



Most Popular

1. As drought intensifies, Newsom plans California's biggest water project...
2. This quiet Bay Area suburb saw explosive growth in its homeless population
3. S.F. jazz bar owner says police, fire departments 'failed' his business,...
4. Police, emergency cre respond to inci in downtown S.F.

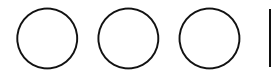
FOOD // WINE, BEER & SPIRITS

# 'That's how people die in wildfires': How Wine Country's fancy new resorts could increase fire risk



Jess Lander

July 26, 2022 | Updated: July 26, 2022 9:09 p.m.



The entrance to the Montage resort in Healdsburg.  
Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

In the early hours of Napa Valley's [2020 Glass Fire](#), luxury resort Calistoga Ranch burned to the ground. Less than 24 hours later and 7 miles south, Napa's most famous resort, Meadowood Napa Valley, also caught fire, [leaving its three-Michelin-starred restaurant in ashes](#).

It was the third round of [devastating wildfires](#) to hit Napa and Sonoma since 2017, and the region has been in a [constant state of rebuilding](#). But wildfires have not slowed new development, especially when it comes to lodging. Three new Wine Country resorts opened in Napa and Sonoma after the Glass Fire's incursion: the Montage in Healdsburg, the Four Seasons in Calistoga and [Stanly Ranch](#) on the southern end of Napa. Another upscale Healdsburg hotel, [Appellation from chef Charlie Palmer](#), is slated to open in 2023.

This massive expansion of the tourism industry comes at a contentious time. Environmental experts say that such development increases the risk of wildfires, yet visitor demand in Wine Country is high. Some of these resorts have undertaken exhaustive and expensive fire mitigation measures to protect their properties and guests, but it might not be enough.

Humans are responsible for 95% of wildfire ignitions in California, according to Peter Broderick, a staff attorney at the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity, which [sued Lake County over development](#) in 2020. "When you bring people to wildfire-prone areas you increase the wildfire risk," he said. "We should not be building in these areas."

The state attorney general's office has [criticized and delayed](#) several development projects in recent years because of wildfire concerns. And low-density developments, like resorts, are "especially fire prone," Broderick



said.



The Lavender Pool at Stanly Ranch, which is set on 700 acres.

Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

Consistent wildfires have not resulted in less tourism during fire season, which happens to overlap with the popular wine harvest season. Wine lovers continue to seek out luxurious retreats tucked among vines and nature, despite nightly room rates that often exceed \$1,000. These businesses are also a boon for the local economy — in 2018, Napa Valley visitors spent \$476 million in lodging, according to an economic impact report. According to Visit Napa Valley President and CEO Linsey Gallagher, the region’s 2021 hotel revenue reached roughly 98% of 2019 levels. During fire season specifically, demand was down just 8% on average from 2019.

“We have been talking about it and thinking it would slow down” during fire season, said Patrick Nayrolles, Meadowood general manager. While the restaurant remains closed, Meadowood has reopened to guests and members at the resort. “People have been talking about September and

October becoming like hurricane season in Florida, but we haven't felt that impact."

Arguably, all of these new properties are located in areas where wildfires could strike. In 2020, the Glass Fire unexpectedly jumped the highway and threatened urban areas of Napa Valley. The Montage, for instance, is in a moderate-severity zone, with high-severity areas within close proximity, according to [Cal Fire's Fire Hazard Severity Zones mapping tool](#).

"There's no way to predict the way a natural disaster will unfold and the last few years have certainly taught us that," said Jennifer Chiesa, the Montage's director of public relations.

That's why fire mitigation has been a top priority for the hotel, according to Chiesa. During the construction process, developers made landscaping adjustments, like replacing mulch with rocks around the buildings to reduce accelerants. They installed a pump station, which will provide extra water in case of a fire, and the resort has cleared vegetation extensively. As part of the original development agreement, the city of Healdsburg also committed to building a fire substation on the property, an area where task forces and strike teams can organize. This is set to be completed in 2023.





Guest houses and rooms perch on a hillside at the Montage resort in Healdsburg.

Jessica Christian/The Chronicle

When asked about fire preparedness, representatives of Auberge Resorts, which operates Stanly Ranch and the Four Seasons, declined an interview with The Chronicle. Ed Gannon, general manager of Stanly Ranch, said in an email that Stanly Ranch “is uniquely positioned at the southern edge of Napa Valley in a low risk fire zone.” But Stanly Ranch sits in the wind-prone Carneros wine region where the [Nuns Fire](#) burned in 2017.

Meadowood has been busy removing dead trees and brush that could fuel future fires. It’s working with a herd of 1,200 sheep and goats that graze dry grasses and replanting fire-resistant tree species like oaks and coast redwoods. Paul Asmuth, a manager at Meadowood, credits the resort’s extensive clearing and pruning work in the spring of 2020 with saving the majority of the property when the Glass Fire struck.

The team plans to rebuild structures with noncombustible materials like hardy wood. This was used for Meadowood’s spa renovation in 2015 and

seemingly proved effective in 2020. “The fire burned right up to the edge of the spa and stopped right where the building was,” said Asmuth, who believes Wine Country is now more experienced and thus better prepared to face future fires.

---

## Food Guide

### Top 25 Restaurants

Where to eat in the Bay Area. Find spots near you, create a dining wishlist, and more.

“There’s a lot more knowledge throughout the space and a lot more preparedness going on,” he said. “The county has made a great effort to have a very responsive team in the case of fires starting. We’ve seen it twice this year already.”





One of the many structures that burned after the Glass Fire ripped through Napa Valley's Meadowood resort on Sept. 28, 2020.

Nina Riggio/Special to The Chronicle 2020

But Broderick argues there are other factors to consider, like the potential impacts of development on residents and other businesses. While these resorts were erected according to modern building codes and have the resources for extensive mitigation, their very existence increases the danger for higher-risk homes and structures in the area that were built 30 or 40 years ago, he said.

Evacuations are also a concern, as more visitors would increase traffic during evacuations. Many parts of Napa and Sonoma counties consist of two-lane roads. That said, no one was injured in previous Wine Country resort fires and guests were able to evacuate safely.

“When you have a limited amount of roadway capacity and increase the number of people in vehicles who need to use that roadway, you’re increasing exposure to injury and death,” Broderick said.

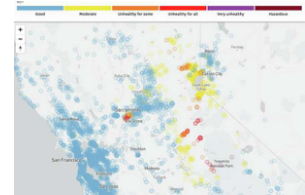
Oak Fire burns 21 homes in Mariposa County, threatens another 2,000

[Read Now](#)



Bay Area air quality advisory extended over smoke from Oak Fire near Yosemite

[Read Now](#)



“That’s how people die in wildfires.”

Jess Lander is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: [jess.lander@sfchronicle.com](mailto:jess.lander@sfchronicle.com) Twitter: [@jesslander](https://twitter.com/jesslander)

## Sign up for Chronicle Food newsletter

The latest news from The Chronicle's Food and Wine team.

Email

**SIGN UP**

By signing up, you agree to our [Terms of use](#) and acknowledge that your information will be used as described in our [Privacy Policy](#).



Written By  
**Jess Lander**

Reach Jess on

Jess Lander joined the food and wine team at The San Francisco Chronicle as wine reporter in 2022. Based in Napa Valley, Jess has extensively covered California wine country for numerous national and international publications since 2014. In 2021, Jess published "The Essential Napa Valley Cookbook," a project that raised more than \$100,000 for Napa Valley restaurant workers impacted by the pandemic and fires. Jess hails from Boston, where she studied journalism at Emerson College and started out as a sports reporter before making the switch to wine.