

Food & wine

Calistoga revels in its ruggedness

Outpost is proud to be antidote to Napa pomposity

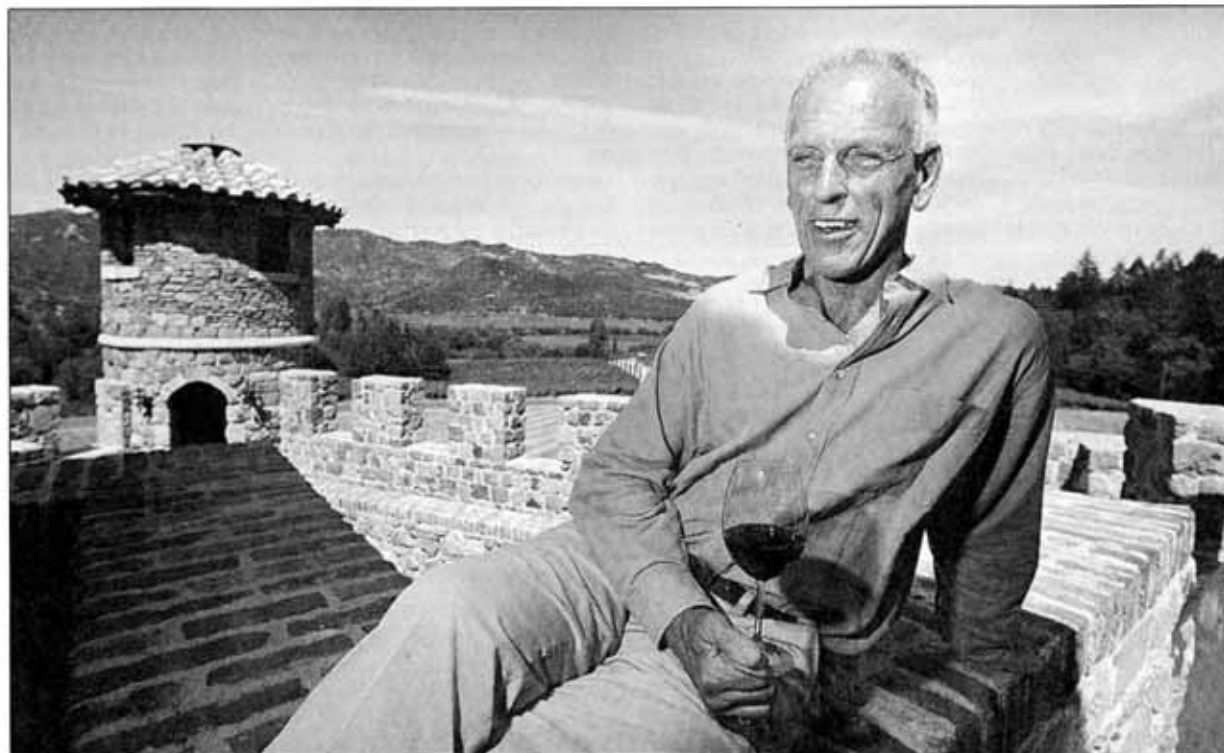
By Jerry Shriver
USA TODAY

CALISTOGA, Calif. — Unlike the other once-obscure farm towns dotting the Napa Valley, this outpost at the northern tip has resisted most of the country-club pretensions that took hold when tourists discovered their taste for the wine-country lifestyle in the 1980s.

St. Helena has become a mecca for boutique shops and traffic jams, Yountville reigns as an elite dining destination, and Napa aspires to a chic cosmopolitan vibe.

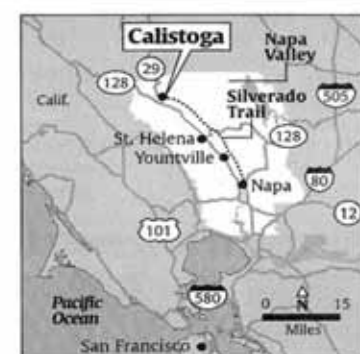
But rugged Calistoga, which sits atop a network of geothermal springs, is where folks build fantasy castles, soak in hot volcanic mud and enjoy food and wine that fit a workingman's budget. Even though the moneyed interests have arrived here, too, their new ventures still adhere to the quirky, laid-back ethos of the area.

As this mellowest of towns settles into the mellowest of seasons, now's an ideal time to see what has bubbled up lately between the mountains.



