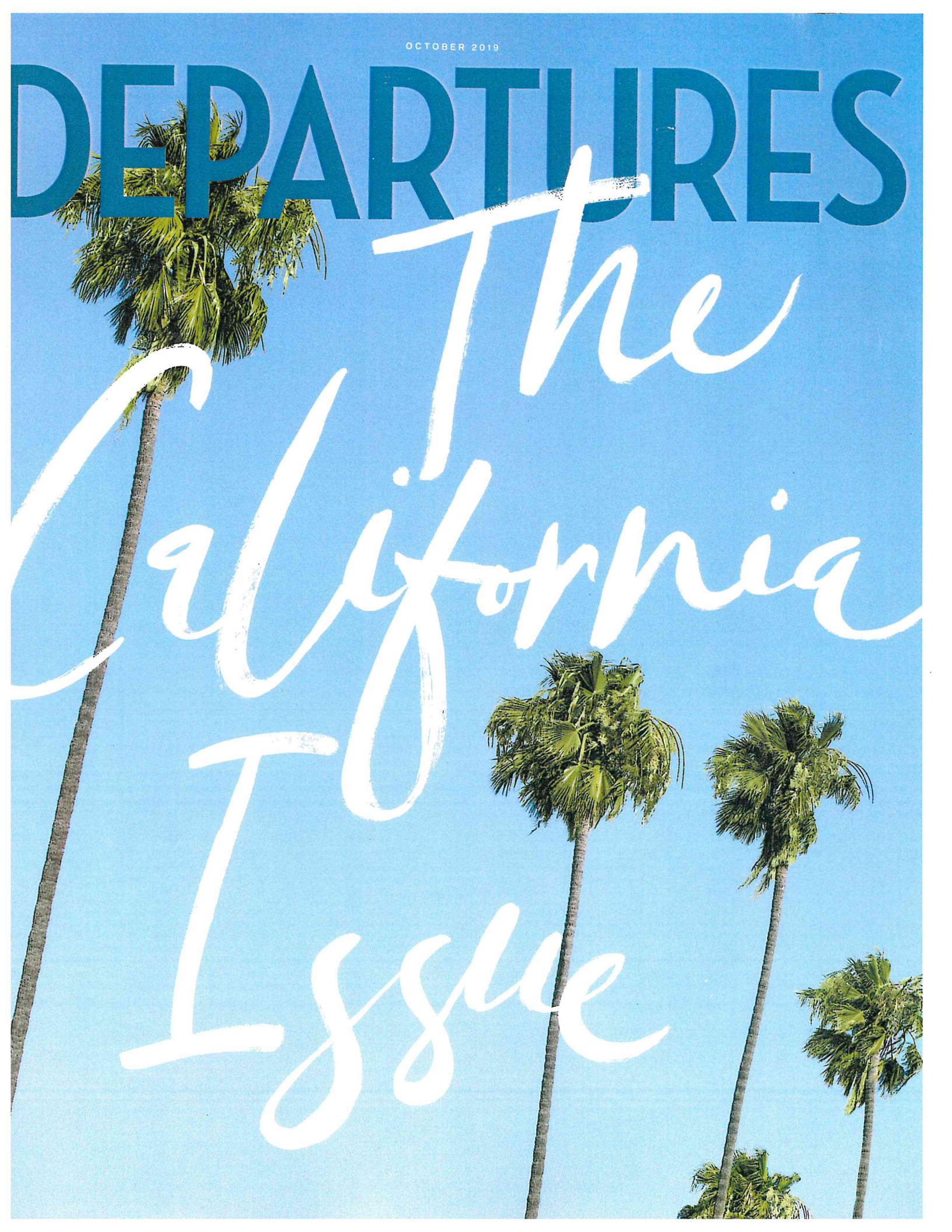


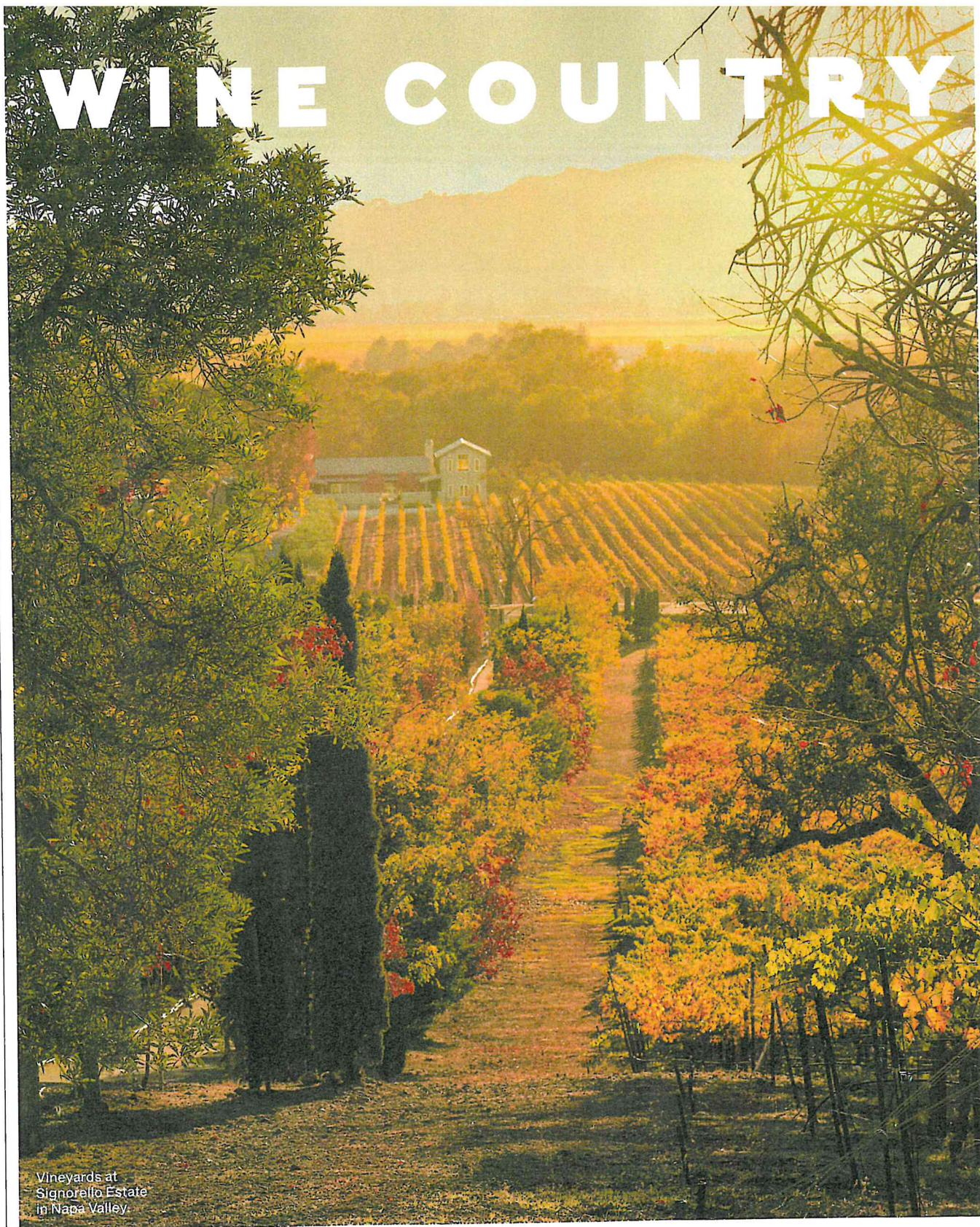
OCTOBER 2019

DEPARTURES

The
California
Issue



WINE COUNTRY



Vineyards at
Signorello Estate
in Napa Valley

Napa's New Groove Experimental cuisine, contemporary hotels, and a buzzy urban vibe are creating a renaissance in one of America's most beloved destinations. *by Hugh Garvey. Photographs by Alex Farnum*



The rooftop of Archer Hotel in downtown Napa. Below, from left: Sweet potato with Brussels sprouts and coconut curry at Meadowood; grilled fish at Miminashi.

