



No time for a nap in the Napa Valley on a budget?

In California for a business summit late last year, **Jennie Vickers** took the opportunity to explore the state's world-famous wine regions

The 'crush' is a big deal in California. Not the people on the streets of San Francisco, but the frenetic activity in the vineyards of the Napa and Sonoma Valleys when it is harvest time in late September and early October. The United States is the world's fourth biggest wine-producing nation, and California its largest region.

California, and the Napa Valley in particular, is not known as a budget venue, but we set out to see if value could still be found in this playground of the rich and famous.

Getting our priorities right, we rolled into Napa and first stop was to find a café. The US is challenging for a fervent Kiwi espresso drinker, so we were delighted to discover the Napa Valley Coffee Roasting Company as we arrived with a looming caffeine-withdrawal headache. It also met the budget challenge at US\$2.50 for a double-shot espresso, and no sign of the usual buckets of coffee-flavoured milk. We now had our daily caffeine visit sorted for the three-day sojourn.

Breakfast was the next priority, and at Grace's Table, we met the best maitre d' (Karen Brewster) of our whole trip. Grace's serves fresh, local, and organic fare cooked with originality and flair, and they never disappointed this fan of potatoes for breakfast. I even developed a new jam passion – their house-made Pink Pearl Apple Preserve, which had a unique and delicate flavour and a very short picking season. And the budget? Three breakfasts and dinner for two for less than US\$150 all up.

An affordable bed was also a requirement for a budget weekend in a fancy destination. Chardonnay Lodge delivered exactly what it promised: budget, smart, clean, convenient, and quiet at night.

Foodies in Napa are spoilt for choice. Our favourite place was the Oxbow Public Market. This initiative, which started out in 2006, combines the

artisan American cheeses, matching local wines, fresh Californian seafood, ice cream to die for, as well as Mexican and burgers. The Saturday morning treat was a farmers' market alongside the Oxbow, selling fresh local seasonal fruit as well as worm farms and vegan hummus! When all foodie-d out, Napa even provides dance-step templates in the pavements to allow a little cha-cha-cha-ing to burn off the calories before the next feast.

The main reason for the trip (apart from culinary delights) was wine tasting, and Platypus Tours was great value at \$99 per person for day one around the Napa Valley and \$89 for day two in Sonoma Valley, lunch included. Our guides were entertaining and varied; a retired businessman drove us on the first day, followed by a retired female soldier on day two.

We visited eight, predominantly small, family-owned boutique vineyards over two days, and with 132 microclimates in Napa alone, variety and distinctions were guaranteed. I am not an expert, but everything we tasted was good enough to buy and bring home.

One grape variety that was under-represented on this visit was Merlot. The derogatory comments by characters in the 2004 movie *Sideways* about Merlot have so damaged the grape's reputation that many wineries had no option but to rip out those vines and replant grapes which were still in favour. It's sad that passing comments in a piece of fiction can change the range of wines available for tasting.

My favourite wineries across the two days, and worthy of special mention, were: Hopper Creek, Peter Cellars, Paradise Ridge, and Judd's Hill Winery.

Judd had been out picking since 2am, so did not make it in to meet us, but it felt like he was a Kiwi at heart. Pushing the boundaries seems his way of life as he's a creative, innovative winemaker, as well as an artist and musician, I have already pencilled

grape set the bar pretty high. This family venture was all about winemaking and little about making money. Judd sold his big production wine factory when he realised he worked such long hours that he had stopped experiencing the magic. Sound familiar?

"Dan the Man" owns and runs Hopper Creek Vineyard and Winery, and it rapidly felt more like hanging out with old friends for a few hours than a commercial venture. Hand punching freshly picked grapes was fun, albeit cold, and their hand-painted bottle of Pinot made its way safely back to New Zealand, but I am not sure for how long.

We were in California for the massive Oracle OpenWorld Conference, and it was amusing to taste wine on tasting day two, made with love and wit and poured by ex-Oracle VP Peter, of Peter Cellars, Sonoma. His 2006 Pinot was excellent and made me think of the best Pinots from the South Island. Peter, like most winemakers, had a wine dog. This one, a drop-dead gorgeous retriever called Rupert, was short on brains but long on charm. The dogs enhanced the intimate, family-home atmosphere of so many of these ventures.

Our final wine stop was Paradise Ridge Winery, which grows its grapes in the Russian River Valley, Sonoma County. Annette McDonnell, Tasting Room Manager, would win the prize for biggest personality. Her passion for helping people discover the joys of wine and food matching inspired her to develop a herb garden specifically to share new palate sensations with her tasters.

Final words go to this Energizer Bunny of a woman, who, in talking about her love of her job, said: "Own what you do. If my father had known I'd be paid to drink and talk he'd have slept easier".

Napa and Sonoma are full of delightful people who sleep well and who offer experiences that guarantee that you will too. ☺