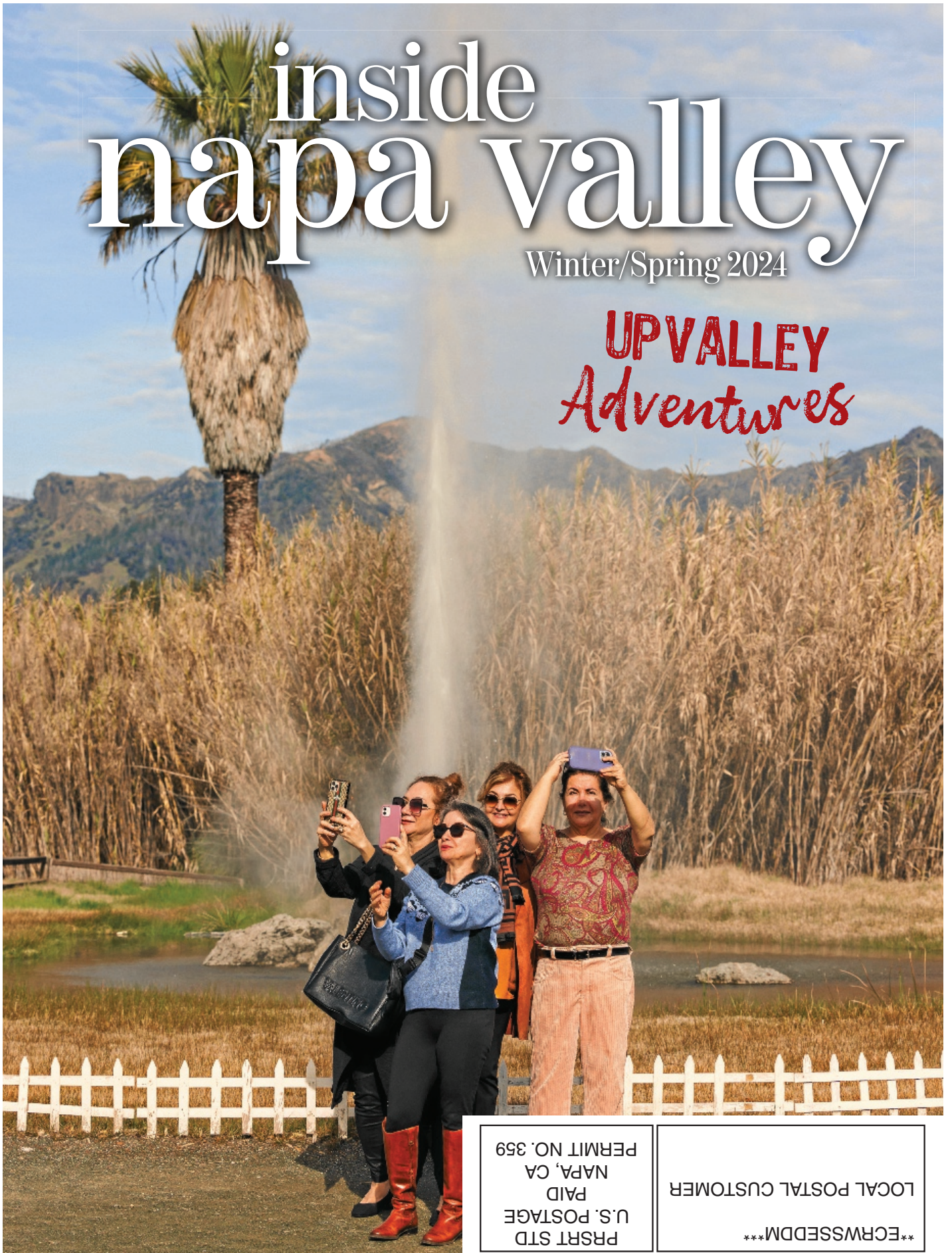


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Winter/Spring 2024

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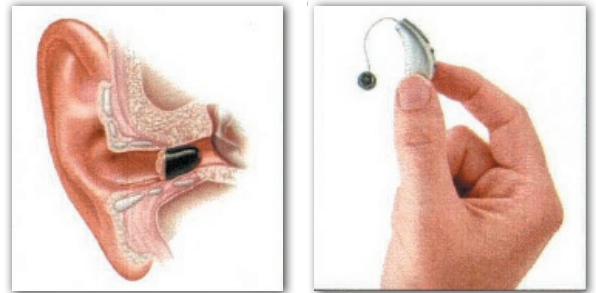
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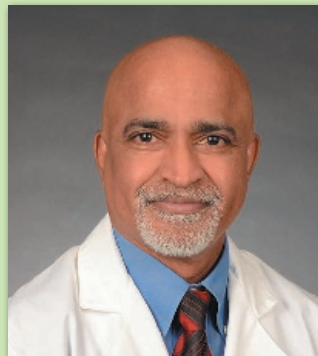
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Making our way Upvalley

DAN EVANS
Executive Editor

As you drive north from Napa, the city's business parks, grocery stores and retail shops quickly give way to the rolling hills and vineyards that give our collective home its fame. Driving toward the



DAN EVANS

county's northern edges, I can almost feel my blood pressure go down and my pulse relax as I leave the concerns and troubles of the world behind.

We're focusing this issue of Inside Napa Valley on the Upvalley, celebrating and honoring the fascinating businesses and people in the area. Contributor Paul Ghusar checks out the creative forces

behind Nimbus Arts in St. Helena, and Katie DeBenedetti sits down with Rebecca White, the chef and owner of Mangia Mi in Calistoga.

Our own Sarah Dowling took a break from putting this magazine together to write a piece of her own, profiling Elliot Bell of Charlie's in St. Helena. And photographer Nick Otto and myself put

together a "Choose your own adventure" style piece for a day trip to Calistoga. We all had a lot of fun writing this and putting it together. I hope you find the same enjoyment in reading it.

On the Cover: Visitors take selfies as water erupts from Old Faithful Geyser of California in Calistoga. Photo by Nick Otto.



Paul Ghusar

Andrea Cázares teaching a group of young students at Nimbus Arts in St. Helena on Jan. 18, 2024.

Lighting the ARTISTIC SPARK

St. Helena's Nimbus Arts going strong

PAUL GHUSAR

Located at the southern edge of St. Helena, untold thousands of visitors have sped past the Nimbus Arts Center, unaware that one of Napa County's main centers of artistic creativity has its headquarters in a modest building along Highway 29.

Founded in 2005 by Jamie Graff and Dana Johnson, the nonprofit's

name is a spin off "Cloud Camp," the first summer camp the group offered. In the years since, Nimbus' classes have expanded to a wide group of disciplines – from sewing to painting to the culinary arts – and to an even wider group of students: middle schoolers to retirees to those healing from physical or mental ailments.

The journey of Nimbus Arts

began modestly.

"We really started small out of the back of my Volvo and borrowing church buildings and school classrooms and cafeterias," said Graff.

Today, Nimbus Arts occupies a dynamic space where creativity and community intersect, boasting three well-equipped studios, including a dedicated ceramics



Nimbus Arts' new Nim+BUS can deliver mobile art projects to the farthest reaches of Napa County.

Submitted photo

and metal arts facility. The organization offers a diverse range of programs, from traditional fine arts to innovative disciplines like glass fusing and culinary arts.

“We work within the public school systems providing arts activities on campuses... And we also work in the court and community schools,” said Graff.

In public schools, Nimbus Arts integrates art into the educational fabric, offering students a creative outlet that complements their academic learning. This program helps foster creativity, critical thinking, and a sense of accomplishment.

The impact in juvenile halls is even more profound, where art becomes a tool for self-expression and emotional exploration, offering a positive channel for the youths’ experiences and

feelings, said Graff.

Andrea Cázares is a resident artist whose work has become a cornerstone of their educational and outreach programs. Cázares, who joined Nimbus Arts in 2018, has a background in historical fine art mediums, studying at the American University of Rome.

Her approach to art education is deeply rooted in her belief in the therapeutic power of art. This philosophy extends to her work with various community groups, including young students and individuals in juvenile facilities, emphasizing art as a tool for emotional and psychological healing.

“We accept all forms of art. We accept all ideologies and we allow a person to uniquely express themselves regardless of what we



Marvin Humphrey photo

Costumed figures attend Sunday's Día de los Muertos celebration at the Napa Valley College Upper Valley Campus, sponsored by the UpValley Family Centers and Nimbus Arts.



Kids work on a Día de los Muertos-themed art organized by Nimbus Arts.

Jesse Duarte, Star



Kids work on arts and crafts under the guidance of Nimbus Arts during “’Tis the Season in Lyman Park” on Dec. 8.

Jesse Duarte, Star

feel, we encourage it and that’s incredibly healing,” said Cázares.

Matt Mumford is father of a 12-year-old student at the center.

“My daughter has been attending Nimbus Arts since she was 2,” he said. “It started with simple activities like finger painting, and now she’s an accomplished oil painter and

has even created Victorian dresses in Andrea’s sewing class.”

Cázares describes Nimbus as a sanctuary of creativity and learning, where art transcends mere technique to become a medium of personal expression and healing.

“I teach a lot of different classes for all age groups... just a lot of like exploratory art. I

“It started with simple activities like finger painting, and now she’s an accomplished oil painter and has even created Victorian dresses in Andrea’s sewing class.”

Matt Mumford, parent

talk about our history. I nerd out with them... so I teach them the historical mediums, and just kind of teach them through a form of play,” she said.

Her words paint a picture of an environment where art is not just a skill to be mastered but a language through which individuals of all ages can communicate, explore, and heal. Nimbus, in her view, is more than just an art center; it’s a vital, nurturing community hub that empowers and inspires.

