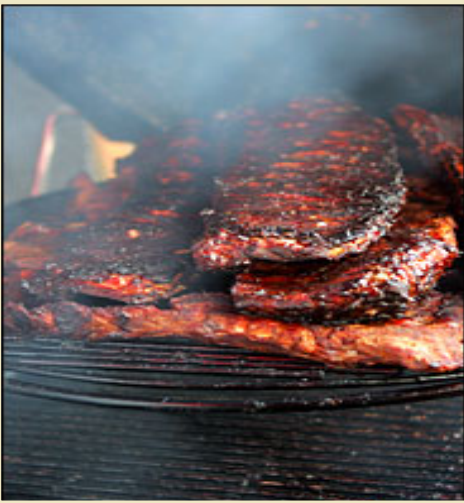


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Blue-Collar Napa Joins the Gold Rush

Dining Out
R.W. Apple Jr.
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“Visitors are flocking to Napa, California, about an hour's drive from San Francisco, to try dishes like the ribs at the Bounty Hunter.”



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The Bounty Hunter began life as the retail offshoot of Mr. Pope's catalog wine business, and it shows. Bottles line the walls (although you may not notice them at first, because it's hard to take your eyes off the towering stuffed bears that flank the door), and the kitchen is the size of a stall shower for two. Fortunately, a grill and a smoker out back give Nick Heinrich and William Wright, the chefs, a little more flexibility.

It's good times all the time at the Bounty Hunter, whose brick walls, stamped-tin ceiling and marble-top tables give it the feeling of a saloon. Go at lunch, and you'll encounter winemakers and politicians; turn up at dinner, and you'll meet tourists and locals celebrating a birthday. "It needs to be fun," said Mr. Pope, the son of a Michigan welder. "If you go too highbrow, it won't appeal to people on vacation."

As casual as it is, the cooking is based on prime ingredients, cooked with care but without undue fuss. Take the lunchtime sandwiches: a succulent cheeseburger with just the right amount of fat (Wednesdays only, unless you get lucky); a "T.L.B." made with house-smoked turkey, perfectly crisp baby greens, Nueske's nonpareil bacon from Wisconsin and chipotle mayonnaise; and tender pulled pork barbecue on soft buns, which would earn the grudging respect of even the pickiest North Carolinian. It prompted my friend Stan Bromley, the recently retired general manager of the Four Seasons in San Francisco, to exclaim uncharacteristically, "Oooh, now that's a real saliva driver!"

Evenings you can order cowboy steak or assorted sausages. Thursdays through Sundays, try remarkably moist whole chicken cooked on the grill with a lime inside or smoked pork ribs - fat, juicy, expertly charred hunks of meat served with red (tomato-based) and yellow (mustard-based) barbecue sauces. The chicken is a steal at \$20, salad included, and so are Mr. Pope's wines, 40 by the glass, 400 by the bottle.
(Full article on reverse side.)

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YOU can size up the new Napa and the old in a single sidelong glance down the 800 block of Main Street, where a jampacked tapas spot and a welcoming bistro rub shoulders with a bar that has been shuttered since 1975 and an Asian cafe whose fading sign advertises that great Chinese-American gastronomic anachronism chop suey. This has always been a blue-collar city, home for decades to many of the workers at the nearby Mare Island Naval Shipyard, which is now closed. As vineyards filled the valley north of here over half a century, Napa has been content to leave the tourists, the inns, the boutiques and the fashionable watering holes to St. Helena, Yountville and other "upvalley" towns and villages.

For many years, Napa's only consequential restaurant was the bubbly, locally beloved little Bistrot Don Giovanni, which is not really in the city at all but out on busy Highway 29, which skirts Napa to the west.

Come the culinary revolution: suddenly there are a dozen worthwhile dining destinations in town. Malpeque oysters on the half shell, roasted quail and braised pork belly are displacing pizza and burgers as foods of choice in this city of 75,000 about an hour northeast of San Francisco, and visitors are flocking here to try them. "We used to drive up to Oakville or Calistoga to eat," said Mark Pope, the wine-loving owner of the Bounty Hunter, one of the more idiosyncratic of the new Napa restaurants. "Now a lot of people there drive here."

None of the chefs working in Napa is likely to knock Thomas Keller, the king of Napa Valley cuisine, off his throne anytime soon. Like its Manhattan progeny, Per Se, his Yountville flagship, the perennially booked-up French Laundry, wins fresh acclaim every week for the originality and consistency of its American-modern haute cuisine. But James McDevitt's winning Asian-accented food at Budo and Victor Scargle's accomplished offerings at Julia's Kitchen, the newly invigorated restaurant at Copia: the American Center for Food, Wine and the Arts can easily stand comparison with such established, often-honored places as Terra and the Martini House, both in St. Helena. And Napa is rich in small, modestly priced grills, bistros and brasseries.

Some of the impetus for change came from the opening of Copia, a culinary museum and cultural center, in 2001 and the reopening of the Napa Valley Opera House in two stages in 2002 and 2003, following a lengthy campaign that saved that 1880 building from demolition. The opera house now regularly stages dance, recitals and concerts of many kinds. Equally important, however, have been the valley's swiftly changing demographics.

"Hip young people who wanted to live in the wine country found that they couldn't afford housing farther north," said Patricia Perini, a documentary-film maker who worked on the campaign to save the opera house. "So after a while they started buying up workers' bungalows in the city of Napa and restoring them." Soon they found themselves spoiled for choice at dinnertime as restaurants proliferated - Cole's Chop House, a first-class steak joint; ZuZu, the tapas bar, which construes its genre broadly, with plenty of not-so-Spanish but oh-so-good dishes like hummus with grilled lamb and goat yogurt; and NV, a clublike establishment also riding the trend toward small plates, owned by Peter Halikas, who once cooked at Gary Danko in San Francisco. NV? The letters don't stand for nonvintage, Napa Valley or anything else, or so Mr. Halikas insists.

