

A Blissful Interlude, One Sip At A Time.

Napa Valley's Chateau Montelena made history nearly 50 years ago at the 'Judgement of Paris.' Noted oenophile and sommelier **Ruma Singh** visits the winery for a stroll down memory lane and taste of its aromatic future.

The ethereal façade of Chateau Montelena evokes a bygone era.

A WISE MAN ONCE TOLD ME GOOD wine is created first in the vineyards. It's true—good grapes produce good wine. That's why I simply love visiting them. Walking among rows of vines, soaking in the atmosphere that makes every vineyard in the world different from the other.

Take Napa Valley. It's not only one of the world's premium wine regions, but also quite unique, with an exciting narrative. So, when my sister's family suggested a trip to this gorgeous haven, after enjoying a family wedding in the

USA, it was an exciting opportunity to experience history first-hand.

The famed valley, nestled between the Mayacamas and Vaca mountains, is home to a remarkable range of diverse microclimates. Since it's situated within easy driving distance north of San Francisco, we simply picked up a rental car at the city's airport and made our way directly to Napa town, where we had booked a spacious Airbnb. The thought of returning to its air-conditioned comfort after a day out in the sunny vineyards was enticing.

My brother-in-law is an avowed Napa wine aficionado and member of several of the region's exclusive wine 'clubs.' He showed us a list of those we could visit. One name jumped out. Chateau Montelena.

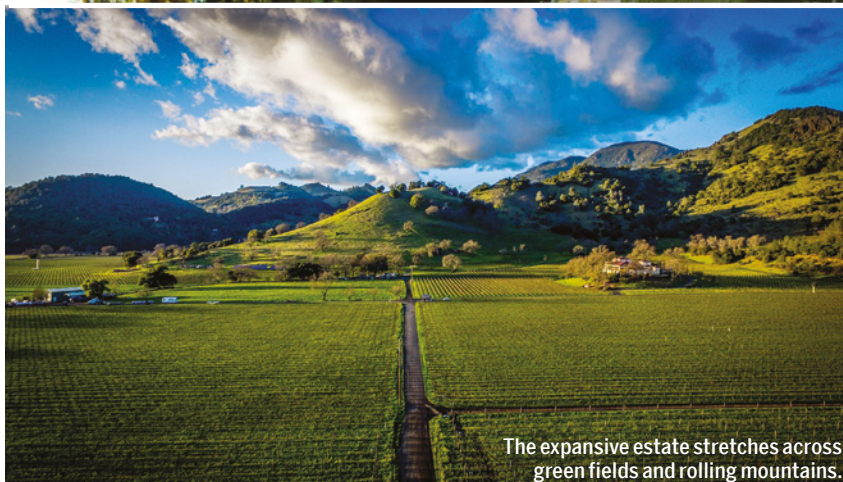
A New World Order Emerges

Renowned among many wine lovers, this winery is located in Calistoga, a district in the northern part of the valley. In 1976, its owner Jim Barrett made history when his creation, the Chateau Montelena 1973 Chardonnay

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Serene and lush setting of the picturesque Jade Lake.



The expansive estate stretches across green fields and rolling mountains.

won against some of the world's most iconic white wines from Burgundy at a famous blind tasting subsequently called the 'Judgement of Paris'. Conceptualised by British wine expert Steven Spurrier, this event pitched unknown wines from California against some of the most famous wines ever produced in France. The jury consisted of top French critics. The hitherto unknown wines from the USA won decisively, creating a furore in the established world of fine wine! It also firmly and clearly

established the 'New World'—regions like Napa—as champions.

Aware of this inspiring past, it was a matter of immense curiosity for me to taste the wine, traverse the vineyards, talk to the people, and experience it all for myself.