By Eric Risberg, AP

Dungeons and daring: Daryl Sattui built his re-created castle, Castello di Amorosa, "to satisfy my creative impulses."



By Adrienne Lewis, USA TODAY

The newcomers

Calistoga's funky, off-kilter flavor shines through at a number of recently opened places, including:

- ▶ **Castello di Amorosa.** Winery tasting fee: \$10-\$20; tour and tasting: \$25-\$40. 707-967-6272; castellodiamorosa.com
- ▶ **Solage** resort spa. Off-season (Nov. 1-March 31) room rates: \$325-\$77; spa services: \$95-\$325. 866-942-7442; solagecalistoga.com
- ▶ **Solbar** at Solage. Bistro menu featuring healthy or hearty dishes. Entrees: \$14-\$37. 866-942-7442; solagecalistoga.com
- ▶ **Wine Garage.** Retail shop and soon-to-be wine bar specializing in \$25-and-under wines. 707-942-5332; winegarage.net
- ▶ **BarVino.** Wine bar featuring small-plates menu. Entrees: \$9-\$35. 707-942-9900; bar-vino.com
- ▶ **Calistoga Cellars.** Downtown tasting room serves wine at two bars and on a patio. Tasting fee: \$5. 707-942-7422; calistogacellars.com



By Martin E. Klimek for USA TODAY

At Solage Calistoga: Tom Hahn, 28, and his wife, Ginger, 26, relax in the pool heated by geothermal spring-fed waters. The resort spa features separate saunas for men and women and private sunning areas.

Keeper of the castle

For much of the past two decades, Daryl Sattui worried about making a fool of himself as he invested a fortune in a winery project that charitably could be called quixotic or not so charitably, downright strange.

After all, he says, Napa Valley "is a small place, and people talk. A lot of them said, 'He's absolutely crazy.'"

But since April, when Sattui finally unveiled Castello di Amorosa, the centerpiece of his 171-acre estate on Diamond Mountain, a lot of people have been left speechless.

And who can blame them?

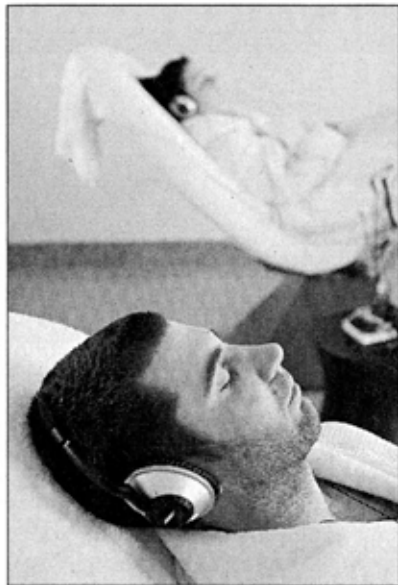
Sattui's "Castle of Love" is a full-scale, brick-by-brick re-creation of the medieval castles built in Italy between the 10th and 16th centuries. There's a moat with a drawbridge; a Great Hall with hand-painted frescoes on the walls and ceiling; a dungeon; a torture chamber outfitted with an iron maiden, a rack and a stump for beheadings; 60-foot watch towers affording stunning views of the valley; a chapel; a royal apartment; a vast piazza where Schwarzenegger, Pelosi, Giuliani and a Russian symphony orchestra have staged receptions; and four underground levels totaling two acres.

And somewhere within the walls is a winery that specializes in Italian-style blends.

"I'm Italian, and I love all things Italian — food, wine, art, people, medieval architecture," says Sattui, 65, explaining why he invested a lifetime of profits from his V. Sattui Winery in St. Helena ("It's been quoted as \$30 million, somewhere in there") to indulge his passion.

Sattui, a fourth-generation winemaker, spent about 30 years researching the project and taking thousands of photos of medieval structures in Tuscany and Umbria. During that time, he acquired the Diamond Mountain property and hired master builders in Italy to render his dream. It took them 14 years, using centuries-old reclaimed bricks from Italy and Austria, hand-forged iron and hand-planed timber.

Originally envisioned as an 8,500-



By Martin E. Kilmek for USA TODAY

"Zero-gravity" experience: Tom Hahn and his wife, Ginger, of Sacramento relax in a sound chair at the Solage spa.

square-foot winery, Amorosa grew into a 121,000-square-foot complex encompassing 107 rooms (95 dedicated to winemaking), 900 linear feet of caves and vaulted tunnels, and a 12,000-square-foot barrel room.

