

Napa With A Group Of Ghosts

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW HANSEN/STOCK PHOTOS

Given the grin on his face, I thought my husband had won the lottery. Instead, Richard informed me that car-friend Frank had just invited him on a Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost tour of Northern California.



Yountville's Villagio Inn & Spa exudes European charm.

Frank, I learned, has two vintage Ghosts. He would pilot the 1913 with his wife and baby on board, and Richard could drive the 1922. We were both impressed with the generous offer, and I was genuinely excited until I realized that it was assumed I would want to "share the experience."

Memories of previous classic car tours include multiple flat tires in Vermont, being cold and wet in New Zealand, and riding home from Borrego in a tow truck — so it was with great reluctance that I agreed to join him, "but just for the first four days in Napa Valley."

The Ghost group's base was Yountville, and it seemed that the Tuscan-style Villagio Inn & Spa would be the best place to stay. The 112-room hotel is located in the 23-acre Vintage Estate, a low-

rise landscaped complex that also includes the Vintage Inn, a wedding pavilion, Spa Villagio, and the V Marketplace specialty shops housed in a historic winery.

Web sites can be misleading, so I was relieved when we checked in and found that our spacious room came with a fireplace, a balcony, a large spa tub, beautiful bed and bath linens, and a wine bar instead of the normal mini-bar. I also hadn't realized that an extensive buffet breakfast and afternoon tea are included in the room tariff.

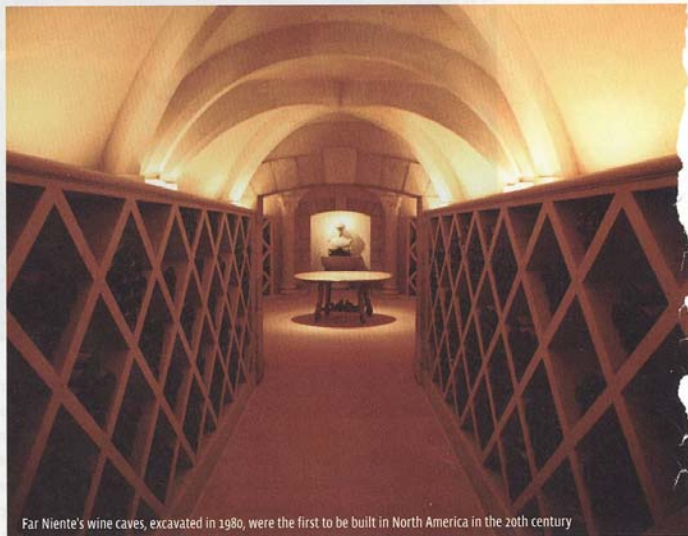
While the car guys unloaded the Silver Ghosts, I headed to Spa Villagio, where Mario delivered a terrific Wellness Massage that included aromatherapy, essential oils from local plants, and heated compresses. After my treatment, I shared the relaxation room with

a bridal party that had been groomed from nose to toes.

Later, I found Richard under "his" car with a toolbox and an assortment of parts. This gave me a chance to explore Yountville, which must be one of the most appealing small towns in America. Unlike much of Napa Valley, which has been infiltrated by housing tracts and 7-Elevens, Yountville is a tiny little enclave with one main street and lots of pretty cottage gardens.

I also learned that the community is a culinary hot spot with more Michelin stars per capita than anywhere on the planet. Recipients include the French Laundry (three), Bouchon (one), Bistro Jeanty (one), and Redd (one).

That night we dined at 25' Brix Restaurant & Gardens where chef



Far Niente's wine caves, excavated in 1980, were the first to be built in North America in the 20th century.



Rolls Royce Silver Ghosts - these date from 1911 to 1922 - are named for aristocratic adventurer Charles Rolls and motor engineer Sir Henry Royce

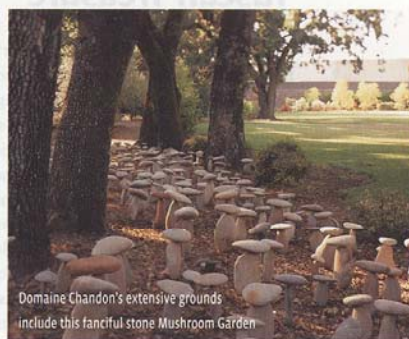
Yountville's 19th annual Invitational Father's Day Auto Show will take place within The Vintage Estate on Sunday, June 21, from 10:30am to 3:30pm. The free event will include more than 100 classic cars.

Anne Gingrass Paik wowed us with duck confit ravioli, seared scallops on white corn and chanterelle mushrooms, and seared yellowfin tuna with olive puree and tomato fondue. The restaurant has a list of 800 wines from which we enjoyed a Pouilly Fuisse from France and the Bink Pinot Noir made by two women in Mendocino. The highlight of the evening was the strawberry Coeur a la Crème, a creamy heart of mascarpone cheese and sweet cream served with Silverado Trail strawberries, strawberry compote, and lemon cornmeal cake.

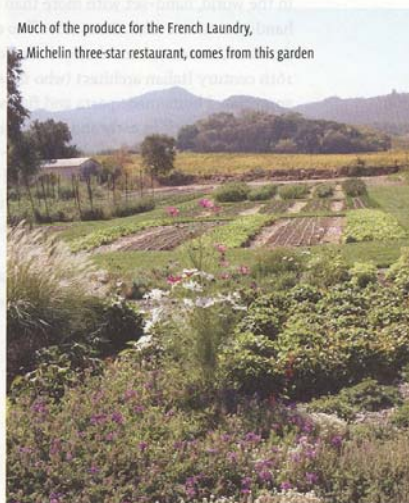
It was no surprise that the group chose to tour and taste at Far Niente Winery. Founder Gil Nickel was a car collector and active vintage racer. The pride of the Far Niente stable is the 1951 Ferrari 340 America he used to race at Sears Point. Guided tours and tastings include the Carriage House, the historic winery, and the extensive wine-aging caves. Afterwards, our group was treated to a reception in Far Niente's 13 acres of beautifully landscaped gardens.

We also toured and tasted at Domaine Chandon, where the highlights include art exhibits, outdoor sculptures, and extensive gardens with majestic oak trees and roses. The French Laundry's two-acre garden across the street from the famous restaurant was another fun place to wander (while Richard continued to tinker with the car). Later, I enjoyed my visit with the Food Network's Michael Chiarello when I stopped in at his NapaStyle Store in the V Marketplace. Here, a paninoteca offers creative panini sandwiches, and "docents" enable tastings of olive oil, wine, salt, organic preserves, salami, and balsamic vinegar made in Modena. Since my visit, Chiarello's Bottega restaurant has opened in the historic Grogan Winery within the Marketplace.

By the time I was relieved by Richard's brother, the Rolls-Royce was running perfectly, and the two of them headed north to Mendocino with the other Ghosts. For my part, after four delightful Yountville days, I turned south — feeling like I'd won the lottery. ELIZABETH HANSEN



Domaine Chandon's extensive grounds include this fanciful stone Mushroom Garden



Much of the produce for the French Laundry, a Michelin three-star restaurant, comes from this garden