their own. A \$20 card gets you 10¢ pours in all of them, and, in case you give up on walking the four or five blocks to the outer edges, there's a regular shuttle. The shuttle also goes to the Napa outlet stores, but they warn you first.

We view all this as a perfect launch spot for our Quest, partly because of the tasting room wealth, partly because it seems a safe place to work on my tasting proficiency, and partly because Copia is here.

Copia, a \$55-million, 80,000-square-foot temple to all things epicurean, is named after the Roman goddess of abundance. Its official title is the American Center for Food, Wine and the Arts. We have a long road ahead of us through this valley that is its own thirty-mile-long shrine to food and wine, and we figure some early cultural grounding can only help.

Copia, it turns out, seems to be about a lot of things, maybe too many things, but not particularly Napa Valley. It was funded in big part by Robert Mondavi, and his approach to food and wine as joyful art is apparent in the exhibits and general esteem for the subject. There are rotating art shows about food or wine, there are classes and films, and there's a large, playful science-fair section.

But it's lacking, ironically, what has always been Robert Mondavi's greatest charm: a sense of excitement and charisma, a sense that there is something larger in these connections than just the idea that food

and wine and art go together. Mondavi always made it feel like they belong together, and that together they make a special magic. Copia could use a dose of magic.

It could also use a bit more Napa. Despite the tributes to the miracle of winemaking, there isn't much feel of vineyards or wineries or the lush valley. Outside, the building looks like a modernist factory, despite the fountains, long rows of trees, and the three and a half impressive acres of what they call "organic, edible gardens." Inside, it's tall and sleek, with pale colors and lots of metal, glass, and open space for events and festivals.

What Copia feels like, really, is a high-end mall for grown-ups. You can see teenagers dropping off parents with a firm, "We expect you to call right when your food-and-wine pairing gets out." Instead of a food court, there's a wine bar, a Julia's Kitchen, an American Market cafe with designer sandwiches, and a Wine Spectator Tasting Table. That is our target.

The Tasting Table is a curved bar out in the ground floor mall section. Today they're pouring New Zealand whites. We walk up and the genial guy behind the bar, without a word, slides a couple crystal glasses across to us with something in them, then moves away to talk up other tasters. Hank guesses Pinot Grigio. I would have said Chardonnay, but I nod because, what do I know. I go look for something to tell us what we're drinking.

I walk down the bar and cock my head sideways to read the bottle the genial guy is pouring for two women. Kumeu River Pinot Grigio. That Hank, he's good. Meanwhile, genial guy, a burly, sixtyish man wearing a green Copia apron and a permanent happy look, is telling the women, "C'mon, what am I gonna do with the rest of the wine? Have some more." They relent under his assault of hospitality, and he nearly fills their glasses. He looks around for another mark.

A young couple walks up and he dishes them each a healthy pour with the air of a barkeep serving ale. They try to ask about the wine, but genial guy moves on with a happy "Enjoy." He picks up a new bottle and comes to us with a Stoneleigh Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc. Hank starts to say this should be good, but genial guy is having too much fun. "You look like men who like wine," he says. "Help me finish the bottle."

We're guessing genial guy is a Copia volunteer, just a nice man donating his time, and that when the winemakers pour their own stuff on weekends, it doesn't go quite like this. Still, you have to love the irony. Copia calls itself a "monument to the elegance of food and wine," and we're sitting through possibly the least elegant wine tasting in Napa.



ONE BLOCK EAST OF THE TWELVE acres of Copia, and across the Napa River as it bends away from downtown, is JV Wine & Spirits. There may be nothing in Napa Valley that is more of a polar opposite in mood to Copia.

The Napa River separates the new Napa downtown from what it was. JV looks like a warehouse store and sits in an industrial district. Across the street is Furniture 4 Less. Where contemporary Copia is about modernity and form, JV Wines & Spirits is nothing but function. Its rows and rows of wine are stacked alphabetically and mostly in their boxes. If Copia is designed for tourists, JV is a place for locals. A very good place for locals. It's got a mammoth wine selection, including 800 labels from wineries that produce no more than 600 cases a year. Because they, like almost everyone, are out of Rombauer Chardonnay, the valley's current "it" Chardonnay, JV has a display with twenty suggested replacements, similar in style and price. They promise more Rombauer the day it's released in the fall. You wonder if maybe Robert Mondavi, after an appearance at Copia, sometimes pops into JV to see what they've got.

JV's tasting bar is a major contrast, too. It's in a side pocket of the store, inside a little room for pricey wines, and it's just a simple L-shaped counter looking at a cinder block wall painted grape purple. It's quiet and lighted well-enough, but here, it's about the wine. They are pouring twelve good wines this afternoon. Even I recognize a few.

