

Grilled Moroccan Kebabs



YOUNTVILLE - PUSHING THE EPICUREAN ENVELOPE

By Shane Boocock

Mark Twain popularised the saying: ‘There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.’

Mark Twain would have liked Yountville. Statistics on this Napa County town aren’t lies but absolute fact. Yountville boasts 12 top restaurants, just a knife’s throw apart, and attract foodies from all over the world to this classic grape-clad escape. Sequestered within four square miles, Yountville’s prowess as a culinary powerhouse is unmatched. The town boasts the largest concentration of Michelin stars per capita on the planet, sharpening its culinary edge with six coveted Michelin stars within six walking blocks. The town also has eleven sophisticated hotels and ten wine tasting locales. Add another two dozen regional wineries tucked within the town’s own AVA (American Viticultural Area) and you might find yourself ‘Walking on the Wine Side of life’.

There’s the three star awarded *French Laundry*, considered by

many to be the best restaurant anywhere in America, the one star *Bouchon*, one star *Redd*, and one star *étoile* at *Domaine Chandon*. New to this year’s Michelin line-up are two recipients in the “Bib Gourmand” category, also known as inspector’s favourites for good value: *Bottega* and *Bistro Jeanty*, a township institution serving classic French bistro fare.

My first view of Yountville was driving along Washington Street, the main ‘cultivated’ thoroughfare, lined with both ivy-covered historical and faux-vintage buildings, a small train station, wine tasting rooms, restaurants, galleries, sculpture lined sidewalks, an array of large palm trees, neatly clipped hedges and colourful flower boxes. Like Main Street in Disneyland, this is a town meticulously well-tended.

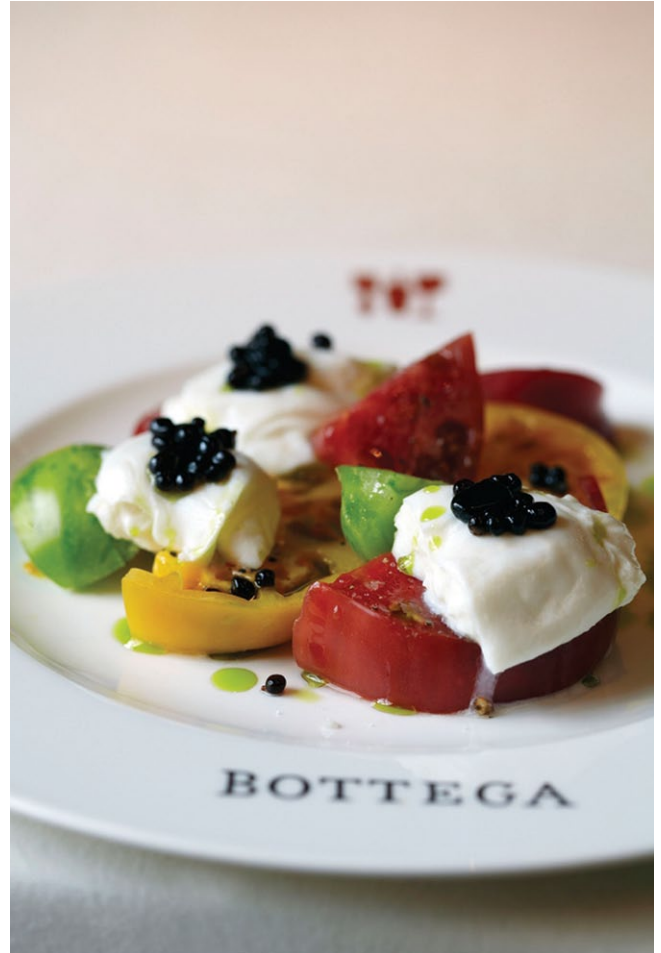
The tiny community of just 3,200 people is no hick-town that suddenly found itself festooned with wine and food accolades.

The first grapevines were planted here in 1838 by George Yount (1794 – 1865). It's therefore no coincidence that the people who now live and work here are passionate about food and wine, piquing the senses and pleasing the palates of both locals and visitors alike.

“We get over four million visitors a year,” said the former town mayor, who just happened to be our tour guide on an art and wine tasting jaunt along Washington Street, as she pointed out another sculpture. “This particular work of art is valued at US\$350,000 (NZ\$ 440,000),” she said, before we were ushered into another tasting room for more sampling of wines.

The lovely thing I found visiting Yountville is that when you arrive at your choice of accommodation (I stayed at the luxurious Bardessono Hotel, Restaurant & Spa with its sensational rooftop pool), you can park the car and walk or bike to just about everywhere. On my two-wheel taste trek, had I had the capacity, I could have easily pedalled to all 24 wineries tucked into just four square-miles.