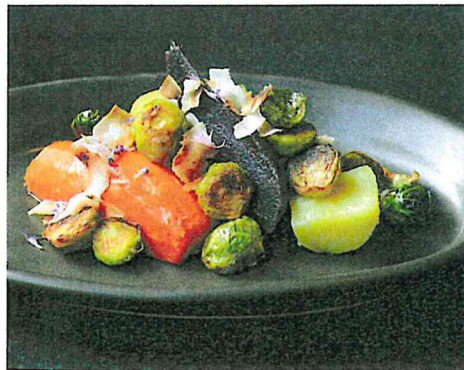
AT FIRST I DIDN'T NOTICE the T. Rex looking over my shoulder. As tourists window-shopped on St. Helena's charming Main Street, I stood inside the showroom of designer Erin Martin checking out display cases filled with vintage shaving kits, riding crops, and a taxidermied African porcupine wearing a cowboy hat. The offbeat collection of objects fit the playful aesthetic Martin applies to her winery and interior design projects. "Do you like our dinosaur?" asked the woman at the front desk. I looked up and, sure enough, just behind me was a 15-foot-high skeleton of a T. Rex baring its teeth. "It's yours for \$3.9 million," she said.

The dinosaur was the first of many surprises I encountered on a trip to Napa, a destination both blessed and cursed by its reputation. Napa has near mythic status among wine consumers who visit to pay homage to an industry that put California on the wine map. But now some locals call it "Disneyland for adults" because of its neo-Italianate tasting rooms and self-consciously quaint shops. Jaded wine pros dismiss its pricey Cabernets as Texas soda. But a new Napa is emerging as hoteliers and restaurateurs widen their aesthetic range and appeal to visitors in search of something different. As a result, Napa yields subtler and more varied pleasures than ever—especially when it comes to wine.

I started my trip in Calistoga, home to several resorts

and hotels with mineral pools fed by hot springs that arc from Sonoma westward. While the sleek **Solage** and the opulent **Auberge du Soleil** offer discrete universes of luxury, pampering, and on-site restaurants, instead I checked into the **Francis House**, a new five-room inn in town. With its château-like grandeur, the property is statelier than the ranch houses flanking it on a quiet residential street. But quirky details like a vintage pickup truck in the gravel driveway are pure Calistoga.

"I was inspired by the *maisons particulières* of France," said co-owner Dina Dwyer, referring to the private hotels that lack signage but over-deliver in details and service. There are nice touches throughout the inn, such as Le Corbusier sling chairs, a Martin acoustic guitar, an antique French writing desk in my room thoughtfully positioned to view the grounds, and a very Cal-Asian breakfast with a bacon-wrapped avocado, San Fran's Four Barrel Coffee, and mochi.

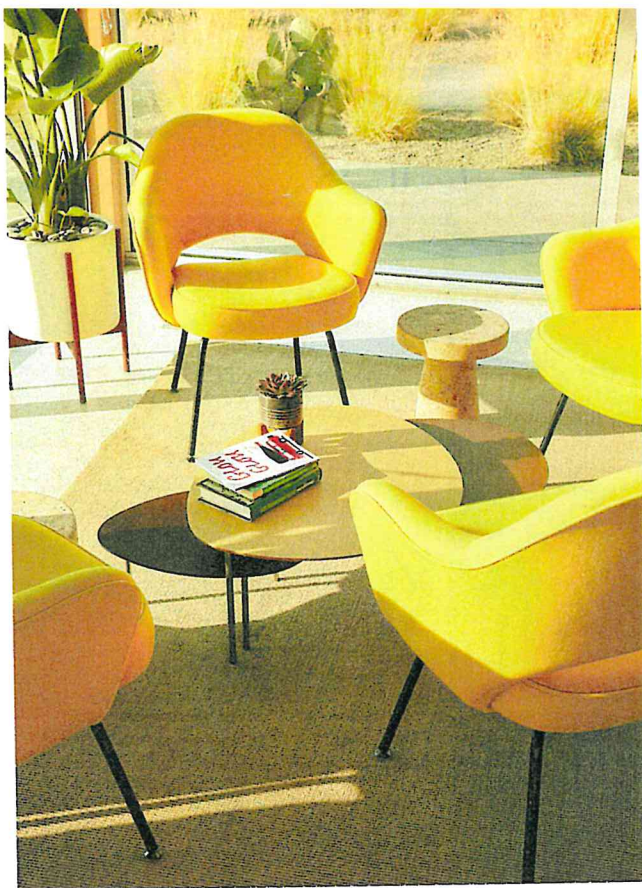


There was also a heated pool, but I decided to try out the spa at the **Calistoga Motor Lodge**, a 1940s roadside motel redesigned by AvroKO, the firm behind a number of hip restaurants on both coasts. This Great American Road Trip fantasia has the requisite bocce courts and loaner bikes, and there's a communal bathing hall straight from a scene in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. Guests can soak in claw-foot tubs in a tiled room lit by a skylight during happy hour. After a mud treatment and a spell in the steam room, I considered the CBD treatment on the menu but was already feeling beyond relaxed.