One is Sedna, from a small winery on the valley floor just a few miles north, and I know I've liked their Cabernet. Hank can't resist his wine-retailer impulses and he's wandering around the store when Brad, a clean-cut young guy in JV's purple shirt, comes to pour for us. We chat. I say I like that Sedna Napa Valley Cab. He pours me a bit. I still like it. Hank walks up and gives the look I've seen many, many times.

"What I have told you," he says with overacted exasperation, "about starting with a Cab?"

I know this. There are rules. You go white to red, light to heavy. Taste buds get worn out or overwhelmed or whatever it exactly is. The question, I ask, is can I go back? No problem. A couple crackers, a swallow of water, I'm golden. I'm also hoping Brad will forget I've already tasted the Cab when we get back to it.

The thing about tasting, actually, is there really are no exact rules. Everything's a guideline because everyone does it differently. And because everyone is different. There are, however, key points.

It starts with your nose. You get thousands of scents in your nose

and your olfactory system. You taste, however, only a few basic flavors: sweet, salty, sour, and bitter, plus your tongue picks up what's called "umami," a Japanese word for "savory" or "meaty" or, I dunno, "not fish."

"Your nose is everything," Hank says. That's why you swirl your wine. The smells come from the alcohol evaporating, and swirling helps it along, spreads the wine around the glass and creates more surface area for evaporation. I'm now sure it does not matter which direction you swirl—thank you, Luna Vineyards—but there are some guidelines for this, too.

We would meet a winemaker named John at Signorello Vineyards a few days later who would give us some of them.

"Why do you swirl the glass?" he would ask.

"Open up the wine?" I say tentatively. I know the phrase.

"How do you know it worked?" John says. "Smell first, then swirl. Smell it, swirl, smell again. If the nose doesn't change, you know it's a simple wine. You can keep swirling as much as you'd like. When you smell, stick your nose right in there. In wine country, I promise no one will laugh at you.

"And put the glass on the bar or the table before you swirl it. If you try to be too cool and swirl it mid-air, you'll end up with half the bars' cleaning bills."

Been there. At JV Wine & Spirits, I swirl carefully, if multi-directionally. I'm also dribbling less during the spitting action, so Hank figures it's time to move my lessons along.

The actual tasting has its techniques, too. Hank lets me sip the 2002 Sedna Napa Valley Chardonnay. I get all that crème brûlée/toasted marshmallow big Chardonnay flavor. Now, Hank says, try it again.

"Take a healthy sip," he says. "Leave it in your mouth a few seconds and move it around. Try to coat your tongue."

The taste buds, as limited as they already are, have regional issues, too. They're bunched, rather than spread evenly, which is why you try to cover your whole tongue with a little wine. Then, you pucker your lips and suck in a little air, kind of like a reverse whistle. You look like a fish and the gurgle isn't pretty, but it gets a huge flavor spike. I mean huge.

"It's aerating the wine," Hank says, "just like when you swirl. Then spit."

This time I taste a lot more fruit. Hank says it's green apple and pear and I'm buying it. I'm also starting to buy the idea spitting doesn't kill the taste, but I think that's because you still swallow a little. Or maybe that's me.



WE LEAVE JV AND HEAD BACK across the river to the little center of town. It's hard to stand at First and Main Streets in this newly polished downtown and not be happy about the proximity of so many tasting rooms. Also such wildly different styles of tasting rooms.

Through the day, we go to places like Vintner's Collective in one of the oldest buildings in Napa, the Pfeiffer building constructed in 1875, and once the home of, among other things, a saloon and brothel. From the outside, the old bricks and stone show some history. Inside, there are no signs of the Pfeiffer's shady past. The room is proudly upscale, with polished blond wood and a jet-black tasting bar. There's bright, progressive art everywhere. It would feel like an ultra-trendy restaurant, the kind of place Hank and I usually can't get into, if the guys behind the bar weren't so amiable.

Vintner's Collective is one of the shared shops. They serve wines from eighteen small-but-premium wineries, and they have the wine-makers come in and pour regularly. The wine is very good—my favorite is a huge 2000 Richard Perry Napa Syrah—and so are the crackers, which, instead of the usual full basket, are laid out flat, four to a plate.

But, all you really need to know about Vintner's Collective is their website quotes the sommelier from The French Laundry, certainly Napa's, and one of America's, most respected restaurants, as the wine shop he'd visit if he could only visit one.