Graff said part of the non-profit’s mission is to involve the community as much as

possible. Examples of this include the annual Dia de las Muertos event – organized in partnership with the UpValley Family Centers – and the “Hundreds of Hands” program, meant to raise awareness about youth mental health.

“We invest a lot of love and energy in working with and collaborating with other community organizations,” she said.

The latest initiative, said Graff, is a mobile art center housed in a box truck, aimed at reaching an even wider audience across Napa County.

“We just got our ‘Nim-Bus’ out on the road,” she said. ■

Cooking with family at Mangia Mi

KATIE DeBENEDETTI

Chef Rebecca White's trajectory as a chef has been anything but conventional. She got her chops from pizza-making contests with her cousins and as a competitor on Food Network's *Cooks versus Cons* — both of which she won.

She was introduced to the fine dining world as the personal assistant to Naomi Cambell. Her first restaurant shuttered within a year, but her unlikely New Haven-style pizza joint in the small surfing island of Rincón, Puerto Rico, the

original Mangia Mi, later became one of the town's most popular restaurants.

Mangia Mi Calistoga, which she opened in 2022, is just as unconventional. The Italian restaurant's kitchen doesn't have a freezer and isn't hidden away like most fine dining restaurants. Instead it serves as a show for those sitting in the restaurant's premier bar seats. The menu changes daily and is even open to requests from regulars. White's general manager and multiple kitchen team members

weren't career restaurant staff — she met her general manager at the gym, and members of her kitchen team in the Calistoga High teaching kitchen.

Why? "Well, I think I'm mildly insane," White said, laughing. She called over lunch from Fairfield County, Connecticut, where she's currently opening her third Mangia Mi location.

"I think you have to be mildly insane to be in this business, to be a woman in this business," she continued. "I jump and I don't



Rebecca White, chef and owner of Mangia Mi in Calistoga eats a slice of pizza while at the restaurant on Friday, Jan. 19.

Nick Otto, Register



Rebecca White, chef and owner of Mangia Mi in Calistoga poses for a photograph on Friday, Jan. 19.

Nick Otto, Register



Rebecca White, chef and owner of Mangia Mi in Calistoga poses for a photograph on Friday, Jan. 19.

Nick Otto, Register



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look back. My first restaurant was an ultimate failure, but it taught me everything that I know now not to do. I think if you know you don't take a chance on things in life, then you're not going to get anywhere. I thought 'If I fail, I fail, but if I succeed, then it's going to be really cool.'"

While White's Mangia Mi locations in Rincón and Calistoga have both been great successes — gaining popularity and earning accolades including recognition in three Best of Napa County's 2023 award categories — she's no stranger to failure.

In fact, White said that returning to Connecticut to open a restaurant is kind of a full circle moment to where her first foray, and failure, in the restaurant industry, took place.

White grew up in New Haven, Connecticut, surrounded by a large and food-loving Italian family. She said her earliest memories are in the kitchen, making fresh pasta and pizza with her grandmother.

"Everybody in my family loves cooking. Every Sunday we were in the kitchen with all of my aunts and my grandmother drinking wine, making fresh pasta, and eating the best food," she said. "I just remember growing up with all the smells and the sights and the noise and everybody would play cards at the end of the night."

She always loved to cook and eat with family, but didn't think she would ever pursue a culinary career. White went to Emerson College to study film after high school, where she found herself working an internship that got her on the phone with famous actors like Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio. She moved through the ranks, becoming Naomi Cambell's assistant in her 20s.

White said that traveling the world with Cambell jump

started her interest in a culinary career.

"I lived in London and Milan and Paris — that's kind of where I fell in love with food and different cuisines and cultures. That was really an amazing journey."

After five years abroad, White gave it up and returned to New Haven, where she first tried her hand at opening a restaurant.

"I thought I was the coolest person in my small town, and I had a little bit of money, so I thought it would be a great idea to open up a restaurant with absolutely no experience. My very first restaurant was a miserable failure in less than a year"

She'd lost the money earned in her first career and went back to Boston to become a server at a bar fittingly called Dick's Last Resort.

"It was probably the best lesson in humility that I could ever probably go through," White said.

She spent a few years getting back on her feet, moving to Key West and opening a food truck, competing on — and winning — a season of Food Network's Cooks versus Cons in 2016, and ultimately settling down on Rincón, where she was determined to give restauranteering another shot.

"Again, everybody thought I was crazy because I wasn't going to be making rice and beans, I was making fresh pasta and New Haven style pizza," White said. "We were really doing the only authentic Italian food down there. But it resonated with some people. We got a lot of press and it was a good time."

Within a few years, Mangia Mi had become a fixture on the island. White didn't want to rest on her laurels though. She saw that the restaurant could be successful in an unconventional location, and decided to try to break into another challenging market: Napa Valley.

"I always came to Napa Valley with my family and I had fallen in love with it, so I said, 'If I can make it in Napa Valley, I really could make it anywhere.'"

She opened Mangia Mi Calistoga in 2022. The restaurant has quickly gained popularity, which White and members of her staff attribute to not only the quality of food, but the environment that sets it apart from many other Napa Valley dining options.

"The restaurant industry can be hectic, it's a high-stress, fast-paced environment. And I think the difference is that the way (White) has designed her restaurant is, she wants to have it feel like you're coming to her house for dinner. It really does feel like a dinner party every night. People are happy when they get there. We do a lot of comfort food, the music is always good. It's not stuffy and it's not typical Napa Valley cuisine," said Elly Galindo, the restaurant's general manager.

Galindo wasn't looking for a restaurant gig when she met White at a Calistoga gym. But she said that the two became fast friends, and White didn't take no for an answer.

"I had no interest in working in a restaurant — I hadn't since I was 19. But then it came time to open and I told her that I would just help her get open and then find someone to do the job," Galindo said. "I ended up enjoying it so much that I left my job and I've been there ever since."

She said working for White was different from other restaurant jobs she'd had. Just like the restaurant feels like a dinner party, White really does treat her staff like family.

"She cares. I realized this one day when we first opened up. It was very packed, we were all very tired at the end of the day, and the kitchen made food for everybody to eat. The first thing she did was make

sure that everyone else had a plate. She really cares about her team and she really cares about the people that she works with," Manny Santiago, a member of Mangia Mi's kitchen team, said.

He met White when she was a long-term substitute teacher for Calistoga High School's cooking class back in 2022. White was waiting for the restaurant's construction work to be done, and took the role to stay out of trouble, she said.

The two hit it off, and she offered him a job though he had never worked in a restaurant before. Two years later, Santiago can see himself pursuing a culinary career after college.

While Galindo, Santiago, and the rest of Mangia Mi's Calistoga team has been keeping the restaurant running, White has been flying back and forth, finalizing plans to open her Connecticut location. She said that this restaurant will be for her biological family.

"I'm literally opening this Connecticut location for my family," White said. "My cousin has been a teacher all her life and she's like, 'I want to run one of your restaurants.'"

White said that having restaurants near her home in Napa Valley, and now her childhood home in Fairfield County feels like the best of both worlds.

"I love traveling. I'll always get on a plane from Connecticut to Calistoga. I'm here about half the time, but I've also got a beautiful staff that want to make it their own, and I want to support that. We're just expanding and building and it's another outlet where I can offer everybody in California more opportunities — it's really about growing as a family." ■

Mangia Mi is located at 1120 Washington St. in Calistoga. Visit mangiami.com for more information.

There's a (DoNapa) app for that

Connecting both visitors
and locals to downtown



Nick Otto, Register

Paul Kelaita, who developed a new app for DoNapa (downtown Napa), shows the app on his phone near Folklore in downtown Napa.

KEVIN COURTNEY

How does someone discover the deals that downtown Napa's stores, restaurants and tasting rooms are offering?

You could do a slow walk through the central business district, poking your head into enterprises of interest.

But do you have the time? What if the most alluring attractions lie a block or two away, just beyond your awareness?

Despair not. There's now a DoNapa app that "pings" you as you make your way by foot or car through the central business district. It can be customized to your interests, so you never miss out.

At the end of December, some three dozen businesses were posting promotions on the app, with more coming aboard in the new year, said Bill La Liberte, Downtown Napa Association's new executive director, who replaced Craig Smith upon his retirement.

The app is the brainchild of Paul Kelaita, a Napa software developer, who spent the summer writing the code on his own time. The Downtown Napa Association offers it free to downtown businesses and shoppers.

Kelaita had been working as a "Napa ambassador," strolling downtown on Fridays and Saturdays, trying to guide pedestrians to the businesses best suited to their needs. Businesses have their own websites, certainly, but they don't reach potential customers who just happen to be passing by, he said.

The DoNapa app provides that connection in real time, he said.

This reporter had the app on his iPhone while driving along Third Street after a visit to the Napa library. When he passed the new Folklore café on Third Street, he got an alert enticing him to check the business out. On a visit to Oxbow Public Market, his phone buzzed with a nearby wine tasting offer.

"It's reaching out to somebody in proximity, not to someone in San Francisco but someone by their front door," La Liberte said.

When the app is downloaded (an Android version is not yet available), it can be customized to search for restaurants, wine tastings, cocktails, shopping, cultural interests and more.

During the holidays, the DoNapa app promoted happy hours as well as discounts on

hotel rooms, store merchandise and wine tastings.

Erin Riley, owner of Be Bubbly on Second Street, said the app allowed her to reach folks in downtown who might be interested in a "bubbles lounge" that serves small bites and features local entertainment.

Vast numbers of visitors stick to First Street, never realizing there are businesses off First that might satisfy their needs, Riley said. "Second Street is just a block away, but it seems like another country sometimes," she said.

On the DoNapa app, Riley promotes her happy hour and special events, including entertainment.

