



Napa's 'Disneyland' wineries: Are they actually worth the trip?

By Esther Mobley, Jess Lander and Cesar Hernandez | July 26, 2022 |
Updated: July 27, 2022 11:32 AM

There is a certain type of establishment in [Napa Valley](#) that we call the “gateway winery.”

These destinations, invariably located on the valley's main promenade, Highway 29, are ideal stops for the first-time Napa visitor. Tour buses frequent the parking lots. The atmosphere is casual, the bar usually crowded. These tasting rooms often employ spectacles and gimmicks: medieval dungeons, giant bunny statues, bikini-clad mannequins. The wines themselves tend to taste fruity, bold and sometimes even sweet.

Here, at the gateway winery, no one will quiz you on what malolactic fermentation means or expect you to understand jargon like “clonal

selection." If you're part of a bachelorette party, you won't get the stink eye. If you're really just here to take some selfies against a picturesque vineyard backdrop, that's fine too. Wine doesn't have to be so serious, the gateway winery insists.

More Napa in Flux



Napa Valley has reached a turning point. Here are 4 more stories that explain how the wine destination is changing.

[Read more](#)

To some wine-industry insiders and connoisseurs, the gateway [wineries](#) are kitschy and embarrassing, the places that make Napa feel like an adult Disneyland. But one person's tacky may be another person's approachable, and it's undeniable that the gateways do an admirable job of catering to newcomers. In fact, they may convert first-time wine tourists into repeat Napa visitors — serving, literally, as gateways to the other 500-odd wineries in the valley.

We revisited four of Napa Valley's most heavily trafficked gateway attractions — [Castello di Amorosa](#), Del Dotto, [Hall](#) and Raymond — to take a closer look at what makes them so popular with some people and so cringeworthy for others.

— *Esther Mobley*



Castello di Amorosa



Photos by Rachel Bujalski / Special to The Chronicle

Castello di Amorosa feels thoroughly medieval, a painstaking reproduction of a 13th century Tuscan castle. You'd never guess it was finished in 2007. Owner Dario Sattui shipped almost a million antique bricks from Europe to construct his magnum opus, which has all the classic Tuscan-castle trappings: drawbridge, moat, chapel, armory, torture chamber. (A building on the property [burned in the 2020 Glass Fire](#), destroying significant wine inventory, but the castle itself was spared.)

As if that weren't enough spectacle, some very attention-grabbing animals roam the lawns outside the castle. When was the last time you saw an emu? There are two here.

Known to its many fans simply as "the castle," Castello di Amorosa would be an attraction even if there were no wine to taste — and indeed, wine tasting can feel secondary to castle-roaming in the visitor experience. Guided tours are available, while self-guided tours are enabled by ubiquitous QR codes. The castle begs to be noticed at every turn; the towers, for example, feature historically accurate slits for arrows. This, Sattui notes in a video accessible via the QR code, helps position you to attack your advancing enemy.

It can feel like you've entered Medieval World, the interactive theme park from Michael Crichton's 1973 film "Westworld." But eventually there is some wine to taste, and you'll be reminded that you are in [Napa Valley](#). The standard tasting (\$50) routes visitors to the downstairs tasting bar after they finish their jaunt through the fortress. Staff is well versed in explaining the ABCs of wine to a novice audience. Standing at the bar, each customer chooses five wines to taste from a menu of 25. If you like sweet wine, you're in luck. If you don't, try the Vermentino. The fact that the tasting room is located in what feels like a gigantic gift shop — candles, chocolates, olive oil and more are for sale — adds to the feeling that a departing guest has just visited a theme park, not a winery. But judging by the crowds snapping selfies with the emus, that seems to suit plenty of folks just fine.

