

## New spirit, fashionable dining lift downtown Napa's appeal

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By Kathleen Thompson Hill, Globe Correspondent | May 14, 2008

NAPA, Calif. - If you're headed to Napa, you're either going to the valley, the county, or Napa itself. The formerly neglected downtown Napa, 55 miles northeast of San Francisco, is one of those places where you wish you had purchased a craftsman or Victorian house 10 years ago when nobody went there. Visitors were all attracted to the "up valley" glitz of romantic wineries and restaurants in Yountville, Oakville, Rutherford, St. Helena, and Calistoga. The Napa River seemed to flood downtown every other year, a disastrous problem neglected by officials.

Then two of the biggest names in food and wine saved the city. Recognizing that the city of Napa was dying on the vine, the late Julia Child and wine mogul Robert Mondavi raised millions to build COPIA - The American Center for Wine, Food & The Arts, across the river from downtown. Next door to COPIA, Oxbow Public Market, a relative of San Francisco's Ferry Building Marketplace, features interesting restaurants and elegant food-related vendors.

Downtown Napa now basks optimistically in a spirit of renovation. Residents voted themselves a hefty tax to control the river, with resulting construction interfering slightly with some restaurants' decks and the growth of new three-story buildings overlooking the water. Main Street is straight but somehow runs along the bending river. The historic Napa Mill/Hatt Building on the southern end houses the fashionable restaurants Angèle, Celadon, and The General Store along with the truly charming Sweetie Pies bakery.

Two blocks north on Main sits the renovated 1879 Napa Valley Opera House, where everyone from Jack London and John Philip Sousa to Arlo Guthrie, Queen Latifah, and Rita Moreno has performed. Here you'll find Mexican, vegetarian, and Vietnamese eateries. Also in the city are Ubuntu, which is always packed and whose food focuses on the restaurant's own biodynamic gardens; Pizza Azzurro, which just moved to a new location with hip metallic decor; and Pearl, a favorite of many.

But there are less well known places that the locals gravitate to. One is the irreverent Kelley's No Bad Days Cafe, featuring bright Baja décor mixed with political jokes, books, and live jazz on no-corkage Thirsty Thursdays. Kelley Novak owns the revered Gatsby-esque Spottswoode Winery in St. Helena with her mother and sisters. Kelley Novak grows organic vegetables for the restaurant at her vineyard home and makes the best grilled cheese sandwiches anywhere with Vermont's sharp white cheddar from Cabot, along with a killer spinach salad with Thai peanut dressing. Try the light taquitos, chicken satay, crispy calamari, or Nicoise salad with seared tuna.

Across Main Street from the Napa Firefighters Museum (a must-see) is always-packed Taqueria Rosita, where Fred Corona serves economic, if not gourmet, Mexican food. Chef Maria Sanchez fires up dishes fast, with both takeout and restaurant lines filing out onto the sidewalk. Large taco salads, combination plates with chili verde, carnitas, fajitas, generous daily specials, Mexican music, and artwork brighten your day with great doses of carbs.

Professional and home cooks will happily lose themselves in Shackford's kitchen store one more block north.

But before you do, stop into Uva Trattoria, a half block up Clinton from Main Street, owned by two Napa classmates who re-met as co-best men at a wedding after working at Thomas Keller's The French Laundry and Michael Chiarello's Tra Vigne. Gazillions of old typewriters, and photos of the best of jazz, movie stars, divas, and baseball players decorate even the restrooms.

Uva's food includes Meyer lemon and rice soup with Oregon bay shrimp, a tempura-like calamari with aioli, and prosciutto-stuffed organic quail. You'll also find live jazz and a server whose business card reads "Maitre d'Harmonica."

**Kelley's No Bad Days Cafe**, 976 Pearl St., Napa, Calif., 707-258-9666. Sandwiches and burgers \$12-\$20; salads \$8-\$22. Beer and wine.

**Taqueria Rosita**, 1214 Main St., Napa, Calif., 707-253-9208. Burritos \$3.50-\$6; lunch and dinner combos \$7.25-\$11.50; a la carte \$.75-\$4. Beer and wine.

**Uva Trattoria & Bar**, 1040 Clinton St. at Brown, Napa, Calif., 707-255-6646. [uvatrattoria.com](http://uvatrattoria.com). Salads and sandwiches \$4.95-\$12.95; pizzas \$12.95-\$17.95; main courses \$12.95-\$27. Full bar. ■