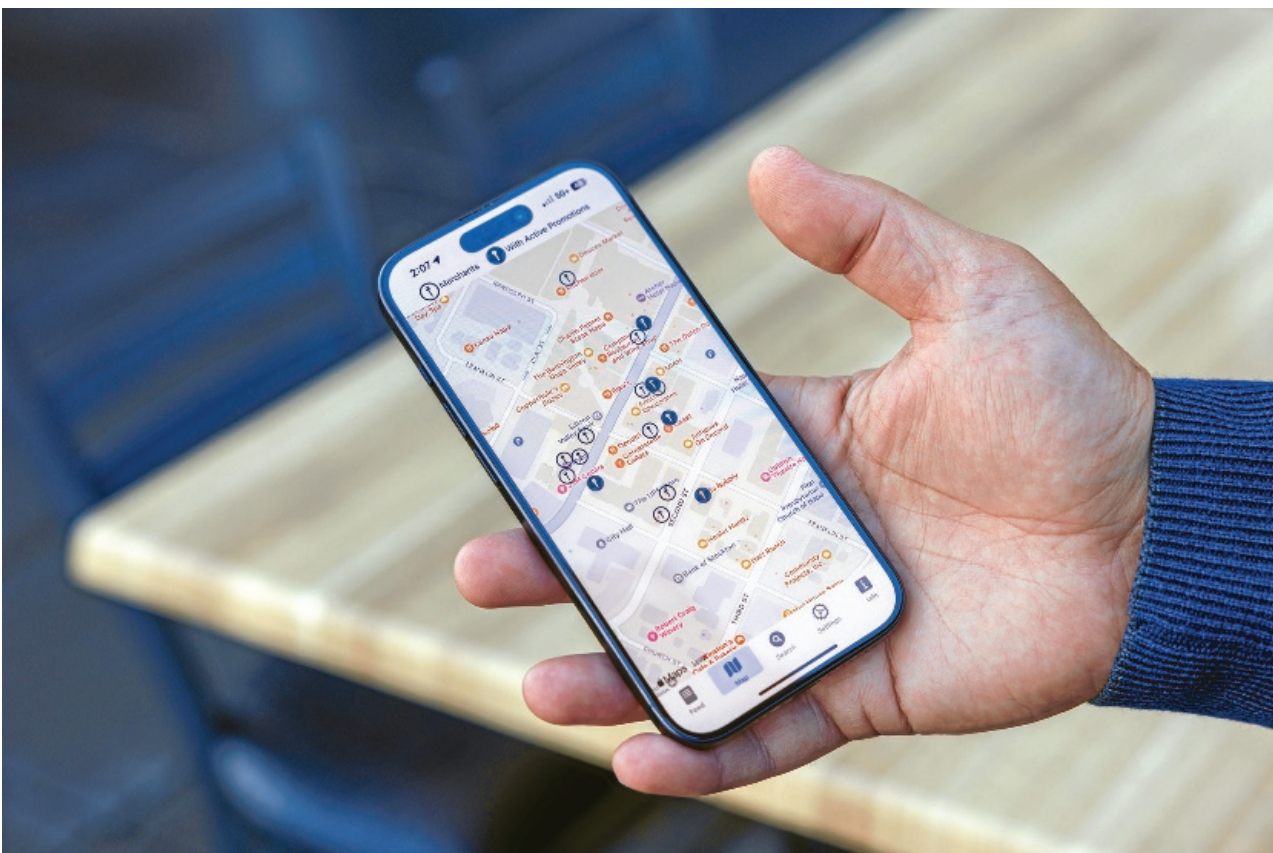
Kelaita is a software engineer who has worked for NASA, Yahoo as well as startups. He and his wife bought a home in Napa nine years ago, but they waited four years until their children were out of the house to live here full-time.

"If it flies in Napa, I'd like to take it to other cities. I'll use Napa as a reference," Kelaita said of the DoNapa app. He imagines selling versions to other Valley cities and beyond, such as "Do Burlingame" and "Do Palo Alto." ■



Nick Otto, Register

Paul Kelaita, who developed a new app for DoNapa (downtown Napa), poses for a photograph on Main Street in downtown Napa.



Paul Kelaita, who developed a new app for DoNapa (downtown Napa), shows the app in map mode.

Nick Otto, Register

From 'introduction' to career

JENNIFER HUFFMAN

Danielle Cyrot explained that as a freshman at the University of California at Davis, she originally thought she might major in physical therapy.

"I didn't really know what I wanted to do, so I just started flipping through the course catalog and found one class that looked very interesting: 'Introduction to Wine.'"

She was intrigued, said Cyrot. "My dad is French, so wine was always on the dinner table," she explained.

"I signed up for the class ... and I absolutely loved it."

After that class, "I changed my major to viticulture and enology (grape growing and winemaking) and started working in wineries making wine."

Today, Cyrot is the winemaker at CADE Estate Winery on Howell Mountain. She's been in the wine industry for 27 years.



Danielle Cyrot, winemaker at CADE Estate Winery.

Jak Wonderly photo

1. What was your childhood ambition?

I think I wanted to be a painter/artist when I was in first grade. I quickly realized that my stick figures were a far cry from the Mona Lisa.

2. What was your first job?

My first job was working as a receptionist for a real estate agent in Mission Viejo. I usually just transferred the call to an actual real estate agent or sent the call to voicemail. I don't really know why they wanted someone to answer the phone who couldn't answer any questions about real estate, but it paid well, and I could do homework in between phone calls.

3. What's the worst job you ever had?

I had a summer job working at Blockbuster Video while I was in college. It was the most uninteresting and boring job ever. All I did was rewind VHS tapes and then put them back on the shelves. Working at the cash register was terrible! People would be so upset when you told them they had a "late fee."

4. What job would you like to try/not try?

Try: Pastry chef.

Not try: Skydive instructor.

5. What is the biggest challenge the wine industry has faced?

The 2020 wildfires that hit Napa Valley, not once, but twice with the LNU Lightning Complex Fire and Glass Mountain Fire were devastating to the wine industry. CADE did not make any red wines in 2020 due to smoke taint. Climate change will be our biggest challenge in the future with rising temperatures, lack of water and a constant threat of wildfires. I am hopeful that we can find solutions and continue to make great wine.

6. What's one thing Napa could do to help local business?

When you are dining out at one of the many great Napa restaurants, buy a bottle of Napa Valley wine.

7. If you could change one thing about the wine industry, what would it be?

A lot of things come to mind that I would want to change about the wine industry, such as a greater adoption of organic grape growing/farming. Increasing the use of solar power for wineries and reduction in packaging waste or our lack of recycling in the wine industry.

But mostly what has been on my mind is finding a way to make Napa Valley not only a great place to work, but a great place to live and raise a family. Making

wine is a dream job, but if you can't afford to live in the area that you work in, it is not sustainable. I hope we can continue to build affordable housing in Napa Valley while still preserving agricultural land. Winemaking is not a job that is done by one person alone. From the vineyard to the winery, we rely on lots of people to help us make great wine.

8. What's your favorite charity or nonprofit?

The Napa Valley Food Bank and the Napa Valley Farmworkers Foundation.

9. What's something people might be surprised to know about you?

I enjoy decorating my home for the holidays and entertaining my friends and family with big dinner parties.

10. What is one thing you hope to accomplish in your lifetime that you haven't yet?

Making a 100-point wine has eluded me so far. Maybe one day I will make a perfect wine, but honestly, I know better than anyone what went into making a bottle of CADE. I wouldn't put wine in a bottle I wasn't proud of making. ■

Info: CADE Estate Winery, 360 Howell Mountain Road S., Angwin; cadewinery.com; 707-690-1213



Nick Otto, Register

Artist Shawn Risko, right, and friend Steve Hope move a panel of stained glass that Risko restored toward First Presbyterian Church.

Behind the glass

SARAH DOWLING

Risko restores stained glass across the Napa Valley

There are not many professions where you get to touch a piece of history and then become a piece of it yourself.

Art and history are intertwined for Shawn Risko, who has spent his career creating and restoring stained glass. Risko has perfected his craft over the past 20 years, piecing together highly detailed and colorful glass works of art that can last a lifetime.

His company — Riskula Art Glass — has been involved with numerous projects in Napa County and across the Bay Area. Among these are several private homes in the Silverado Country Club area, Napa Methodist Church, Creekside Community Church and St. Helena’s Catholic church.

One example of his handiwork is on display in downtown Napa — a portfolio of sorts in a single building.

Risko recently concluded a project at Napa’s First Presbyterian Church, located at 1333 Third St., which saw a lot of damage from

the 2014 earthquake. The church’s windows were among the many casualties.

The stained glass was the “most obvious damage right after the earthquake,” according to Jill Lambert, a church board member. “The stained glass was obviously broken.”

Now, in what Lambert called “leftover earthquake damage,” some of the windows were “starting to bow out and the lead between the panels was failing. We are lucky to have Shawn available to repair it for us!”

“When we had to make repairs on several of the windows in the



Nick Otto, Register

Amy Hall Risko helps her husband Shawn Risko clean a panel of stained glass at First Presbyterian Church in Napa that the two restored and reinstalled on Nov. 30.

sanctuary, Shawn was able to source old glass that matches what we have," Julie Worthington, another church board member, said.

Risko's relationship with First Presbyterian has been a long, yet rewarding one.

"There is something about touching glass made by people who are not here anymore," Risko said from the church's library, surrounded by five window panels he was in the process of installing. "It really makes you think about the time that goes by."

The library windows were carefully placed at the end of November but were first pulled from the historic building in the middle of June. From there, they were taken to Riskula Art Glass's Napa County workshop where the restoration work begins.