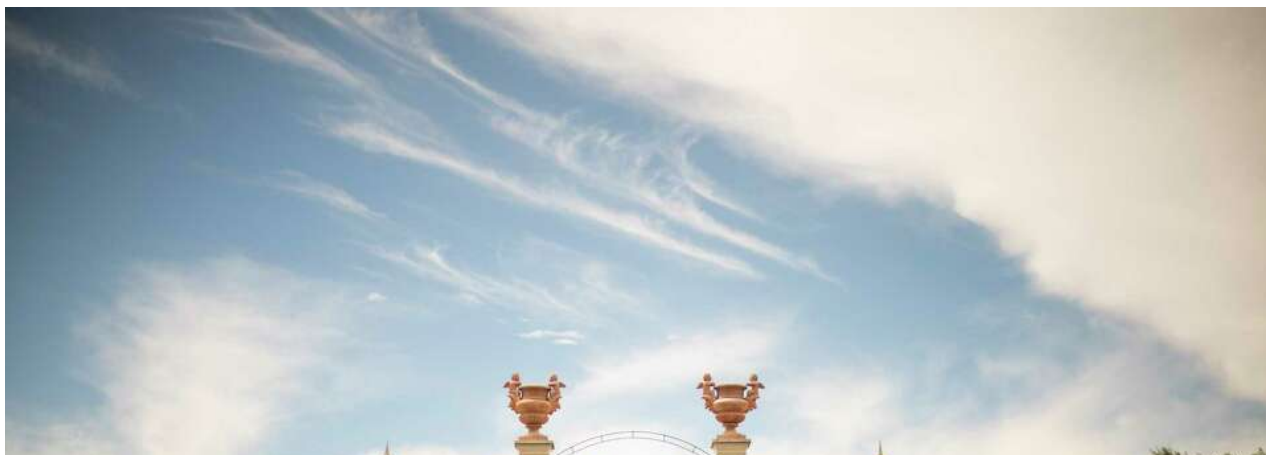
— *Esther Mobley*

IF YOU GO: Self-guided tour and standing tasting \$50. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday and 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, by appointment only. 707-967-6272 or castellodiamorosa.com

READ MORE

Del Dotto Estate Winery & Caves





Locals jokingly refer to Del Dotto as “Del Blotto” because that’s just how drunk a visit to this winery can get you, if you let it. (Don’t let it! There are spit buckets everywhere.) The central experience at the St. Helena estate (\$120) is a staff-guided journey through the wine caves with tastes directly from the barrel. My recent tour involved eight such wines but, according to the guide, some especially ravenous groups can get up to 15. You see where one could get blotto.

The barrels are a big deal here. If you assume all wooden drums are more or less the same, you’re in for an awakening. You’ll taste wine from vessels made of American oak and French oak, toasted heavily and lightly, made by various coopers, of varying age. At one point, your guide will extract wine from two barrels, one forged from American-grown trees and the other from French, and blind-quiz you on which you prefer. If you haven’t been spitting your samples, this may be the point in the tour where you really start to feel the alcohol.

My tour guide displayed a deep reverence for winery founder Dave Del Dotto, best known for the Cash Flow System, a course he sold on infomercials starting in the 1980s. (In 1996, he [paid \\$200,000 to settle a lawsuit](#) in which the Federal Trade Commission accused him of making deceptive claims.) The employee hat-tipped “Dave” adoringly throughout the visit, commending him especially for his taste in winery design. That design is nothing short of extravagant. Modeled on a Venetian cathedral, the winery’s central rooms are lined in carrara marble, punctuated by baroque pillars, with ancient Roman-style mosaics laid into the floor. Every tour concludes with the most Italian treat of them all: a cheese [pizza](#).

— *Esther Mobley*

IF YOU GO: *Tour and tasting \$120. 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday, Tuesday and Thursday and 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday-Sunday, by appointment only. 1445 St. Helena Highway, St. Helena. 707-963-2134 or deldottovineyards.com*

[READ MORE](#)

Hall Wines



From lengthy, tree-lined drives to towering iron gates, many Napa Valley wineries flaunt a dramatic entrance, but only one has a giant, stainless steel bunny rabbit leaping out from its vines. Known by locals as Bunny Foo Foo (the actual name of this Lawrence Argent sculpture), Hall's rabbit dons themed accessories throughout the year, including an Easter basket, a witch's hat, reindeer antlers and even a lightsaber whenever a new Star Wars movie is set to premier. Like any good art piece, Bunny Foo Foo is a controversial fixture on Napa's Highway 29, attracting visitors just as often as it repels them.

Art, specifically contemporary art, is a [focal point at Hall](#). It's throughout the entire property — even the wine cellar — but the Hallmark Tour (\$60) is equally immersed in history and wine.

Guests sip three red wines along a 45-minute tour of the 1885 stone winery, tasting room and wine production area. There, a short video expertly guided us through the entirety of the winemaking process. Instead of the lively tasting room, which bordered on rowdy, the experience concluded in one of Hall's private salons with a flight of three [Cabernets](#) and a red blend from different Napa Valley sub-regions. This experience is one of the best values in Napa.

Our group chatted casually as we tasted, and we made new friends with the people sitting next to us. We didn't feel rushed to leave or pressured to buy bottles. Admittedly, our young tour guide was less polished or buttoned up than what I've come to expect from Napa Valley hospitality, but the group absolutely ate him and his wisecracks up. His approachable nature successfully broke down wine's many barriers; when asked about ratings, he said, "It's like Rotten Tomatoes for movies. Take those with a grain of salt. You should never use it as the Bible." And I happen to agree.