Down the block, there's Napa Valley Traditions, which is, barely, the tasting room for Bayview Cellars, a family winery just north of Napa in the Oak Knoll District. Napa Valley Traditions is really a country store and gift shop. They sell stuffed animals, jams, ceramics, and, of course, checkered country linens. And they have a very nice espresso bar. The "tasting room," on the other hand, is a table in the back, around two corners, tucked in a section that can't decide if it's retail space or storage area.

The wine is OK, about what you'd expect, but everyone in the store is so adorably friendly, and so happy to see us, we buy a couple bottles of Wine Away stain remover just to buy something.

We eat an early dinner in the Napa General Store, which, like so much in this enjoyably inconsistent little downtown, is also not what it sounds like. It's mostly a restaurant in a high-ceilinged room in a refurbished building on the river. It's got an open kitchen, huge windows leading out to a deck, and a warmly lit wine bar.

We get our 10¢ taste at the bar, courtesy of the Downtown Napa

Tasting Card, then move to a table in the dining area. I have a 2003 Cakebread Napa Valley Sauvignon Blanc and Hank's gets an '03 Praxis Pinot Noir from Monterey to go with our Asian fusion meals, and, no, I do not spit. There is such thing as taking your lessons too far. The room is a spacious, inviting place, and it would be good to just sit here a while, but we have tasting rooms to get to. Work. Work. Work.



BACK ROOM WINES, JUST A BLOCK down from the walking mall, has the feel of a place for locals. And for wine folk. It's a modest-sized, nothing-fancy wine shop with an expansive world view. Since most of its customers have plenty of access to Napa wineries, there's a good stock from other regions and other countries.

Owner Dan Dawson is pouring for his weekly Friday night tasting, and the theme tonight is Cabernets Under \$30. The range of regions includes the Columbia Valley, Lake County, and Alexander Valley. I spot my Sedna on the list, too, but I'm holding back. It got me in trouble once already. Now I'm doing what Hank does.

The shop has about ten people in it, most of them young and with that yippee-it's-Friday-night brightness. They look like people who'd hit TGIF spots if this weren't Napa. Instead, they're in a small, quirky wine shop talking about finishes and balance and oak. The sense isn't a bar's flirty wariness; instead it's almost collegial, like, maybe, we can learn a little about wine from each other. Not from me. I'm just saying. The three women next to us, in their twenties, locals, and attractive, ask us what we're tasting, what we think of it, and why. This is not standard bar talk.

For the record, Hank and I are both married. Any incidental chatting up of attractive Napa locals is purely for research purposes. We learn that two of the women, Michelle and Jen, are servers in a St. Helena restaurant and are here to taste wines they don't carry. Their friend, Terri, works in a tasting room at a winery just north of Napa.

That gets us asking about tasting room behavior, and, more specifically, what isn't cool. I can't be briefed too much on this subject.

Some of it is obvious: Tasting rooms aren't for happy hour. It's not all-you-can-drink, and it's not part of a pub crawl. (That's why you buy a bottle and find your own spot.) Just be moderate and don't hang around the same room all day.

Also, there really are no stupid questions—except for my counter-clockwise swirl theory—but you can look stupid trying to look smart. That's a big point with Hank.

"You guys taste your wines every day," he tells them. "You're

always going to know more about them than we will.” And this from a guy who knows a lot.

Terri says she gets men—it’s always men—who lecture her about her wines, which would be boorish enough even if they weren’t often wrong.

“Just be nice,” she said, “we’ll end up pouring you more. I like beginners, and I like people who ask questions. It’s never a problem talking about our winery and our wine. But, you know, what we hate is snobs.”

That gets us to what Terri, Michelle, and Jen—and we would learn, half of Napa Valley—consider a scourge of wine country: limousine tasters. A lot of wineries restrict limos to certain hours. It isn’t everyone in a limo, particularly not the small groups looking for a different tour of Napa, but there are two annoying classes of limousine tasters. One group is the partyers, who are a general pain for obvious reasons, but at least they aren’t driving themselves around. The other bunch is what Michelle calls the elitists.

The elitists, she says, only buy the most expensive wines. Not the best, the priciest. Michelle sees them at her restaurant. Wine isn’t a passion for them, it’s a way to keep score, to show their elevated social status and general grandness. “Those people,” Michelle says, “are such wanna-bes. When those guys show up, it’s a buzz kill for the whole room.”

Lower on the annoyance scale for locals, actually more lame than irritating, are the people who’ve seen the movie *Sideways* too many times. Great movie. A classic for wine lovers. But if you don’t have the inner warning light about tired and overused jokes, here’s what you should know: Don’t recite lines from the movie, don’t brag about your love for Pinot Noir, and do not, seriously, do not say you’re not drinking fucking Merlot. It’s already been done too often.

