 by joseph schmitt

Napa Valley and Sonoma County

What's Not to Love About California's Wine Country?

There's so much about California's wine country of Napa Valley and Sonoma County that make it an enticing and unique place to visit. First off, naturally, is the juice. Wine lovers of every variety, from the box novice to the expert nose, will find a certain romance and adventure in exploring the almost endless wineries and their handcrafted creations. The winding roads that connect these sprawling vineyards and quaint hamlets remind you that the journey is as important as the destination. And the locals you'll encounter here are a special breed, indeed. An egalitarian mindset in these parts of California is rooted in a collective appreciation for our connection with the land, and creative expression. Millionaire wine makers can be found cozying up next to waiters at local eateries, often striking up conversations about wine and food, and the areas many famous Chefs are bigger celebrities than any movie star.

It's hard not to fall in love with California's wine country, and fantasize about making it your home. During a recent visit, I befriended one such man who couldn't resist the temptation to live what he calls, "the Champagne Lifestyle in Northern California." Before settling in Napa County, Charles Kimball worked as an event manager and catering director at several fine hotels on both coasts. With strong hospitality skills and an impressive resume, he spent his first five years in Napa expanding his wine knowledge and making friends and business connections. The wine country concierge business he eventually started, catering to gay visitors, was a natural progression, blending his love of people, food and wine.

Charles' boutique concierge business, Gay Getaways Napa Sonoma (gaynapagetaways.com), helps gay visitors experience that 'Champagne Lifestyle' without uprooting their lives and hiring movers. His large portfolio of villas and homes throughout Napa and Sonoma offer a homey approach to experiencing the best of this beautiful country. And the insider knowledge he offers his clients through his customized packages helps ensure they get everything they've dreamt about in their wine country adventure. Charles is also a wedding planner and legal officiant. He says he takes great pride in helping his gay clients create a stress-free dream wedding, whether it's a large event, or an intimate elopement.

Photography courtesy of Charles Kimball, Wine Country Concierge and Wedding Officiant.

We asked Charles Kimball to share with us some of his personal favorite places and where it is he likes to send his clients. He happily shared with *The Rage Monthly* readers his insider knowledge and welcomes us all to experience the other side of California.

In Napa:

"For a romantic and fun time in the ever cool downtown Napa, I suggest a pre-dinner specialty cocktail and appetizer, maybe some sushi, at the uber-cool bar at Morimoto (morimotonapa.com). Fans of Iron Chef America will instantly recognize Chef Morimoto's face in the restaurant's retail section. More romance and great food can be found a short walk from Morimoto, at Angèle (angelerestaurant.com). The menu here is classic French with contemporary comfort influences. After dinner I suggest taking in some working-class color and stop for a drink where the locals hang out. Henry's Bar and Lounge (823 Main St., Napa) is a bit of a dive bar, but gay friendly. Located just a block from the Napa River Inn, remember to take cash, as they don't accept credit cards. Hotel wise, the Napa River Inn (napariverinn.com) is very convenient. You can wine taste and take in the sites of Napa Valley in the daytime and come back to your hotel and not get in your car again the rest of the night."

In Yountville:

"I often book my clients into the gay friendly and romantic Hotel Luca (hotellucanapa.com) in the small town of Yountville, just north of Napa. You'll find that lots of wine tasting rooms and bistros are within walking distance. Yountville is sometimes amusingly called Keller Ville, due to all of the venues that Thomas Keller of French Laundry fame owns here. They're all great places to dine and have fun.. and spend your money. I often suggest my clients stop in at Keller's Bouchon (bouchonbistro.com) establishment for some oysters and a pre-dinner cocktails. You might recognize Bouchon from its Beverly Hills and Las Vegas locations."

"Then maybe on to a romantic and sweet dinner at Redd (reddnapavalley.com), where the chef owners worked to perfect a balance of serious modern food and an unpretentious romantic environment. The bar at Bottega Napa Valley (botteganapavalley.com) is also hot with all the locals and visitors alike, trying to get a sighting of celebrity owner and Chef Michael Chiarello. Just across the street from Hotel Luca you'll find a very gay friendly dive bar called Panchas (6764 Washington St., Yountville) that often hosts gay benefits. There are two pool tables where you can find one table with Motorcycle Mamas playing pool and on the other table a couple of gay guys."

In Sonoma:

"I think of Sonoma as more of a small town, outdoorsy kind of trip. The wines and the experiences are completely different from the rest of the area. A great and romantic gay-owned place in the small village of Monte Rio is Village Inn and Restaurant (villageinn-ca.com). Dinner in their restaurant will fill your senses and then just below you is the Russian River, swimmable and fun for kayaking, you are but twenty minutes from the Pacific Ocean. This charming establishment is just three miles from the gay-popular town of Guerneville with plentiful gay-owned businesses."

As good as, if not better than French Laundry, is Cyrus (cyrusrestaurant.com). Located in Healdsburg, you'll find this friendly establishment to be just a bit less expensive than some other more famous restaurants and perfect for a special occasion. Since wine is the big draw here, don't miss out on a tour of Wine Road (wineroad.com) that will take you through this beautiful wine country where you'll find numerous small wineries that are all very gay welcoming.