— Jess Lander

IF YOU GO: Hallmark tour and tasting \$60. 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. daily. Reservations recommended. 401 St. Helena Highway South, St. Helena. 707-967-2626 or hallwines.com

[READ MORE](#)

Raymond Vineyards



Photos by Brian L. Frank / Special to The Chronicle

A big part of visiting Raymond Vineyards involves being told over and over that owner [Jean-Charles Boisset](#) is the stuff of legend. The staff has memorized an exposition-heavy script, talking him up to be a party animal, the likes of which the world hasn't witnessed since Jay Gatsby.

The winery has several rooms that each display a different brand of fanciness, like the corridor of the senses, a hallway where you can smell wine-associated aromas; the main tasting room, a casual salon with a wall of hands holding bottles; or the red room, a lounge with velvet couches and chairs, the most elegant of the rooms.

But the Crystal Cellar best displays the facade behind the man. Around the chandelier-lit room of steel tanks, you'll see some mannequins dressed in bikinis while others wear angel wings. The lighting is red and pink — it's meant to inspire a nightclub vibe but looks more like a bad episode of "Euphoria." The staff will tell you that the room's design looks that way because it was once the site of Boisset's legendary ragers, so you can relive the party every visit. I was curious to know whether the display cases with Macy's-style jewelry are also leftover from the party? If so, then this was the tackiest party I've ever seen.

The vibe is generally casual, with the occasional bachelorette party toasting to the night. The Crystal Cellar tasting (\$50) offers four Cabernet Sauvignons — the standout was made with grapes that were salvaged from the [2020 Glass Fire](#), imparting the faintest smoky-savory flavor. Overall, the best parts of visiting Raymond are looking at the art displays, like the outdoor installation of hanging frames, and

strolling through the outdoor walkway overlooking the grapevines.

— Cesar Hernandez

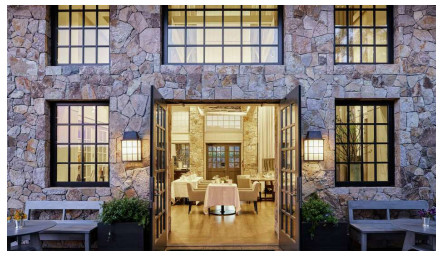
IF YOU GO: *Crystal Cellar Tasting \$50. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. daily, by appointment only. 707-963-3141 or raymondvineyards.com*

READ MORE

More like this



[These 8 power players are reshaping the future of Napa Valley wine](#)



[Napa's most historic wineries are staging a comeback. Will multimillion-dollar rebrands work?](#)



[Napa's vineyard workers are retiring — and the next generation doesn't want their jobs](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

Credits

Reporting

Cesar Hernandez • cesar.hernandez@sfchronicle.com • [@cesarischafa](https://twitter.com/cesarischafa)

Jess Lander • jess.lander@sfchronicle.com • [@jesslander](https://twitter.com/jesslander)

Esther Mobley • emobley@sfchronicle.com • [@esther_mobley](https://twitter.com/esther_mobley)

Editing

Janelle Bitker • janelle.bitker@sfchronicle.com • [@janellebitker](https://twitter.com/janellebitker)

Visuals

Scott Strazzante • sstrazzante@sfchronicle.com • [@scottstrazzante](https://twitter.com/scottstrazzante)

Rachel Bujalski

Brian L. Frank

Visuals Editing

Emily Jan • emily.jan@sfchronicle.com • [@emilybjan](https://twitter.com/emilybjan)

Philip Pacheco • philip.pacheco@sfchronicle.com

Design & Development

Steven Boyle • sboyle@sfchronicle.com

Alex K. Fong • alex.fong@sfchronicle.com • [@alexkfong](https://twitter.com/alexkfong)

[TO TOP](#)

ABOUT

[Our Company](#)

[Privacy Notice / Notice at Collection](#)

[Your California Privacy Rights](#)

[Interest Based Ads](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

[Careers](#)

[Advertising](#)

NEWSROOM

[Ethics Policy](#)

[How We Cover Politics](#)

[Endorsement Process](#)

[News Tips](#)

[Newsroom News](#)

CONTACT

[Customer Service](#)

[FAQ](#)

[Newsroom](#)

[Contacts](#)

CCPA

[Do Not Sell My Personal Information](#)

SERVICES

[Subscriber Services](#)

[e-Edition](#)

[Reprints & Permissions](#)

[Corporate Subscriptions](#)

[App](#)

[Archives](#)

[Membership](#)

[Store](#)

[Subscription Offers](#)

[sfgate.com](#)