Amy Hall Risko – Shawn's wife and partner on many projects over the years including those at First Presbyterian – explained that making stained glass from scratch is a lot easier than fixing an old piece.

"Restorations are a little bit more tricky," she said. "Generally, because you are working



Nick Otto, Register

Artist Shawn Risko, left, and friend Steve Hope install a panel of stained glass that Risko restored into a window frame at First Presbyterian Church in Napa on Nov. 28.

with an item 100 to 150 years old, the template we take can be buckled or folding."

The template is essentially a map the Riskos use to ensure each piece of glass removed from the window pane is returned to its rightful place during the restoration. That way the original stained glass pattern of the piece is retained.

Restoring such intricate patterns takes meticulous planning, time and patience because sometimes the condition of the window is not

apparent until it is transported to the workshop.

"You definitely don't know what you are getting into," Hall Risko said.

Once a template is created, the pair start taking the window apart and work with the old glass – which in First Presbyterian's case is 150 years old and from Belgium, according to Lambert and Worthington.

Once the glass is removed, it is cleaned and if the colors are faded, sometimes this means repainting it and refiring those pieces in a

kiln. When all the glass is ready to go again, it is like a "giant puzzle, putting it back together with lead and soldering," Hall Risko said.

Some clients choose not to repair the broken or faded glass, Hall Risko said. Instead, they opt to have that history remain intact. For example, "if one piece is broke in half, we put a new lead line" around that piece, she explained.

For others, restoring stained glass is a "very low priority," according to Risko. Risko said he provides assessments on the condition of glass, sometimes as a paid service or out of sheer curiosity.

"If I see something, I'll take a look at it." And sometimes the lead looks like it's on its way out.

The lead for these stained glass pieces is a key component. Even if an earthquake hadn't rattled First Presbyterian, over time the lead would eventually deteriorate. This is just part of the cycle of stained glass works. The 2014 quake simply accelerated this timeline.

But now, with the Riskos help, members of Napa's First Presbyterian Church can celebrate the completion of "the last big project from the earthquake that needs to be redone," according to Lambert.

That doesn't mean the Riskos won't be busy. Projects flow in and out of the workshop all the time.

A long-term goal for Shawn Risko? To create his own church from scratch, being involved with the stained glass work from the beginning. Building "something that big takes a lot of design time," he said.

But if there is one thing Risko has learned throughout his career, it's patience. ■

PHOTOS: For more photos of Shawn Risko's work, point your smartphone camera at the QR code and tap the link. [NEWSVU](#)



Chef Elliot Bell poses for a photograph at Charlie's St. Helena on Monday, Jan. 8.

Nick Otto, Register

'Approachable but interesting'

Chef Elliot Bell strikes a balance at Charlie's in St. Helena



SARAH DOWLING

Chef Elliot Bell’s path from a small town in Iowa to the Napa Valley city of St. Helena is a series of one door closing and another opening – and Bell walking through each with little hesitation. Opportunities sprung up from conversations with professors at his hospitality management school in New Hampshire to chefs in New York and Boston, which eventually led him to world-famous Napa Valley chef Thomas Keller. Bell worked his way up to executive sous chef at The French Laundry in Yountville, staying with the restaurant for almost 11 years.

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**Chef Elliot Bell
poses for a
photograph at
Charlie's St. Helena
on Monday, Jan. 8.**

Nick Otto, Register



Golden Harvest razed; Italian-style restaurant coming

JESSE DUARTE

With surprising ease and speed, the 1960s-era building that once housed the Golden Harvest restaurant in St. Helena was reduced to a pile of sticks.

The demolition on Jan. 16 clears the way for a new building that will house Capo 29, a sister restaurant to Bruce Marder's "Italian-style" restaurant Capo in Santa Monica.

Golden Harvest closed in July after 27 years in business on Highway 29. Marder closed escrow on the property a few months later and won the St. Helena Planning Commission's approval to replace the 2,807-square-foot Golden Harvest building with a 3,597-square-foot, 76-seat restaurant.

Construction is scheduled to take 10 to 12 months, with Capo 29 opening sometime in 2025.

Marder is chef, manager and partner at the Santa Monica Capo, one of 100 restaurants in the world to win a Grand Award



Submitted graphic

A rendering of Capo 29, coming to the former Golden Harvest site in 2025.

from Wine Spectator for the 3,000 choices on its wine list.

Marder apprenticed at the Dumas Pere School of French Cooking in Glenview, Illinois, and returned to his hometown of Los Angeles to work at the Beverly Hills Hotel. He was chef/owner of Café California, West Beach Café, DC3 and Broadway Deli before founding Capo in June 1998.

Marder envisions Capo 29 as a "comfortable, elegant, hospitable, everyday

dining choice presented in a way not currently available in the valley." To maintain a consistent staff, it will be open five days a week, for dinner only.

"Napa Valley is a tourist destination year-round now, yet there are NO sophisticated Italian restaurants in the Valley. ... Capo is straightforward, not fussy, with the best food products and tabletop amenities available," Marder wrote in a business plan he provided to the Star. ■



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Now, Bell is taking on a new challenge by owning and managing his own restaurant in downtown St. Helena.

Bell, who balances family life with working as a chef and a St. Helena firefighter, opened Charlie's in October to much fanfare from the local community. The location formerly housed Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen — the brainchild of local chef Cindy Pawlcyn who still checks in on Bell from time to time. The Railroad Avenue restaurant hosted many special occasions for locals over the years and Bell hopes to add to that legacy with Charlie's.

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity and space.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO OPEN YOUR OWN RESTAURANT?

It's always kind of been a goal or dream of mine. I've worked in so many different types of restaurants and learned a lot of great things, learned a lot of stuff that I wouldn't want to do, and it's always been a goal to have that culmination of being able to really direct what I know to be right and what I want to see as a restaurant and how I want to treat employees and how I want to purvey food. It's always kind of been a goal to have that independence in doing that and being able to support others to do the same.

WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU FACED IN OPENING CHARLIE'S? WHAT HAS SURPRISED YOU THE MOST ABOUT THIS PROCESS?

There're the obvious challenges of the pandemic. Staffing was a challenge at the beginning but has kind of sorted itself out a bit and has become better. It was definitely something I was nervous of when we first started talking about the concept. That was like right in the middle when there were a lot of the unemployment benefits and people not really coming back to work, which led to a lot of challenges for a lot of other restaurants. But as we kind of phased out of that, we've had a lot of eagerness of people to work. Staffing was a challenge, but it is starting to get better. The construction and just the restraints of funds and financing is a challenge, but it has also built this restaurant into what it is. And being able to work within those constraints. But fundraising money is definitely challenging.

I'd say the construction and that (financing) was probably the two biggest challenges. The town's been super supportive, the community has been super



Charlie's St. Helena chef Elliot Bell makes pasta on Monday, Jan. 8.

Nick Otto, Register

supportive so that's been amazing and really helpful in the process.

And then the surprises just of running a small business, not being able to spend as much time at the stove as I thought or would like to. It is a lot more time on the computer.

SO YOUR HOSPITALITY/BUSINESS DEGREE, IS THAT COMING IN HANDY AT THIS POINT?

It definitely came in handy, and I'm glad that I have that basis and

understanding, like the economics of running a restaurant. It is probably the first time in my career I've really knelt back on that and really been able to dig into it. It's been great; it is not the funnest work to do, but it's definitely necessary, and I'm glad I have the experience.

TELL ME ABOUT YOUR "SLIDING SCALE" APPROACH TO THE MENU

We tried to really, in having this restaurant be approachable and something fun and interesting tried to kind



“Everybody supported us through opening and just the local community, we kind of invited everyone in and it was a couple hundred people and that was really fun and a relief to see everyone in here. There was a lot of anticipation from the community about it.”

Elliot Bell,
owner and chef at Charlie's

WHAT WERE THE GOALS IN REIMAGINING THE SPACE, WHICH WAS HOME TO CINDY'S BACKSTREET KITCHEN FOR SO MANY YEARS?

We wanted to, since it has been through its many iterations as such an iconic space in St. Helena, we didn't want to wipe that clean and do something different. We wanted to keep — and just being this older building it kind of lends itself to that familiarity — so we wanted to keep a lot of the iconic parts of it and have that feeling when guests, because everyone is so excited to reopen, that they didn't feel like they were coming to something completely new and all those memories of those birthdays and anniversaries are wiped clean. But we also wanted to give it a fresh update. This piece of wallpaper back here, that was the original wallpaper that was everywhere in this room. We got to keep that, and we have some pieces up of the old building. We kept a lot of it similar, but also updated it to the times. A lot of the renovations in the bar are pretty different from what it was but still keeping that comfortable feeling.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE MENU?

It's approachable, comfortable food that people are familiar with but has maybe some different techniques or something that's a little exciting about it, really focused on local purveyors and local food, but at the same time providing an experience for the guests that's approachable but interesting trying to make things successful like caviar, truffles, like Wagyu beef that maybe everyone doesn't try. A lot of staff has never tried some of the things before, but trying to create it in a way to get guests in.

of give the opportunities for the guest to have these different experiences. We want to be a restaurant where the locals feel comfortable coming in two or three times a week. But also somewhere where somebody can really come in for those special occasions to celebrate. As we were doing the construction so many people stopped by and were like “Oh my God I had my wedding reception there” or “we had our anniversary there” and everyone has these very fond memories of Cindy's and these special occasions

so we want to be a place that can provide that as well. And people can really come and have this great experience and have white truffles if they want to or try caviar for the first time and have that accessibility with some of these ingredients that people may not be familiar with and at the same time people feel comfortable to have Coors Light and fried chicken at the bar and hang out. We're tried to really hit both of those and be a comfortable and approachable place but also offer a unique and exciting dining experience.



