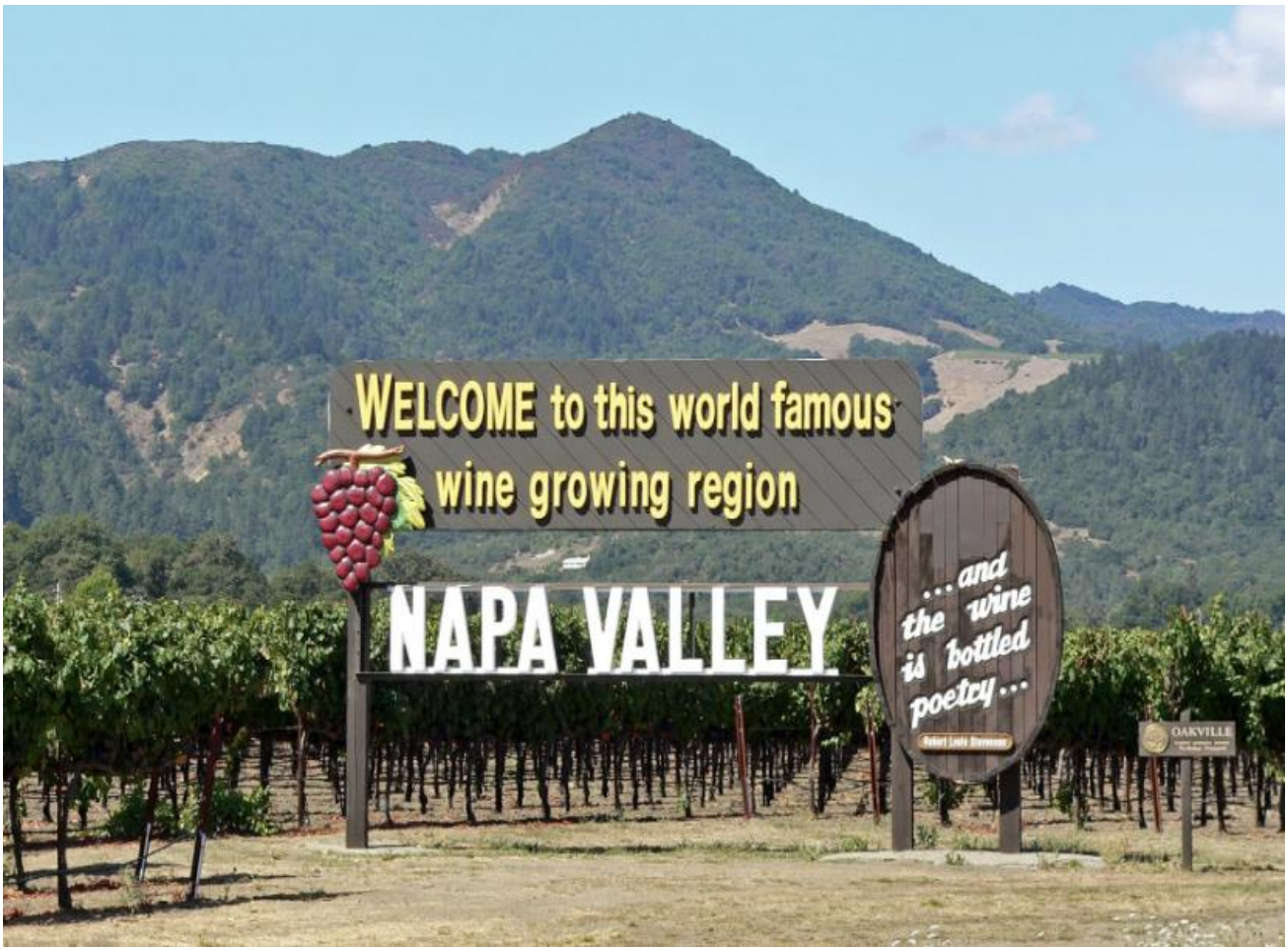
A snapshot of Three Wineries in Napa Valley, California.