Another repercussion from *Sideways*, apparently, is more guys now hit on the women working tasting rooms. “Honestly,” Terri says, “I don’t know why people see something in a movie and think they should do it. It’s not like we suddenly need bouncers or anything, but some guys are such morons.”

And then there is this move, and I am so entirely with them: Holding your wine glass by the base. That’s just stupid.

“God, I hate that,” Terri says. “I’m not even sure why. But when people come in and do that, I want to pour wine on their lap.”

I decide, after all this conversation, I won’t brag that I’ve almost learned to spit.



OUR LAST STOP, EVEN WITH A strong endorsement from our three friends, is an energetic, hospitable surprise. It's a place called Bounty Hunter. It's a wine bar/pub/bistro on First Street down at the river that is everything a wine bar, pub, and bistro should be. There's lots of wood and light, and the room is somehow both crowded and airy. There's one brick wall with shelves of wine, tall community tables seating eight, scattered smaller tables, and an unfussy feel at the bar. One bar stool is a saddle.

If you closed your eyes and wished for an end-of-the-day wine and social spot, it would be Bounty Hunter. They're also serious about their wine. The stemware is high-end crystal, they offer rotating wine tasting flights—what they call Taste Drives—forty wines by the glass and more than 400 labels. The menu lists a wine's retail price, its Bounty Hunter's price—with a minimal markup—and a standard restaurant price, which in here looks like gouging.

Bounty Hunter opened in 2003, more than a decade after its owner, Mark Pope, started his rare wine catalog and his service tracking down tough-to-find wines for customers—which explains the bounty hunter name and gear displayed around the room, like the snowshoes and western-style topcoat. Nothing exactly explains the polo mallet.

Hank and I eventually land spots at the bar and order glasses of wine. On Hank's suggestion, I have a 2002 Herbert Brochard Sancerre, a French white from the Loire Valley. Hank has a 2001 Talisman Thorn Vineyard Pinot Noir from the Sonoma Coast. Both are terrific. As we sit there, a cooked chicken, standing on its tail end, goes by on a platter. It's Beer-Can Chicken, the bartender says—a chicken, cooked with a half empty can of beer stuffed inside and its top plugged by a lime. The whole thing steams on the grill. Hank and I swear that chicken is our next Napa meal.

As we sit at the bar and watch this humming crowd, so many of them drinking good wine, we see a guy we met earlier today, Andy, who was pouring at Vintner's Collective. We keep meeting people like Andy, who just moved to Napa. They're here to be at the epicenter of wine.

Andy is in his twenties and came from Boston after working in a wine shop for two years. His reason for moving was both vague and very specific. He wants to live in the wine world. We also met Karen, pouring at Napa Wine Merchants, who was a TV promotions exec in Sacramento—our home—and who sold her house to move to Napa.

She loves the industry and if you're going to learn about wine, she says, you need to be in Napa.

That's the thing about this valley. Its fantasy mixes with a clear truth: There is no wine region in America so wholly and resolutely engaged in the notion of wine. People come here to visit that, and they come here to live it, to learn about wine, to make wine, to just be around it all.

There is nothing like wine in the world, no other foodstuff or agricultural crop that has such a quixotic grip on us. Nothing that will make people pick up and move just to be around a product. Wine has a mythology, a free-standing significance, an almost primal lure that can seem utterly irrational if you think too hard about it.

It makes food and social connections better, and, yeah, sometimes that's just the alcohol. But mostly it's more. It's the complexity of winemaking, the seemingly endless variations on something so simple as juice from grapes. It's the way good wine evokes a sense of place, a sense of the region and the countryside it comes from. Sometimes, it's just the taste.

Sitting here in Bounty Hunter, watching the people and just sipping good wine, stirs something in both of us. Wine is at its best, we decide, at the human level. That's what Copia missed. You don't worship wine, you drink it. If wine is art, as Copia says, then it's best when it's experienced, not revered.

That's why, maybe, the elitists in the limos rub so many people the wrong way in this valley. They turn something that should be a joy into a prize, and they miss what wine should be: a pleasure everyone can get a piece of.

And that's why, at least for us, Bounty Hunter strikes such a chord and seems such a fit for Napa Valley. This is a place connected to some very good, and sometimes very expensive, wine. But the connection is at the street level, or maybe it's the people level. This bouncy, obliging place has a joyfulness to it, and if it, and everyone here, has bought a little into the romance of wine, that just adds to the basic fun of finding a new wine, or of uncorking an old, reliable one, and of drinking it.

After all that, after sitting there and deconstructing our connections to this world of wine, it dawns on us both: We haven't even left town. It's time, we decide, to get out into the vineyards.