Nick Otto, Register

Charlie's St. Helena Chef Elliot Bell, left, preps in the kitchen on Monday, Jan. 8.

DO YOU HAVE SPECIALS DURING THE WEEK?

Yeah. It's fun, and it is a good way for us to test out like we just put on the menu a new pasta dish, and we ran that as a special last week to kind of get the staff familiar with it, get some interaction with the guests from it and then put it onto the menu. We always run a special or two.

WHAT HAS THE RECEPTION BEEN LIKE SINCE CHARLIE'S OPENED ITS DOORS? FROM LOCALS? VISITORS?

The opening from harvest time into the holidays, when it is not the tourist season up here, we've really been able to open our doors to the community and have great support and that's really helped us in January, which is typically a slower month out here, to be really busy. The local community support has been amazing, and it's been really fun especially with that bar – it's a horseshoe and it really makes this communal feeling in there. And we still get buzz from tourists and get people

coming up from San Francisco just to try us because they have read about us. But we've gotten a lot of comments like "it has been really great to have this community-centered restaurant" and I am sure once we get into the tourist months, we'll get a lot of tourists as well.

HOW DID IT FEEL WHEN YOU FIRST OPENED THE DOORS TO CHARLIE'S?

It was a lot of anticipation, which led to a lot of nerves. We did a big open house before we opened for actual service, which was really fun. Everybody supported us through opening and just the local community, we kind of invited everyone in and it was a couple hundred people and that was really fun and a relief to see everyone in here. There was a lot of anticipation from the community about it.

WHAT DOES CINDY PAWLACYN THINK ABOUT THIS RESTAURANT?

She's been in a couple times, and she's

been really supportive. It's been fun throughout the process. She now lives in town, she used to live up the hill a little bit, but now lives in town, so she'll stop by every once in a while and say "hi" and check in on us, and she's been extremely supportive, which has been amazing.

DO YOU FEEL LIKE THERE'S A LOT OF SUPPORT BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT RESTAURANTS FOR EACH OTHER? IS THERE CAMARADERIE?

I think everybody, especially in St. Helena and the bigger Napa Valley, the restaurant community is really tight and supportive. We've had a lot of restaurants reach out to see how they can help and see what we need, so that's been a great feeling. ■

Charlie's is located at 1327 Railroad Ave. in St. Helena. Visit charliesnv.com for more information.



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Joel Pfeifle the bar manager at Wilfred's Lounge in Napa adds fire to the mocktail "Ube-bae-baby!" on Friday, Dec. 8.

Nick Otto, Register



Nick Otto, Register

Joel Pfeifle the bar manager at Wilfred's Lounge in Napa prepares a mocktail on Friday, Dec. 8.

NO PROOF NEEDED

Cocktail mavens embrace non-alcoholic drinks

SARAH DOWLING

Like millions of Americans, Southside Café owners Irma and Morgan Robinson often use the first month of the year as a reset, taking a break from the wine and other alcoholic beverages synonymous with the Napa Valley.

Commonly called “Dry January,” this 31-day sobriety challenge “ended up evolving” for Irma, whose Dry January turned into a Dry February, Dry March, Dry April and never really stopped. It has been two years and counting.

Irma Robinson never actually set an end date for her “dry period” as is typically done with the Dry January model. Instead,

she decided to take it one day at a time, asking herself “how alcohol was serving me and not serving me,” she explained, sitting in her Gasser Drive café. Robinson touted the clarity and discipline that came from her decision to stay sober. And there was a lot to think about.

“With everything that happened with the pandemic, I was very clear minded in addressing all the challenges that happened and that could lie ahead,” Robinson said.

Southside has endured many challenges since its 2016 opening. The first Southside café — known as Southside Carneros — was located on Old Sonoma Road. Later, Southside

Yountville popped up on Washington Street in Yountville. Southside Century — located at 135 Gasser Drive, Suite B — completed the trifecta in 2019.

Then the coronavirus pandemic hit, the ripple effects of which are still being felt by business owners across the Napa Valley, forcing the Robinsons to reevaluate their multiple locations. Ultimately, Southside Carneros and Southside Yountville closed. Irma noted that Century “has everything we need” and efforts were poured into this location, including its catering operations.

Robinson described Southside as “elevated, fast casual,” noting what sets this eatery



Nick Otto, Register

Southside Café owner Irma Robinson prepares an non-alcoholic drink on Monday, Nov. 13.

apart from others in Napa is its hospitality and chef-driven menu. This model plays to the couple's strengths: Irma has a background in hospitality, marketing and has worked in wine tasting rooms. Morgan, meanwhile, is a classically-trained chef.

While the food menu features breakfast and lunch staples such as avocado toasts, biscuits and gravy, lunch soups, salads and sandwiches, the beverage menu has evolved with an "NA" – non-alcoholic – focus. Robinson clarified that although they will always have some wines and other alcoholic options, she wanted to explore NA beverages and provide guests who are sober or "sober curious" some tasty options. NA should not just equal a glass of juice, Robinson said.

In wine country, "zero proof" is likely a foreign concept to many. With Robinson's



Nick Otto, Register

Joel Pfeifle the bar manager at Wilfred's Lounge in Napa garnishes the mocktail "Ube-bae-baby!" with nutmeg on Friday, Dec. 8.



Nick Otto, Register

A non-alcoholic strawberry mezcal sour is seen at Southside Café in Napa on Monday, Nov. 13.

wine background, there was certainly a learning curve when it comes to non-alcoholic beers, wines, spirits and bitters. This Pandora’s box of liquid offerings is one Robinson excitedly opened – many of these zero proof products are on display at Southside, available for purchase.

Southside’s NA menu

includes a few beers from Athletic Brewing Co.; Curious Elixir No. 1 – a “pomegranate cocktail inspired by the negroni;” an Espresso Martini – Despierta Blend Espresso, Ritual Rum Alternative, Pathfinder, All the Bitter Aromatic Bitters; a Spicy Pineapple Mezcal Margarita – Cut Above Mezcal, house-made

Cointreau, pineapple juice, fresh orange juice, lime juice; a Gin & Tonic – Monday zero-proof gin, Betty Buzz Tonic, fresh lime, kaffir lime leaves, marigold blossom, juniper berries and more.

Robinson emphasized there are a lot of reasons people choose not to drink, whether it is “just today,



Nick Otto, Register

Bottles of alcohol free gin and mezcal are seen at Southside Café in Napa on Monday, Nov. 13.



Bar Director Andrew Salazar makes a cocktail at the Fink in downtown Napa on Thursday, Aug. 3.

Nick Otto, Register



Nick Otto, Register

Wilfred's Lounge mocktail "Toucan Sham" is seen on Friday, Dec. 8.



Above: An old ship wheel is seen on the wall at The Fink in downtown Napa on Thursday, Aug. 3.



Right: A nui nui is seen at The Fink in downtown Napa on Thursday, Aug. 3.

Nick Otto, Register



Nick Otto, Register

The owner of The Fink in downtown Napa, Judd Finkelstein, poses for a photograph at his bar on Thursday, Aug. 3.

or every day.” Southside has options.

For Joel Pfeifle, bar manager at Wilfred’s Lounge in downtown Napa, it is all about “inclusiveness vs. exclusiveness” and creating a welcoming environment for everyone.

“There are so many people and a multitude of reasons not to drink,” he said. “I don’t need to know your reason.”

From the designated driver to the expectant mother and everyone in between, Wilfred’s welcomes all.

However, the lounge with the tagline “island-inspired cocktails and cuisine” almost had a very different concept.

Downtown Napa had been home to many wine tasting rooms when Nat Komes and his father decided to buy the abandoned BurgerFi restaurant with a riverfront view that had been vacant for three years. The original intent was to add

another tasting room at the 967 First St. space, but Komes decided to create “something for the locals,” he recalled during a recent interview.

Komes has always enjoyed a good Tiki bar, from those across the Bay Area to the “enchanted” variety within Disneyland, these themed establishments are “a good place to unwind.” Wilfred’s modern take on the Tiki bar may bend a few of the Tiki “rules,” but Komes and crew have succeeded in adding something different to downtown Napa’s dining scene.

Pfeifle has tended bar for over 20 years, joining the Wilfred’s team before the Tiki bar officially opened in October 2021. Using Hawaiian culture and the Tiki community as a guide, Pfeifle crafted a beverage menu that includes a lot of rum and fruit-juice infused cocktails as well as classics like

Mai Tais and Tahitian punch.

“It’s tropical,” he said simply. “I want you to feel like you are on vacation” outside of wine country, of course.

The non-alcoholic mocktail menu was added to extend that vacation to anyone, even the children who frequent the family friendly eatery.

One Tiki rule – well perhaps more like Pfeifle’s rules – is to be able to light the cocktails and mocktails on fire. Pfeifle’s pyrotechnics are achieved in the cocktails using 151 proof rum and sometimes cinnamon to “provide some sparks when a drink calls for it,” he explained.

For the mocktails, the bar-side fireworks are achieved using sugar cubes soaked in lemon extract, and we “put them into our hollowed-out lime shells from our daily juicing. We can float these over most of our drinks. They will

light for about a minute with a bright flame that we can use as a base for playing with or simply for someone to enjoy,” Pfeifle said.

Aside from a single drink with an alcohol-filled counterpart – a Piña Colada-inspired creation called Ube-Bae-Baby! – Pfeifle approached the mocktail menu with fresh eyes.

“Everything else is original,” he said, axing Ube-Bae-Baby! from the list. “I looked at balancing these as stand-alone drinks. Not looking to overpower.”

What remains?

Toucan Sham is a combination of passionfruit, vanilla, pandan, coconut cream, lime, soda that “tastes like Fruit Loops,” according to Pfeifle.