Long lunches seem to be the norm in this part of California. On our first day we lunched at the famed *Bottega* owned by TV Chef Michael Chiarello. Inside a building built in 1830, we heard firsthand how good chefs find primary ingredients that set them apart. Michael told us how one day a hippy-type named Amigo Bob (yes truly, and only in America) stopped by his house as he was mowing his lawns on his ride-on tractor. “He asked me if I was interested in buying his organic polenta. I told him I wasn't, but to leave me a bag and if I need some I'd get back to him. I threw the bag under the tractor seat and immediately forgot about it. Six months later we were thinking of including polenta in one of our signature dishes and needed to source a supply. I suddenly



Burrata with heirloom tomatoes and balsamic caviar



Bob Hurley Mars



Michael Chiarello



Tamarind & Chipotle Glazed Buffalo Short Ribs



Braised Wild Texas Boar

realised there was this bag under my seat so I went and retrieved it. It turned out to be a pre-Columbus type polenta – the very best in this region,” he concluded, smiling knowingly.

Hurley's Restaurant and Bar (no stars here) is a firm favourite with chefs and locals alike and that's how the owner and veteran chef Bob Hurley likes it. He's lived in Yountville for 25 years. “We call our selections wine country cuisine.” His signature dish is Braised Wild Texas Boar, with truffle scented soft polenta, roasted seasonal vegetables and crispy onion rings. Like many restaurants in this town his wine list doesn't include any wines outside of Napa Valley!

At the legendary powerhouse *French Laundry* expect outstanding attention to detail. All 62 seats are filled every night with bookings made a year in advance. Having secured a seat you'll find the chef serves up two unique nine-course tasting menus prepared with organic produce, each a series of smaller, focused dishes. No single ingredient is ever repeated throughout the meal. As a sampler: grilled fillet of Australian Hiramasa, akita komachi rice, bok choy, navel orange, shiso and charred shishito pepper-eggplant vinaigrette. The wine list is of course impressive: a 100 page book-type selection includes a mere seven New Zealand wines. If you can't make it there in person, they've launched an iPad wine list showcasing 20,000 bottles in a slightly quirky and breezy format. Dining at the *French Laundry* will set you back around NZ\$340 (Prix Fixe).

It's a delight to wander across the street from the restaurant into the *French Laundry's* two-acre veggie garden. We enjoyed a private tour, meandering among 25 varieties of heirloom tomatoes, baby yams, oyster leaf seedlings, fingerling potatoes and Jerusalem artichokes. There are no fences; just 24 vegetable plots,



Bistro Jeanty Restaurant

each measuring 7.6m by 7.6m, with grass walkways between; a place where chefs saunter up every morning and order what they need for that day's menu.

Bistro Jeanty also offers a French theme. Over lunch in the restaurant's slim-line courtyard, I could have sworn I was in some French provincial country town. Born in the Champagne region, Chef Jeanty it turns out is French - Sacré Bleu! At one stage, his little corner of France was awarded one Michelin star, three years in a row. Crème de Tomate en Croute (tomato soup in a puff pastry) is his signature appetiser dish. Don't leave town without trying the Mousse au Chocolate Brulee.

Thomas Keller, a fixture since opening the *French Laundry* in 1994 is also the chef and owner of *Bouchon Bistro*, another Michelin star on this town's walk of fame. On the Friday night we dined, the restaurant was of course full. Owner, Thomas Keller, espouses his passion: "French bistro food is my favourite - steak frites, a two-inch high quiche with bacon and onions, a salad with an egg on top, finished with a perfect vinaigrette, a croque madame, some oysters and a glass of champagne. These are foods that represent the most important kind of cooking there is because they're rooted in tradition. So when I thought of opening a restaurant that's more casual than *The French Laundry*, I decided to explore and deepen the culinary heritage that I admire so much. A bouchon can be, and should be, whatever you need it to be. It's a casual place, a social place, a place where people come to relax talk and to eat. A kind of home."

And that best describes my impressions of dining on fine cuisine and drinking superb wines in Yountville - I felt at home, simply enjoying my just desserts and walking on the wine side of life. ■■



Polenta under glass hand pouring balsamic



FACTS:

Located 88 k. north of San Francisco, travellers can arrive in Yountville via scenic Highway 29 or Napa County Airport, Sacramento, Oakland or San Francisco international airports. We took a ferry from downtown San Francisco to Vallejo (60 minutes) then a shuttle bus service to Yountville (about 45 minutes). www.baylinkferry.com

Sporting a chef line-up worthy of a world tour, Yountville's 2nd Annual Moveable Feast program hits town 1 January - 28 February 2012 with value-season hotel/dining packages and a roux of seasonal prix-fixe meals. For more information such as tasting opening hours, travel inquiries and reservations, contact the Yountville Chamber of Commerce. www.yountville.com.

WINE & DINE:

Bottega, www.botteganapavalley.com
Bistro Jeanty, www.bistrojeanty.com
Bouchon, www.bouchonbistro.com
Domaine Chandon, www.chandon.com
Ma(i)sonry Napa Valley, www.maisonry.com
Hurley's Restaurant, www.hurleysrestaurant.com

STAY:

Bardessono Hotel, Restaurant & Spa, www.bardessono.com
Villagio Inn & Spa, www.villagio.com

GETTING THERE AND AROUND:

Air New Zealand, www.airnewzealand.co.nz
United Airlines, www.united.com
Napa Valley Bike Tour & Tasting, www.napavalleybiketours.com

www.napavalley.com