For dinner I Ubered into St. Helena to eat Christopher Kostow's rustic wood-fired food at the **Charter Oak**. Kostow is known for his inventive Michelin three-starred restaurant at **Meadowood**, one of the most celebrated wellness resorts in California. There he was, at the decidedly more casual Charter Oak, which opened two years ago, sipping champagne at the bar as I ate buttermilk-marinated chicken and a Little Gem salad garnished with local smoked-and-dried albacore. Afterward I sat by the firepit and listened to the crickets and clink of metal and glassware drift-



BOTTOM LEFT: STEVEN ROTHFELD/COURTESY MEADOWOOD



From far left: The tasting room at Ashes & Diamonds winery in Napa; the bathhouse at the Calistoga Motor Lodge and Spa. Below: The heated pool at Francis House.

ing from nearby restaurants. In the car back to Francis House, as Debussy played on the stereo, I watched the darkened storied estates of Beringer and Schramsberg whip by, repeating row after row like a flip-book in the moonlight.

The next morning I drove south on Route 29 to Yountville. After quiet and crunchy Calistoga and quaint St. Helena, Yountville feels more calibrated to offer a classically curated wine country experience in a few short blocks. While longstanding dive bar **Pancha's** still serves ice-cold beer to vineyard workers, the **French Laundry** built a sleek new annex in advance of its 25th anniversary, which it

celebrates this year. The new multi-structure **RH Yountville** feels like it's been there all along, with arbors and decomposed granite and an indoor-outdoor restaurant in the Tuscan style, where shoppers can sit on sectionals while sipping vertical flights of local wine. And, yes, they can buy that sectional and bring the moment home.

When I pulled in to the sprawling **Estate at Yountville** complex of hotels and restaurants, I was met with a scene some might label slick but others would call polished: Valets in dove-gray Lacoste polo shirts and track jackets shuttled guests around in Mini Mokes, the British utility cart. It's a thoughtful and fun conveyance at the Estate, a 22-acre resort that makes up a significant portion of the town's main drag and has undergone a massive renovation. At one end, the **Hotel Villagio's** rooms have soaking tubs with champagne buckets at the ready. At the other is the **Vintage House**, all lavenders and white.

And then there's the **Villa**, a five-bedroom house that has an entertaining kitchen with a black La Cornue stove, a stereo system complete with turntable and vintage-vinyl collection, two horsehair-filled Hästens beds, and photos of David Bowie and Debbie Harry in the powder room. There I experienced a level of rock 'n' roll luxury I don't necessarily associate

with the valley. I appreciated the acknowledgment that wine country is not all balloon rides and tasting rooms, and that a visitor might come from an urban area, want to party past 10 p.m., then brag about it on social media. And while I didn't originally come to Napa to swim in my own heated pool with an inflatable swan as the sun went down, I did and I liked it.

Napa moves slowly. But fire moves fast. In 2017 a wildfire swept through Sonoma County and Napa and, in the course of a few days, destroyed thousands of homes and killed 44 people. **Signorello Estate** was the only winery to have its estate burn down. I drove up one morning to meet Signorello winemaker Pierre Birebent, who greeted me in the temporary tasting room and drove me around, pointing out blackened oaks. I tasted the Chardonnay, made in a leaner, less oaky style than bottlings past, still full of flavor but light on the palate. I also saw renderings of the estate as it will look once it has been rebuilt. "Ray Signorello wants a house that his daughters would want to visit when they grow up," said Pierre. It's modern and timeless in a way that matches the emerging aesthetic of the valley.