Banana Dreams is described as creamy without the addition of dairy. It features – you guessed it, banana – but also pineapple, grapefruit, lime and



Nick Otto, Register

Cans of non-alcoholic beer are seen at Southside Café in Napa on Monday, Nov. 13.

fashionola.

The Island Soda contains guava, grapefruit, Jamaican chili spice and soda.

The newest mocktail is called Watermelon Sugar and contains watermelon, ginger ale, spice #1, lemon and mint.

“All of these have fresh juices, and we are making them everyday,” Pfeifle said, adding that Wilfred’s juices three or four cases of pineapples per day for drinks across its menu.

There are plans to expand Wilfred’s mocktail menu in the near future.

Andrew Salazar, bar director at The Fink in downtown Napa, is still working on expanding not just the non-alcoholic beverage menu, but the complete menu. The Fink — located at 530 Main St. at the Napa River Inn — opened in June and according to owner Judd Finkelstein has been pretty busy.

“The community has embraced us,” Finkelstein said, sitting in a cozy, red

booth at his business. “Look around.”

He gestured to the locals flooding into the bar on a recent Wednesday evening, noting that they “get a good mix” of people from the Napa Valley and those just visiting. The proximity to the hotel aids this clientele.

Finkelstein and Salazar — like Robinson and Pfeifle — highlighted the importance of inclusivity in crafting a cocktail menu.

For Salazar, who has close to 20 years of experience, it was important for the NA options at The Fink to stand on their own and “not (be) an afterthought.” Instead, he wants “care and thought put in.”

Salazar noted that sometimes guests request a non-alcoholic drink by ordering an ordinary cocktail and asking that the vodka, rum, etc. be removed. This is problematic for most drinks because all you could be left with is a little lime juice, for example.

Instead, Salazar is working on an NA menu that embraces flavor without having to do any mental gymnastics of what will happen once the alcohol is removed.

For now, The Fink offers the following:

Island Breeze: Pineapple, orange, almond, and ginger.

Stone Sour: House-made cherry shrub and fresh citrus.

Ruby’s Usual: A fizzy ginger-laden long drink with cucumber and mint.

Ruby, for those curious, is Finkelstein’s daughter. Now 13, Ruby used to ask for NA drinks from Salazar when he was working at Napa’s Kitchen Door restaurant. The ginger, cucumber mint creation became her usual.

Finkelstein views his bar as more than just a place to consume alcohol. It can be a place to connect with folks over a drink — any drink — or to collect one’s thoughts alone.

“We want to be as inclusive as possible and show you a good time,” he said. ■

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Jennifer deLeuze photo

Juniper Station is a new “refillery” business and mercantile that sells eco-friendly products and gifts in downtown Napa at 1624 Main St. The business owners are Jessica Benjestorf (left) and Kristina Palmieri (right).

Juniper Station opens Napa ‘refillery’

HILARY WENDEL

The mercantile offers refillable shampoo, lotions, detergent and more

We know our Earth is in peril, and scientists warn that we must make changes now. We have heard the messages, seen the havoc of climate change and want to do better.

Most of us do a good job separating our trash. We bring our shopping bags to the supermarket (most of the time) and drive electric cars (or plan to in the future), but we know we can do more.

We may feel a little guilty. We may also be confused, too busy, or too lazy to take the extra step.

Luckily for Napa Valley, help is here: Juniper Station is a new “refillery” business and mercantile in downtown Napa at 1624 Main St.

Think of a gas station where instead of filling up on gas, the customer fills up on liquids and powders, running the gamut from shampoo and lotions to dishwasher and laundry detergent.

Instead of buying chemical-laden

homecare and personal-care products in single-use plastics, the customer refills a reusable vessel, big or small, with non-toxic, zero-waste alternatives that they pay for by weight, explained business owners Jessica Benjestorf and Kristina Palmieri.

Many plastic bottles end up in landfills. According to the EPA, only 8% of plastics are currently recycled, depending on the type of plastic.

While filling up in the back of the store, the customer can browse the mercantile at the front for eco-friendly gifts, responsible pantry items, children’s organic cotton clothing and local artisanal products. Or simply chat with friends and neighbors, interact with their community, and feel comfort knowing they are making a small change to help the environment, said the owners.

Benjestorf and Palmieri connected through a Napa new moms’ group when they realized they had a joint mission: helping the planet and raising their children in clean environments.

Benjestorf moved to Napa two years ago, pregnant with her first child, from

Colorado, where shopping at a refillery was well integrated into her life. Both moms said they were frustrated having to leave Napa in search of a refillery.

“I kept thinking Sonoma has one, Walnut Creek has one, Napa must be getting one soon,” explained Palmieri, mom to an eight and six-year-old. The two met for the first time over coffee, which turned into a six-hour planning meeting.

They got straight to work, and six months after that first coffee, having invested their savings, they opened the doors to Juniper Station. Though this dedicated refillery is a first for Napa, they are joining a growing retail trend of refillery businesses.

On its own, Juniper Station will not save the planet, but it could help us make those small changes that add up to a big difference, said the owners.

Palmieri admitted that “before having kids, sustainability was not a priority. After kids, I realized we could be doing better; we wanted to set a good example for our kids. ‘Choosing, using, and disposing’ has to be convenient for people! We are all so busy — and it takes a lot of



Jennifer deLeuze photo

Juniper Station offers refillable products and reusable containers. The shop is on Main Street in Napa.



Jennifer deLeuze photo

Juniper Station is a new “refillery” business and mercantile in downtown Napa at 1624 Main St. The business owners are Jessica Benjestorf and Kristina Palmieri.

work. People have good intentions, so let’s make it easier for everybody.”

Juniper Station takes some of the work out of the equation, making it more convenient for consumers to choose, use and dispose, said the owners. It is a learning curve for many, especially the older generation who have ingrained buying habits or have been using a particular brand for years. “We’ve invited all our neighbors to

the soft opening, and people are discovering it in their own way. Many had never heard of a refillery before, but they were so excited,” said Benjestorf. Meanwhile, some customers (mainly of a younger demographic) told the two they have been waiting for this type of business to open in Napa.

In addition to the primary mission of providing non-toxic, zero-waste solutions for consumers, Juniper Station is

“It’s going back a little to how your grandparents used to shop at a general store, taking away the plastics, but modernized and convenient...”

Jessica Benjestorf, owner

also a place to run into neighbors and build community, said the owners.

“It’s going back a little to how your grandparents used to shop at a general store, taking away the plastics, but modernized and convenient. We are also working on a local delivery system and plans for a Farmers Market booth to make it even easier to reach consumers,” said Benjestorf.

“I had been to refill stores before that felt like a chore, just running another errand; we want this one to be more enjoyable for the whole family; that’s why we came up with the concept of combining a refillery with a really great boutique. Something

we would want to go to ourselves,” said Palmieri.

The two moms are compatible business partners despite having only met recently. They explain that they don’t have a division of labor, “though I know that is good business — we just talk and volunteer to take on tasks and communicate when we need help, and that works well,” said Palmieri.

“We both want to be in the store, greeting people, and we could have done this on our own, but it’s more fun to collaborate — creating community in downtown is the whole idea of the store,” added Benjestorf. Plans include “demo days” with vendors, small educational seminars, and family-friendly collaborations with local businesses.

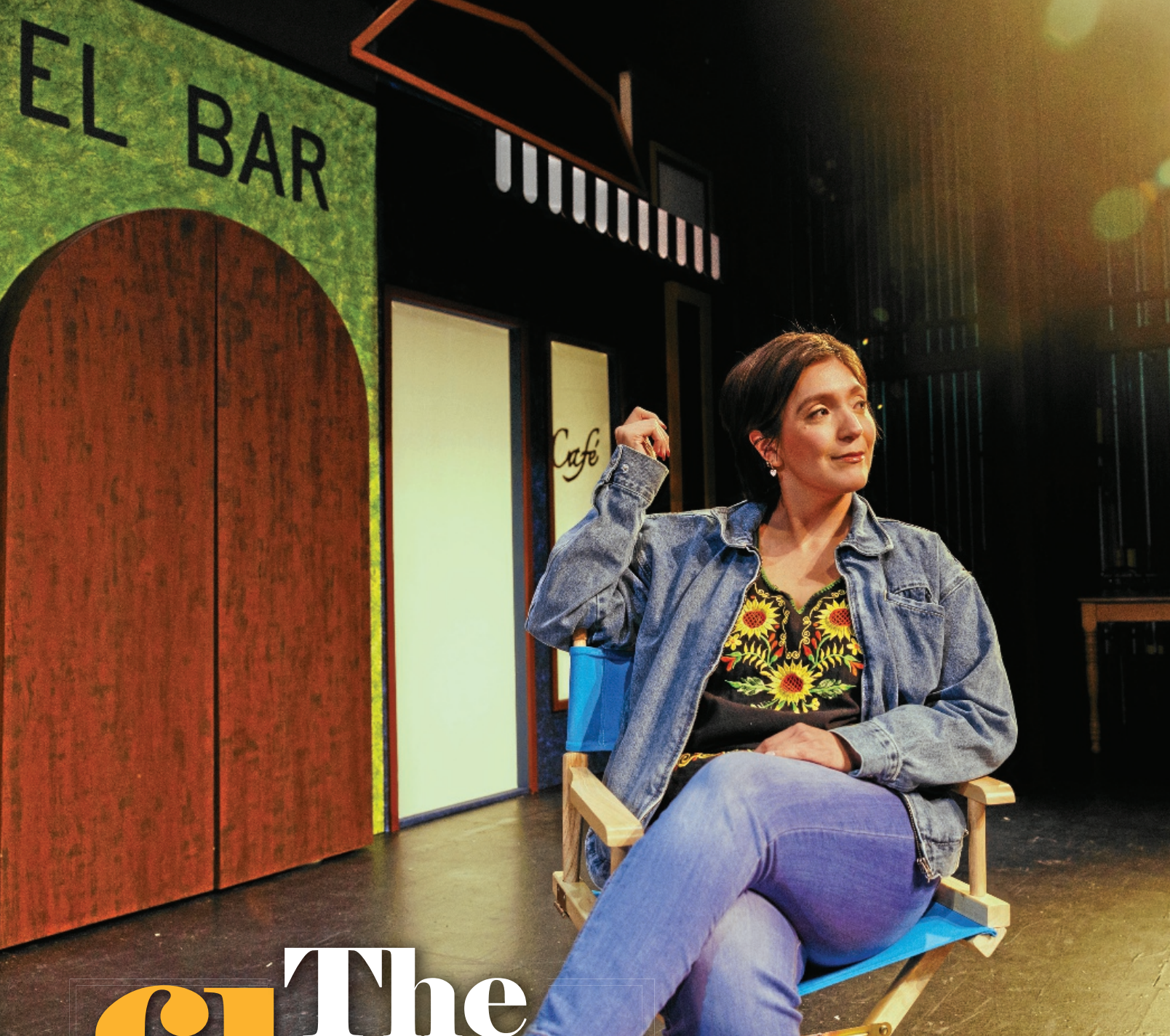
“Zero-waste has to be a family affair — the whole family has to commit,” said Benjestorf. They also encourage anyone eco-curious to come in, ask questions, and try some samples using the “leave a jar, take a jar” basket.