With the help of my brother-in-law, our appointments were quickly confirmed. The sun was bright as we made our way to Chateau Montelena: it promised to be a warm afternoon. As we drove past the cast-iron gates into the property, Montelena looked exactly

like the country estate it was meant to be, green and lush. It was quiet as we passed the tree-lined driveway towards the winery. After signing in, we had time before our tasting, and so decided to enjoy a scenic afternoon repast.

My sister had organised a picnic lunch at the estate's exquisite Chinese-inspired Jade Lake (available for booking by members). And so, we had stopped en route to pick up freshly-made sandwiches and sushi from the Sunshine Foods' deli. While checking in at the winery, my brother-in-law picked up a couple of bottles of chilled Montelena Chardonnay to accompany our meal. At the pagoda on a tiny island within the lake, a perfect set-up awaited us—silverware and plates laid out on the table, a cooler filled with ice, and bottles of chilled water. We sat down to our picnic lunch, grateful for our haven of serenity: a lush, tranquil 13-acre reserve, the lake's waters are a glimmering jade-green and draped by weeping willows. We took in the beauty around, replete with gliding swans and schools of golden koi.

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A worker carries fresh grapes from the vineyards.

A Taste of History

All too soon, the Jade Lake interlude was over. We walked down the charming, red oriental-style bridges and pathways back to the chateau, where a private Cellarmaster's tasting awaited us at the historic old Tubbs room, named after the winery's original owner Alfred Tubbs. The chateau itself is a 100-year-old 'castle' with thick stone walls and narrow arched windows. It even featured prominently in the movie *Bottle Shock* (2008), based on the famous Paris tasting.

We were welcomed by our host, Doug Croll and ushered in. The Tubbs room had an evocative old-world feel to it, from the elaborate chandeliers set into wood-beamed ceilings, to the fireplace, antique tapestries adorning the walls, and richly upholstered chairs. At one end of the room, a large oak table with chairs was set up for the tasting, with sets of tagged glasses and leather-bound files of notes on the wines along with platters of cheese and bread. This was an extraordinary taste of the past in a location offering stunning views over the estate grounds.

We began our tasting with the citrus-driven Chardonnay 2020, and the juicy, full-bodied Estate Zinfandel 2018, followed by two vintages of their complex and rich Estate Cabernet Sauvignon: 2007 and 2014. In the distance, we heard the rattle of bottles in the winery building where, we were told, CEO Bo Barrett was personally



An array of cheese, nuts, and crackers accompany the tasting experience.

overseeing the bottling of Montelena's wines. Only a handful of the history-making 1973 Chardonnay remains in their wine library, I was informed. Montelena holds back a percentage of its annual wine production to allow public access to older vintages.

A Flavourful Future

The tasting done, I was keen to visit the vineyards—Montelena covers 100 acres within Calistoga itself, and more in other regions. Doug offered to take us on a ride through the seemingly never-ending rows of Montelena vines spreading into the horizon.

The diversity of the vines held me spellbound. Glistening in the afternoon sun were old, gnarled Zinfandel vineyards, alongside newer plantings of Cabernet Sauvignon vines. Set at altitudes of 300 metres, they rose



The elegant Tubbs room.

higher onto the mountainsides. The elevation ensured that cooler evening temperatures result in slowly ripened, perfect grapes, all to make perfectly balanced wines.

Bo Barrett is often quoted as saying, "We simply strive to make the BEST wine that we possibly can in each year," referring to their mission to create unique wines that reflect the land rather than attempting to simply replicate history. As we whipped our way around the vineyard's dirt roads, Doug explained the winery's mission of sustainability and nurture—conserving natural resources and avoiding chemical fertilisers and pesticides. "Sustainability is not a word, it is our philosophy," he said. Today, Chateau Montelena is honoured on the US National Register of Historic Places, securing its spot in American history. Yet, its focus is on the future.

Done with the tasting and tour, we walked back to our car. I turned to look back at the stone-faced structure that is Chateau Montelena. It was flying the American flag on its frontage. That, to me, seemed appropriate. ⚙️



GETTING THERE

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