



SUNDAY!

Wood brings warmth to Bernal Heights residence PAGE 28

Meet the kayaking entrepreneur of South Beach PAGE 42

Keys to famed chef's life PAGE 15

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A director with clear focus

The City's Lourdes Portillo will be honored along with Hollywood's elite at the S.F. International Film Festival **PAGES 6-7**



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BARGAIN

HAPPY HOUR AT THE BANK
\$15 per person

As part of the Westin Hotels' "unwind" happy hour, the Westin Verasa Napa offers cocktails paired with the excellent menu from the Bank café. Each week, the experience changes, but on the day I was there, you could choose between a French 75 cocktail (with Champagne and Hennessy cognac) with rosti potatoes and American caviar; or a Napoleon in Moscow (Hennessy, Mandarin Napoleon and black tea liquor) served with soy-glazed pork belly with gingered Brussels sprouts slaw.

— Kathleen Jay



SPLURGE

SPECIAL DINNER AT LA TOQUE

Starting at \$150 per person
At La Toque, a four-course meal is \$88 per person; wine pairings for the four-course feast are \$62 per person. However, chef **Ken Frank's** menu is very flexible: a two-course meal is \$49 (add \$32 for wine pairing) or a three-course meal is \$68 (add \$48 for wine pairing).

— Kathleen Jay

TODAY'S ESCAPE: NAPA

Beauty, bounty by the river

By Kathleen Jay
Special to The Examiner

The city of Napa — founded in 1847, current population 71,412 — is experiencing a major revitalization. Boutique hotels, high-end-but-relaxed restaurants, wine-tasting rooms and the Oxbow Public Market — a microcosm of the San Francisco Ferry Building's farmer's market — are flourishing in this pedestrian-friendly city located on the Napa River and Preserve (it's not just the Napa Premium outlets drawing visitors to this area).

On a visit a few weeks ago, the town was filled with visitors sampling the local gastronomy and viticulture or meandering on sunny walking trails along the river, as well as with shoppers strolling through a downtown filled with boutiques, bookstores, cafes and tasting rooms.

WHERE TO STAY

Having opened less than a year ago, the Westin Verasa Napa is nothing short of a great hotel. The suites-only hotel features a large outdoor swimming pool, two professional-sized bocce ball courts and two great places to dine: the Bank Café and Bar, which offers an open-air casual atmosphere for breakfast, lunch, dinner and drinks, and the excellent La Toque, helmed by Michelin-starred chef Ken Frank.

When you enter the 180-suite hotel, you'll be immediately impressed by the clean, elegant architecture — a mixture of Napa-Valley style and classic Craftsman design. Rooms are as large and airy as the main hall: Expect large living spaces, many of which have full kitchens, large bedrooms with Westin's signature bedding, and



ALL: KATHLEEN JAY/SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

Elegant amenities: The Hog Island Oyster Co., above, is the perfect place to enjoy shellfish after perusing the markets at the Oxbow Public Market. The Westin Verasa Napa, below, is a luxurious hotel to stay in — its in-house eatery, La Toque, is divine.

marble-lined bathrooms.

Valet-park your car, check in, unpack and head to the pool — an area surrounded by tables and chairs under fire torches — where you can order a glass of local wine or a cold drink and enjoy the area's near-perfect weather.

For those who enjoy a gourmet meal, there is no need to leave the hotel. La Toque — which chef Frank recently moved from Rutherford to Napa — offers a romantic dining room with a marble bar and many thoughtful touches such as beautiful bouquets of fresh flowers, intimate lighting and a bright, airy environment. The prix-fixe menu changes weekly.

Bargain hunters, take note: The restaurant offers a midweek, three-course menu of Frank's French regional cuisine from Monday to Thursday from 5:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. at \$36 per person (reservations required).

Without getting back into your car, you can also take advantage of the River Walk located behind the hotel's fence — a short walk along the Napa River with unobstructed views of the valley.

If you book at ideal times and prepay one week before arrival, room rates start at \$139 per night.

WHAT TO DO

Three blocks from the Westin —

past the Napa Wine Train Depot located across the street — is the Oxbow Public Market, a mostly indoor market with shops selling local produce, local meat, hand-made ice cream, artisanal cheese and charcuterie, fresh-baked goods, and of course, Napa Valley wine.

A pleasant (i.e., air-conditioned) escape from hot, sunny days that can bring the temperature in Napa during the summer to the high 90s, the market was filled with visitors enjoying casual meals, wine- and olive-oil tasting, and shopping for fresh produce, fish and meat.

Some places worth stopping by include The Fatted Calf Charcuterie, Model Bakery, the Oxbow Wine Merchant Wine Bar, Oxbow Produce and Grocery, Folio To Go Winemakers, Pica Pica Maize Kitchen, The Olive Press, Three Twins Ice Cream and Hog Island Oyster Co.

OFF WINE TASTING

If you haven't had enough wine to taste at the Oxbow Market — or just want to do a vineyard tour, pick one place and enjoy it.

My pick: Robert Sinskey Vineyards, a family-run vineyard and winery located on the Silverado Trail, about 10 minutes from the Westin. Known for its superb pinot noir, the tasting room offers

IF YOU GO

Napa

HOTEL: Located about 90 minutes from San Francisco, the Westin Verasa Napa is located at 1314 McKinstry St. in Napa (westin.com/verasanapa).

RESTAURANTS: The Bank Café and Bar is located in the lobby of the Westin Verasa Napa. Best bets are the Bank's breakfast and happy hour. For an intimate experience, make a reservation at La Toque (www.latoque.com). Offering a prix-fixe menu, the restaurant is nothing short of excellent.

OUT AND ABOUT: The Oxbow Public Market is located at 610 and 644 First St. in Napa (www.oxbowpublicmarket.com).

ONE WINERY AT A TIME: Robert Sinskey Vineyards is located at 6320 Silverado Trail in Napa (www.robertsinskey.com).

PARK AND LET SOMEONE ELSE DRIVE: The very apt staff at the Westin can help you make arrangements for a car service to drive you around Napa and to nearby wineries.

— Kathleen Jay

visitors an intimate food-and-wine experience that may seem unexpected.

For \$20, expect a perfect pairing of four of Sinskey's wines with four dishes, which are prepared in the open-air kitchen adjacent to the tasting bar. The winery — which only produces 25,000 cases per year — is a champion of bio-dynamic wines (read: organic). For those interested in discussing the process, the wine-pouring staff is very well-versed on the science behind the winemaking.

Also, take a tour of the winery's wine caves — they offer the perfect temperature for aging its wines without the use of air-conditioning. Lastly, meander around the grounds, which — in addition to vines — feature an organic garden, a large koi pond and several benches.

LIFE BY NUMBERS

SQUARE MILES MAKING UP THE CITY OF NAPA
18.34

APPROXIMATE MILES FROM THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE TO THE CITY OF NAPA
50

YEAR NAPA WAS INCORPORATED
1872