Having written and had travel blogs published about cities and villages in the warmer climates of Spain, I found myself and two family members on a bitterly cold and wet December Napa Valley wine tasting day trip. We were on a stop over visiting San Jose, California on route to Bora Bora (more on that later). As an enthusiast of Rioja and Ribera del Duero wines from Spain this could either have been a challenge or would be a head turning experience.

Thankfully our party of five had a driver arranged which allowed all of us to participate in the three wine tastings. On being collected from the Andaz Hotel in downtown Napa we were expertly driven on the St Helena Highway to all three venues by Gary in his spotlessly clean black Chevrolet Suburban SUV. Gary was exemplary and always ready to guide us and provide some excellent local knowledge and history.

I would highly recommend Gary and his Napa Valley SUV company.

https://nvsuv.com/

Freemark Abbey
3022 St. Helena Highway North St. Helena, CA 94574

As the first of three wine tastings planned to Napa Valley the eventful day was about to come alive! The short walk down from the parking lot to the impressive entrance set the tone for the day.

Our eyes feasted on the lovely refurbished property with its stunning gardens, beautiful buildings and impressive modern tasting room, we knew we had started out on the right foot.

After a warm welcome and an introduction from Grace, our superb host we were seated informally around a table where the list of six wines to be included in the tasting was provided alongwith a warm and very personalised welcome to the comparative tasting.

Our host, Grace was really pleasant and welcoming, very generous with her time and humorous with stories of the winery and her personal script writing …… standby for a blockbuster on Netflix! Grace presented each wine, highlighted their qualities and discussed their unique characteristics. She briefed us about the history of the winery and area around it. The renovations and refurbishment work highlighted the significant progress the winery has made in recent years.

The ‘Cabernet Comparative Tasting’ includes wines ranging from $90 to $175 per bottle.

- 2018 Oakville Cabernet Sauvignon.
- 2019 Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon
- 2018 Spring Mountain Cabernet Sauvignon.
- 2018 Mount Veeder Cabernet Sauvignon.
- 2018 Sycamore Cabernet Sauvignon.
- 2018 Cabernet Bosche

Grace also managed to slip in a taste of the 2018 Josephine Blend, named after the founder of the winery, Josephine Tychson.

My clear favourite was the 2019 Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon, keenly priced at $85 and certainly recommended. Unfortunately, I was later to find out they were sold out of this one otherwise I’d have been buying a couple of bottles.

Grace gave us a tour of the venue and showed us the library which displays wines from decades ago going back as far as my year of birth!

What a great start to the day and Grace left us feeling valued and wanting to revisit in the future. If you’re going to Freemarket Abbey make sure you ask for Grace!

Round Pond Estate
875 Rutherford Road, Rutherford, CA 94573

The fabulous grounds of Round Pond Estate in the heart of the Rutherford district are breathtaking, even on a wet and cold December day! Just driving in, you are greeted by the site of a long straight driveway lined with towering palm trees leading you to the winery in the middle of acres of vineyards.

We were made to feel very welcome by Guy at reception and he treated us to his witty stories. Guy then took us to our table on the covered terrace which provides panoramic views of the vineyards and the

Mayacamas Mountains. Guy then left us to a further welcome and short introduction from Evan who poured us a Reserve Sauvignon Blanc, our first tasting from Round Pound.

The female host who took over our tasting from Evan didn't sit and join us and while pouring our wines she came across as polite but slightly uninterested and must have spent less than 10 minutes in total at our table, most of which was a sales pitch at the end. This was nowhere near the standard set by Freemark Abbey and later at Far Niente.

Round Pond Estate could and should be a first class experience in what is a stunning setting. Also on offer are wine and cheese pairings on the terrace, as well as olive oil tastings, or even a multi course food and wine pairing experience curated by the Estate chef.

The 'Artisan' tasting included four wines ranging in price from $50 to $150 per bottle.

- 2021 Jeannine Bovet reserve Sauvignon Blanc.
- 2019 Estate Cabernet Sauvignon.
- 2019 Louis Bovet Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon.
- 2019 Eric Bovet reserve Cabernet Sauvignon.

A stunning winery and thanks to Guy and Evan who try hard at providing a personal service with a smile and a laugh!