“We like the location, five blocks north of First. We hope to have hit that sweet spot, getting some foot traffic from First Street but still attracting locals who want to avoid the crowds. It helps that we also have parking in the back. This part of downtown (north of First) is really picking up,” explained Palmieri.

Juniper Station (originally home to a bus station and later a hair salon) aims to “move the needle on climate change,” according to its website.

“I am a big believer that getting a lot of people to do a little bit is much better than just Jess and myself doing sustainability perfectly. If we can even get 10% of Napa to choose refills, that’s big,” Palmieri concluded. ■

Info: 1624 Main St., juniper-stationnapa.com



The **flow** OF THE **words**

Getting to know Napa's poet laureate

KATIE DeBENEDETTI

Aisha Rivera was named Napa County's 2023 to 2025 poet laureate in May, tasked with being an "ambassador for poetry" throughout the county.

The poet laureate's job, an honorary position appointed by the Board of Supervisors, is "to promote citizens' awareness of poetry, including spoken word, as well as heighten their appreciation of the art form," according to Napa County's website.

Rivera grew up in Napa, graduating from New Technology High School in 2013 before attending Napa Valley College and



Napa County poet laureate Aisha Rivera poses for a photograph on Nov. 28.

Nick Otto, Register

later earning degrees in psychology and theater arts at California State University Fullerton. After graduating in 2018, Rivera, who uses they/them pronouns, returned to Napa, where they work as a production assistant at Robert Mondavi Winery. Rivera is also an artist, actor and member of the Napa Valley Arts Council.

In the first six months of their term, the poet, artist and activist has begun to get comfortable in the role, hosting monthly open mic nights at Napa Bookmine on Second Street in Napa, performing at the city of Napa's Dia de los Muertos celebration, and sharing poetry across social media. Rivera spoke to the Register about the role of poet laureate, their love of words, and their first six months on the job.

If you would like to read more of Rivera's work or find updates about Napa poetry events, visit their website: aishaarivera.com.

How were you introduced to writing, and how has it been a presence in your life?

Some of my fondest memories growing up were when my mom would take me to the Napa library. I would have a little wagon, and I would always really max out the amount of books I could get. And then we would go home, and I would read it all by the time I had to return them, so we would go back, and I would max out again.

I just read so much, so I started writing short stories. It wasn't until like late middle school that I got more into writing poetry. And I don't know if there was really a moment I was like, "Oh, I'm good at this." I think my cousin and I would share poems with each other, and they said "I'm really feeling something through what you're writing" and then I think, as I got less shy, I just realized people like my work. So I started just having more confidence in myself and being like, I'm getting good, how can I keep doing this?

I started to post my writing online on Tumblr back in the day. That's where I started finding a community of other people who were writing and writing poetry. It really started through there.

What inspired you to apply for the poet laureate role?

I had been writing and performing poetry here in Napa for a while. I did Day of the Dead and a couple of other things. And then the opportunity came up through the Arts Council. I'm on the board of the Arts Council and one of my friends who also works for Arts Council told me the position was going to be available and urged me to apply.

We have a big Latino community here, and I write a lot about that and my experiences, and I thought that this could be a good opportunity to just kind of connect with that community.

Where do you draw inspiration and themes for your work?

I write a lot about my identity and growing up Latino, growing up Mexican or Mexican American. My parents are immigrants, and I write about that experience as well. Also growing up queer and growing up a queer Latino is something I write about. All of those experiences and

identities kind of converge into poems.

And I also just use it as a place to express my pain. Sometimes I just get the idea of something like an emotion or an experience I have been through and the only way I can really put it out there is through poem.

During the first six months of your term, what have been the best parts of being Napa's poet laureate?

I get really excited when I think about the sense of community that I'm building, and also the fact that people are feeling like they can write poetry. I've talked to so many people throughout my six months who say, "I didn't think I liked poetry until I found this" or "I didn't think I could write poetry, but I'm going to try." And then they write something amazing; they write something profound. And for me, that has been the most amazing part of this

“I write a lot about my identity and growing up Latino, growing up Mexican or Mexican American.”

Aisha Rivera,
poet laureate

job. The part I'm most grateful for is seeing people become creative or feeling like they have the space to be creative and bring their full selves into a room.

And seeing them inspire each other as well. At an open mic night, someone will come up and then someone else will be like, "Wow, that makes me want to write something or that makes me feel something I haven't felt before." That, for me, is the most important thing about this. I started writing poetry because I read poetry that made me feel something. To see other people feeling empowered to do that is the best part.

Do you have any goals for the remainder of your term?

I really do want to do workshops. I haven't really taught before and so for me, I think I'm a little intimidated, but I know people want them, so I'm going to step out of my comfort zone and do that. It's definitely something I have less experience with. Trying to teach someone how to write a poem feels a little different, but I'm trying to work my way into doing that.

Who are your favorite poets to read?

Shel Silverstein, I still read. I think he has some great stuff that — no matter what age you are — you can go back to. To see the world through that lens is always really interesting. All of the classics, Emily Dickinson, Mary Oliver is not a classic but Mary Oliver. And then more contemporary, I really love Rudy Francisco, watching him perform poetry just moves me in a different way. ■



Nick Otto, Register

Guests are seen sitting outside at Arch & Tower: Robert Mondavi Tasting Room in downtown Napa.

Arch & Tower reimagines Mondavi Winery

KATIE DeBENEDETTI

Downtown Napa's new tasting room, Arch & Tower, brings one of the oldest wineries in Napa to the city center. While Robert Mondavi Winery undergoes a multi-year remodel, the brand has opened a new hospitality center for tastings and events.

Located in one of Napa's oldest historic properties, the Borreo Building, the Arch & Tower tasting room name is an homage to the Highway 29 winery's famed shape, and label.

According to Director of Hospitality Philip Hansell, the space felt

like a perfect fit for the winery's foray into downtown Napa, fusing the longtime history of the town and the winery on the bank of the Napa River.

Located on the corner of Third Street and Soscol Avenue, the tasting room completes a triangle of sorts of the Mondavi family's influence in the downtown and Oxbow districts: between the Culinary Institute of America's Copia campus, The Oxbow School, and now Arch & Tower.

"This is a town that Robert Mondavi helped to build, ... he cared

about hospitality, the arts, the culinary aspect," Hansell said. He explained that bringing Mondavi's wines into the city joins together three big tenants of the family's legacy.

Arch & Tower celebrated its grand opening in September, officially inviting the public to visit the venue Thursday through Sunday. Inside the Borreo Building, guests are invited to take part in four distinct experience-based tastings: the Legend Lunch, Napa Exploration, Taste of To Kalon, and Golden Hour.



Nick Otto photos, Register

Server Marlon Obando walks through the outdoor seating area at Arch & Tower: Robert Mondavi Tasting Room in downtown Napa.



A meeting room at Arch & Tower: Robert Mondavi Tasting Room.

The Legend Lunch, served at communal tables alongside a view of the Napa River on Arch & Tower's expansive back patio, is a three-course seated meal, with a menu prepared by the winery's executive chef, Jeff Mosher, and deliciously paired with their Estates Collection wines.

The food is "a modern expression of 1960s classics," drawing inspiration from the dishes Mondavi enjoyed during the winery's first years.

Mosher worked with James Beard Award winning chef Chris Shepard to develop the lunch and all of the menus at Arch & Tower.

"We wanted to create experiences that are unabashedly Napa, driven by fresh and local ingredients, and inspired by the wines, Robert Mondavi's Italian heritage, and the winery's founding era," Mosher said.

Hansell said that the winery places priority on locally sourced ingredients to create dishes that complement the Mondavi wines.



Nick Otto photos, Register

The upstairs tasting room and bar at Arch & Tower: Robert Mondavi Tasting Room in downtown Napa are seen reflected in a mirror.

“We always want to lead with wine,” he said.

On the fully redesigned second floor of the Borreo Building, the Taste of To Kalon also offers a paired food and wine menu, but Hansell describes the experience as more of an “exploration” than a meal.

“When you do this experience, you get to enjoy three different expressions of the To Kalon (Cabernet) paired with the food. Basically, we’re trying to share with folks the synergy between wine and food,” Hansell said.