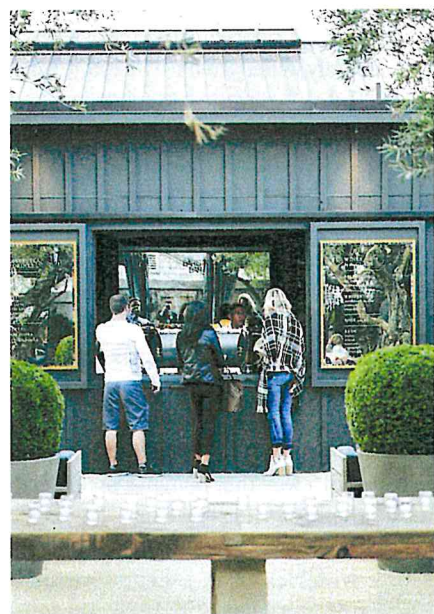
To experience a possible template for future wineries here, I visited **Ashes & Diamonds**, which is decidedly contem-



Right: The Villa at the Estate at Yountville.
Below: Guests on the patio at RH Yountville.

porary: The architect is Silver Lake–based modernist Barbara Bestor, and the complex pays homage to the experimental midcentury Case Study Houses. Serious winemakers such as Steve Matthiasson and Dan Petroski were contracted to make the juice. A self-published literary magazine with all the right hipster sommeliers and cultural references is on the coffee table. And while my Villa in Yountville had Blondie in the powder room, Ashes & Diamonds' bottle labels were designed by Brian Roettinger, who has created album covers for Jay-Z and Childish Gambino.

On my final night, I drove into the city of Napa itself. For the past ten years a renaissance has been in the making: The riverfront had its wetlands restored; the culinary culture center Copia has been rebooted by the Culinary Institute



of America as the **CIA at Copia**; a mixed-use shopping district called First Street is humming. I checked into First Street's **Archer Hotel Napa** and walked to **Oxbow**, a food hall that has been buzzing with visitors since it opened in 2007.

As the sun set, the town of 80,000 started to feel like a city. Visitors and locals crowded the rooftop at the Archer, which, at five stories high, affords a rare view of the valley. I met a local doctor, and she told me she was an investor in **Compline**, a nearby wine bar already on my list of insider must-visits. I'd tried to get in earlier, but a crowd of 50 master sommeliers had bought out the place. I headed there and drank Schramsberg and ate salty, crispy duck-fat fries.

I ended my evening at **Miminashi**, a new izakaya, where the sake list was long and strong, the beers wide-ranging and millennial-friendly, and the yakitori grill fueled by *bincho-tan* white charcoal. As I debated the virtues of chicken thigh versus gizzard, drinking sake, not wine, I could have been in any great city in the world—anywhere artistry, nature, and good food and drink come together in a contemporary way. And right now, that's Napa.

New and Classic Napa

STAY

Auberge Resorts operates three sumptuous properties in the valley: **Auberge du Soleil** (from \$775); **Solage** (from \$375); and **Calistoga Ranch** (from \$695). auburgeresorts.com. Small and intimate, **Francis House** mixes opulence with a dash of California cool. From \$550; thefranchishouse.com. **Calistoga Motor Lodge** offers a chic riff on an American classic. From \$209; calistogamotorlodgeandspa.com. Peerless service and cuisine make **Meadowood** an icon. From \$500; meadowood.com. **Estate at Yountville** offers wine country glitz. From \$449; villagio.com. The 183 **Archer Hotel** rooms anchor Napa's revitalized downtown. From \$339; archerhotel.com.

EAT

After winning multiple awards at **Meadowood**, chef Christopher Kostow opened the **Charter Oak** in St. Helena. thecharteroak.com. **RH Yountville** brings its shopping and dining experience to the valley. restorationhardware.com. Now in its 25th year, **French Laundry** remains the Napa institution par excellence. thomaskeller.com. Michelin-starred **Miminashi** offers high-end izakaya-style cuisine. miminashi.com. **Oxbow Public Market** is Napa's premier food-shopping experience. oxbowpublicmarket.com.

DRINK

Ashes & Diamonds upends the image of Napa as staid and stuffy. ashesdiamonds.com. Fire-damaged **Signorello Estate** maintains a tasting room. signorelloestate.com. The **CIA at Copia** is an annex of restaurants and exhibits dedicated to wine and cuisine. ciaatcopia.com. **Pancha's of Yountville** is a family-owned saloon inside a barn. Two-year-old **Compline** is a wine bar, restaurant, and wine shop with a contemporary vibe. complinewine.com.