"It turned out better than I envisioned," Sattui says during a recent chat in the underground tasting room. "I was born with no money, and I'm OK to die with no money, but I want some in between."

Here's mud in your ear

Auberge Resorts is known throughout the valley for its luxurious, romantic hideaways, Calistoga Ranch in Calistoga and Auberge du Soleil in Rutherford, where some rooms can top \$2,000 a night in the high season.

But this summer when the company launched Solage Calistoga, the flagship of what will become a national brand of hotels and spas, it aimed for something more affordable (November-March off-season rates are \$325 to \$775), more eco- and family-friendly, and in keeping



By Peter Menzel

Brick by brick, barrel by barrel: The Grand Barrel Room extends over 12,000 square feet of Daryl Sattui's ambitious Castello di Amorosa winery.

with the local character.

"Calistoga is a little bohemian, home to individuals who make their own way, and very friendly," says general manager Richard Hill.

The 22-acre property, built on a horse pasture, consists of a 20,000-square-foot spa complex, the Solbar restaurant, which serves California cuisine made with sustainable ingredients, and 89 cottages designed with what Hill describes as a "Napa Valley barn meets San Francisco loft" feel. The rooms feature organic linens and hemp curtains, and were built using recycled wood and eco-friendly paint. To conserve energy, the spa's treatment rooms and soaking pool tap hot water from the geothermal springs beneath the property.

But what sets Solage apart are the whimsical touches. Deliveries of luggage and amenities are made via bicycle, and the spa features a modern take on the traditions of soaking in the hot volcanic mud baths and thermal springs that are popular at Calistoga's older spas.

At Solage, spa visitors who book a "mudslide" treatment begin at a "mud bar," where a "bartender" mixes a customized cocktail of fresh mud, essential oils, serum with antioxidants and hot thermal water from the springs below. Customers then retire to a private sauna, apply the mud, bake for 10 minutes to

draw out toxins, before washing the mess away. Next stop is a 10-minute soak in a tub of geothermal water, followed by a wrap in a down comforter and a session in a "sound chair," where soothing tunes play through headphones and vibrations pulsate through the chair.

"The approach may seem tongue-in-cheek, but it's steeped in traditional healing modalities and aromatherapy principles," says spa director Peggy Francis.

Get a wine tune-up

If Todd Miller can get the permits squared away by next harvest, he'll crush grapes in the parking lot of a former gas station that he leases, ferment the juice in the garage, then dispense the wine from a keg into screw-capped jugs that customers bring with them. If that sounds déclassé, well, that's the point.

"This is an antidote to the trophy-wine obsession in the rest of the valley," says Miller, who runs an adjoining store called Wine Garage with his wife, Joy.

Since they opened the shop in 2003, the Millers have done a booming business selling only wines that cost \$25 or less (\$2 million worth this year). "We're down-to-earth people selling to down-to-earth customers, the people who

The standards

These established wineries offer an extra dimension to the tasting-room experience:

- **Bennett Lane Winery.** Owner and NASCAR team owner Randy Lynch often has one of his racing cars on display. Tasting fee: \$10. 877-629-6272; bennettlane.com
- **Frank Family Vineyards.** Rich Frank, entertainment exec and former president of the Television Academy, is one of the very few remaining owners in Napa Valley not to charge a tasting-room fee. 800-574-9463; frankfamilyvineyards.com
- **Chateau Montelena.** A top winner at the famous 1976 Paris Tasting, which put California wines on the world map, is housed in a stone castle set into a mountain. Tasting fee: \$15-\$25. Tour and tasting: \$25. 707-942-5105; montelena.com
- **Sterling Vineyards.** Only winery to feature an aerial tram that ascends to a mountain-top tasting room. Tour and tasting, including ride: \$15-\$45. 800-726-6136; sterlingvineyards.com
- **Clos Pegase.** The Michael Graves-designed complex showcases owner Jan Shrem's art collection and 20,000 feet of caves. Tasting fee: \$10. Tour: Free. 707-942-4981; clospegase.com

make this valley what it is."

The Millers keep costs low by maintaining a bare-bones retail space — bottles are displayed in cardboard boxes — and seeking out lesser-known labels from the region. Miller aims to install a wine bar and deli by next spring that will allow customers to taste any of the 350 brands in the store.

"There's an ocean out there of good \$25 wines," he says. "But wine is shrouded in mystery and intimidation and people don't know how to get into it. We're making it easy for them."