Nicole Plue, a pastry chef who made her name at Hawthorne Lane in San Francisco and Eleven Madison Park in New York, turns out delicate, enticing desserts at Julia's, among them a cookie-crust tart with a stack of mini-crepes, both flavored with California's daintily perfumed Meyer lemons. I can't wait to try the butterscotch pot de crème, which was off the menu on my visit.

Ms. Plue's work tracks well with that of Mr. Scargle. He, too, is more interested in immediacy of flavor than in flourishes. He uses local ingredients ignored by others, like petrale sole, and he coaxes every bit of potential from his duck breast with his brussels sprouts and from braised chicken bathed in a marjoram-flavored jus. Many of his herbs and vegetables come from a 3½-acre garden adjacent to the dining patio.

At Budo Mr. McDevitt and his wife, Stacey, have created a rectangular, high-ceilinged dining room, accented with ornamental ironwork at either end. In the center stands a long stone-top serving counter that was crowned, when I visited, by an enormous display of flowers and fruits, including persimmons still on their branches.

The son of a Japanese mother and an American father, Mr. McDevitt expertly combined the two elements of his heritage at Hapa, near Phoenix, which he sold in 2003 to move to California, and he works similar wonders at his new restaurant in Napa. The Asian aesthetic is as evident in the fastidiousness of his dishes' presentation as in the arc of their flavors.

For me Budo is the best thing to hit the area in many a moon, though I fear that it is having trouble winning the kind of local following that it deserves. I was much less excited by Press (as in wine press), up the highway toward St. Helena. Its pedigree is impeccable. The principal owner is Leslie Rudd, the proprietor of Dean & Deluca and of Rudd Vineyards and Winery, and one of his partners is Reuben Katz of the Culinary Institute of America. The chef is Keith Luce, late of Chicago's esteemed Spruce. But bloodlines and past performance don't always count; if you don't believe me, ask anyone recently betrayed by The Daily Racing Form.

As Mr. Rudd wrote in a letter to me in the spring, Chez L'Ami Louis, the bare-bones Paris bistro famous for its mythic roast chicken and rare côte de boeuf, provided the inspiration for his new place. The idea, he said, is to serve "the best regional ingredients, very simply prepared and presented," and that's the problem. Minimalist cuisine leaves little margin for error.

My 16-ounce Angus strip from a Kansas farm (\$48, no less) hit the spot, rosy and tender inside, beneath a salty, oxblood-colored crust. But the \$36 chicken for two, turned on a spit in a big fireplace at one end of the dining room, missed the target. Carved at tableside, it was as dry as a Thanksgiving turkey cooked by a nervous neophyte, miles less tasty than the roasted chicken at Zuni in San Francisco. My dining partners, valley dwellers, reported confronting the same problem on earlier visits.

For me, though, the crushing letdown was the potato and garlic cake, a near replica of another of Louis's trademark dishes. Louis's version is one of the masterpieces of Paris, worthy of induction into the Académie Française. It is one of the many reasons that I, an unapologetic potato freak, celebrated my 70th birthday there. Unhappily, what Mr. Luce sent out was unpleasantly mealy, possibly as a result of his use of russet potatoes instead of the firmer and waxier French varieties used at Louis.

- See *Bounty Hunter* insert on reverse side.

If the Bounty Hunter excels at old-fashioned American comfort food, Pilar excels at sophisticated modern dishes from around the world. A spartan, low-key storefront decorated with culinary woodcuts and oversize blown-glass replicas of fruits and vegetables, Pilar shares with the Bounty Hunter a nice lack of pretension.

Didier Lenders and Pilar Sanchez, husband and wife, have both cooked in big-time Napa Valley kitchens (Meadowood, Greystone at the Culinary Institute of America), and both cook at Pilar, although Ms. Sanchez, a tiny figure in T-shirt and blue jeans, also helps out in the dining room.

Serrano ham with snappy Manchego cheese and fig compote made a fine nibble with a glass of white wine before settling down to the heavy lifting. Then technical polish came to the fore, in plump grilled Monterey Bay sardines, their richness cut by a fennel and celery slaw and pickled red torpedo onions, and lightly sautéed Nantucket Bay scallops with mottled brown-and-beige skins, riding atop an unctuous black squid-ink risotto. A baked Belgian chocolate "mousse" - more like a candy bar made for chief executives, it seemed to me - sent me sated and happy into Main Street.

Angèle, a buzzy French-style brasserie, started fast, stumbled and seems lately to have recovered its balance under a new chef, Tripp Mauldin. The Rouas family, one of the legendary restaurant clans of the Bay Area, runs the place, which is tucked into one end of the 19th-century Napa Mill, overlooking the meandering Napa River.

Lunching alone on a chilly Friday with every seat in the restaurant filled, I was pleased with the unusually large selection of half-bottles of wine and by the assortment of fresh Atlantic and Pacific oysters, correctly opened and well iced. A roasted beet, goat-cheese and mâche salad - what a terrific combination - and crisp sweetbreads with bacon, chestnuts and braised fall vegetables almost made me forget that the blanquette de veau, a brasserie classic that the critics and several of my friends had raved about, was absent from the menu.

When I asked why, a waitress told me that the new chef had decided against continuing it. Consider this an appeal, Mr. Mauldin, to change your mind.