Far Niente Winery
1350 Acacia Drive, Oakville, CA 94562

Travelling and feeling slightly disappointed following our experience at Round Pond Estate our initial observation of Far Niente is that it is a truly high end winery which provides personalised tastings.

Our host was Curt Ghiringhelli a very accomplished sommelier. The wine we tasted was exceptional and the beautiful grounds and buildings made a truly excellent experience.

On arrival through the magnificent estate gates, we were greeted in the parking lot with a splash of Chardonnay which was quite unique, very clear and sharp. I would never usually opt for Chardonnay but this was like no other I have previously tasted.

I'm told the temperate climate and volcanic ash soils combine to create the perfect environment for producing the subtle, tropical flavours and complex aromas that are Far Niente Chardonnay. Made with an absence of malolactic fermentation, this ensures the grape's natural acidity is retained, this champion of Chardonnays really impressed me.

Curt led us to the Estate garage where our tasting table was set in amongst a stable of twelve classic cars, the late owner of the vineyard was an avid car buff. His wife still uses the cars today and they are cleaned and valeted every week. A spectacular setting.

From our table sitting in the middle of the garage we tasted wines that retail from between $50 and $340 a bottle. If you like higher end Cabernet Sauvignon, this is your tasting! We sampled Cabs from 2017 - 2018 and finished off with a sweet wine known as Dolce (Late Harvest) 2015. Not being a dessert wine fan I was reluctant but tasted it with a light blue cheese. It was outstanding and Curt managed to convert my view of dessert wines.

In all we tasted 6 wines:

- 2020 Far Niente Estate Bottled Chardonnay.
- 2021 EnRoute Pinot Noir “Les Pommiers”, Russian River Valley.
- 2019 Far Niente Estate Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Napa Valley.
- 2017 Far Niente Estate Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Napa Valley.
- 2018 Far Niente Estate Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Napa Valley.
- 2015 Dolce, Late Harvest, Napa Valley.

For me the 2017 Cabernet Sauvignon was exceptional and stood out from the rest by far, but at $340 a bottle was just outside my Christmas Day wine budget.

Once the tasting concluded, Curt led us on a tour of the cave where Far Niente wines are produced and stored. We got a fabulous history lesson about the wine making process and how the owners used dynamite to expand the cave.

The scale of the underground tunnels and caves is quite staggering, as are the acoustics. Essentially, it's the length of two football fields but tunnelled under the winery grounds.

Curt never pushed a sales pitch but made it clear which wines offered the best buys for drinking and investment. Once you've tasted the stunning wines there is probably no need for a hard sell as they speak for themselves!

Far Niente is very special and easily one of the prettiest wineries in the Valley. The tastings are exquisite, featuring expensive but sublime wines and expertly described by local expert Curt Ghiringhelli.

If you are a wine connoisseur (oenophile) or investor and prepared to buy expensive wines, Far Niente is definitely for you.

End of the Glass and Road

This treat was a really interesting and truly educational experience. It has turned my head on Chardonnay, the Dulce and Napa Cabernet Sauvignons. My day's top choices to pair with a meal are:

Entree - 2020 Far Niente Estate Bottled Chardonnay ($73)
Main - 2019 Rutherford Cabernet Sauvignon. ($85) or
Main - 2017 Far Niente Estate Cabernet Sauvignon Oakville Napa Valley ($340)
Dessert/Cheese - 2015 Dolce, Late Harvest, Napa Valley ($85 for 375ml).

The 'trunk' of Gary's Chevrolet Suburban was laden with purchases. I can only sincerely thank our family who gave us this outstanding wine tasting opportunity. I appreciate this was only a snapshot of what's available across the Valley but my head has undoubtedly been turned on U.S wines.

The experience generated family debates about which wines and vintages were best but overall left us convinced that Napa Wines are truly outstanding and maybe if it wasn't for some eye watering prices they would be the top choice for regular wine drinkers across the globe.

Slàinte Mhath 🥃
(Pronounced Slanj-a-va) and is cheers in Scots Gaelic!

Calum Glenny
Gourock's 'Avid Traveller'