The menu will be changing regularly, but currently, the 75- to 90-minute experience includes the 2017, 2018 and 2019 To Kalon Cabernets, paired with a shrimp louie lettuce wrap, Monte Cristo sandwich and Spinach and Ricotta Malfatti.

The menu comes out family style, which Hansell says is an ode to the way Mondavi used to entertain his personal guests back in the day. Hansell said this style of service is different than a usual coursed tasting menu, and offers visitors the opportunity to



Robert Mondavi’s desk is on display at Arch & Tower: Robert Mondavi Tasting Room in downtown Napa.

play more with the flavors.

“This is the fun house,” he said. “You can try bites of the Monte Cristo with each of the expressions of the To Kalon, and really see how they interact.”



PHOTOS: For more images of the newly opened Arch & Tower tasting room in downtown Napa, point your smartphone at the QR code and click the link. [NEWSVU](#)



Nick Otto photos, Register

Arch & Tower: Robert Mondavi Tasting Room in downtown Napa.

Some of the dishes themselves are also homages to Napa’s history. Hansell said Mosher’s take on the malfatti is a “Robert Mondavi twist” on a longtime Napa staple.

The story has many variations, but malfatti, Italian for “mistake,” is said to have been created by The Depot Restaurant owner Theresa Tamburelli when she ran out of flour making ravioli. She had plenty of ravioli filling though, and thus the malfatti was born. You can still get the original — at least in Napa — malfatti at the Food Mill in Napa, but Arch & Tower’s has a modern twist, adding ricotta and braised short rib. The version pairs perfectly with the 2019 Cabernet (in my opinion).

The other two experiences, Napa Exploration and Golden Hour, also have the option of a la carte menu items, from truffle fries to red wine braised beef croquettes.

Napa Exploration is a traditional tasting of the Estates Collection wines, while Golden Hour is a walk-in only evening special, serving wine by the glass on the building’s sun-soaked back patio.



A sitting area at Arch & Tower: Robert Mondavi Tasting Room in downtown Napa.

The gorgeous two-story space also includes a library, walls lined with vintage To Kalon, Estate and Napa Valley Tier wines, which guests can wander through as they enjoy champagne upon arrival.

For a limited number of guests and wine club members, an in-depth guided tasting through the private To Kalon Collection room upstairs

will also be available, with “offerings from Schrader Cellars, Double Diamond, To Kalon Vineyard Company and Robert Mondavi Winery,” according to Arch & Tower.

As of now, there’s been no decision about whether the tasting space will remain after the Highway 29 renovation is complete, but that likely won’t be until at least 2026. ■

A ‘bold’ move

JENNIFER HUFFMAN

Backen backs café, retail collective in St. Helena

Ann Backen said she’s always had a “deep interest and unwavering passion” for the intersection of health, wellness and design.

This passion led her into the business world, where these interests, once pursued separately, have now merged into a singular pursuit: NO|MA House Café & Collective.

Located at 1429 Main St. in St. Helena, NO|MA (short for North Main) is a café and retail collective that “embraces and celebrates health, community and design,” said Backen.

“We seek to bring people together to eat, talk, work, learn and increase well-being in a beautifully designed and comfortable space,” she said.

In addition to NO|MA, Backen and her husband, architect Howard Backen, are known as the co-founders of Backen & Backen architecture firm.

1. What was your childhood ambition?

My mom would tell you that I had a passion for interior design from a young age. I found joy in rearranging furniture in our home frequently. Instead of formally labeling myself as an interior designer, I prefer to think of myself as someone who enjoys crafting spaces that evoke emotions and feelings.

2. What was your first job?

A Jewish bakery called Lyndell’s outside New York City. It’s in a bedroom community called Metuchen AKA “the brainy borough.”

3. What job would you like to try/not try?

Try: horse trainer. Not try: coder.

4. How did you get into this business?

The creation of NO|MA House Café & Collective was no random occurrence. Prior to this venture, I held the role of owner and operator for our former brand, Archetype. I worked closely with the operations team, actively contributing to the rebranding process, which transitioned us from French Blue to Archetype. This transformation involved refining our menu to include plant-based options, advocating for the use of grass-fed and



Katie Newburn

Ann Backen, NO|MA House Café & Collective

finished beef, and sourcing sustainable seafood.

I played a pivotal role in shaping our marketing strategies and educating both customers and staff and my deep involvement provided me with an intimate understanding of what worked and what didn’t within the space.

This acquired knowledge became an invaluable asset when we embarked on the ambitious journey of renovating and redesigning our establishment. Armed with a clear vision, I laid the foundation for the master plan and introduced the innovative concept of NO|MA House. It was a bold move; one I was resolute in pursuing.

I have worked in the design world for the last 10 years; adding a retail and a curated furniture collection at NO|MA House fit like hand to glove and is now the tip of the spear for our architectural firm.

On the culinary front, my journey commenced at the tender age of 14 when I first ventured into the realm of restaurants. What initially began as a means to earn a livelihood soon evolved into a lifelong passion. My connection to food as a form of medicine has been ingrained in me for as long as memory serves.

My family had a bar/restaurant outside of Island Beach State Park in New Jersey.

I remember as a young girl feeling the energy and positive vibe of a restaurant full of happy families enjoying their summers at the beach. Creating the hybrid space of part retail for home and garden with a café embedded within the space is the result of a lifelong pursuit of health, good design, and connectivity within one’s community.

5. What is the biggest challenge your business has faced?

Retail (brick and mortar buildings) have been significantly challenged by internet shopping; however, many people still prefer coming in and working with a human, feeling the product and sitting on the furniture. For the food industry, the mass exodus of career restaurant employees left a gaping hole for staffing. We turned to an “Elevated QSR” (quick service restaurant) model to keep costs down and mitigate the need for waitstaff.

6. Who do you most admire in the business world?

My uncle Ronald, an architect and bridge builder in New York City and Brazil. He was and is my hero. Building up in heaven these days.

7. What’s one thing Napa could do to help local business?

A train service to downtown St. Helena would be nice. I’m a dreamer, but as a child, I lived 25 minutes to Manhattan on Amtrak, and it was terrific!

8. If you could change one thing about your business/industry, what would it be?

More opportunities and acknowledgment for women.

9. What’s your favorite charity or nonprofit?

I don’t have a single favorite charity or nonprofit, because there are so many incredible organizations out there doing vital work. I do, however, have a deep appreciation for and tend to support small charities that are actively involved in making a direct, hands-on impact in people’s lives.

10. What’s something people might be surprised to know about you?

I rode Ducatis in the 1990s; horses now!■

NO|MA House Café & Collective is located at 1429 Main St. in St. Helena, nomahousecafeandcollective.com

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Pedestrians walk past the “I love Calistoga” sign in downtown Calistoga on Saturday, Jan. 27.

Nick Otto, Register

Choose your own ADVENTURE

DAN EVANS

Exploring Calistoga

Napa County’s most Upvalley of Upvalley towns, Calistoga, is a crossroads of a place. It sits nearly 30 miles north of downtown Napa, but many residents feel more affinity for Santa Rosa — at least partly because the Sonoma

County city is half as far away.

It boasts high-end spas, dining options and \$1,000 hotel rooms, but prides itself on its rural character and farmworking roots. Demographically, nearly half of the population identifies as having Latino heritage, compared to a bit more than a third for Napa County as a whole. It has a rich history, fascinating culture and can feel



The restaurant Lovina in Calistoga is seen on Wednesday, Jan. 24.

Nick Otto, Register



The indoor mineral pool of Dr. Wilkinson's Backyard Resort in Calistoga.



A classic car sits in front of the Dr. Wilkinson's Backyard Resort & Mineral Springs in Calistoga on Saturday, Jan. 27.

Nick Otto, Register

like a serious journey for visitors and anyone living south of Oakville.

With this in mind, the food-and-fun mavens at Inside Napa Valley and the Napa Valley Register have constructed two parallel, day-long, adventures in Calistoga — one for those preferring a more laid-back experience, and one for those seeking a more action-filled undertaking. We've noted kid-friendly activities whenever relevant, and, though we've aimed to have the items on the list be in the mid-range in price, we've snuck in a few caviar-level ideas as well.

Of course, feel free to mix-and-match! But whatever you do, take the Silverado Trail when coming north. It's just prettier.

LAID-BACK

If your vacation is heavy on the words “rest” and “relaxation,” Calistoga more than has you covered. Even better, 99% of anything you might want is along the city's main thoroughfare, making everything very walkable or a (very) short drive. In fact, perhaps the most laid-back, varied — and likely cost-effective — way to spend your day is to simply window shop your way down Lincoln Avenue.

MORNING

What better way to ease into a languid day than with a lovely, big breakfast. That way you can have a quick nap before the afternoon activities. Here's a few favorites:

Lovina Calistoga

1107 Cedar St., Calistoga — (707) 942-6500 — <https://www.lovinacalistoga.com/>

Built inside a historic home, Lovina's offerings are locally sourced — with many of the veggies coming from the owner's garden. It's mainly a dinner place, but the brunch (10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays) are among the county's best. The woman-owned establishment also makes it clear tips are not expected, as 30% of sales are distributed among the staff. (Entrees \$26-\$35)

Evangeline

226 Washington St., Calistoga — (707) 341-3131 — <https://www.evangelinenapa.com/>

Though perhaps also more thought of as a dinner spot, this fun French and Creole-themed restaurant has a killer brunch menu, featuring oysters and Southern favorites like fried chicken and waffles, biscuits and gravy, and shrimp and grits. (Entrees \$15-\$29)

AFTERNOON

After being well-fed and watered, treat yourself to a massage, an art class, take in nature or maybe just a good book. Here's where to find those gems:

Dr. Wilkinson's Backyard Resort & Mineral Springs

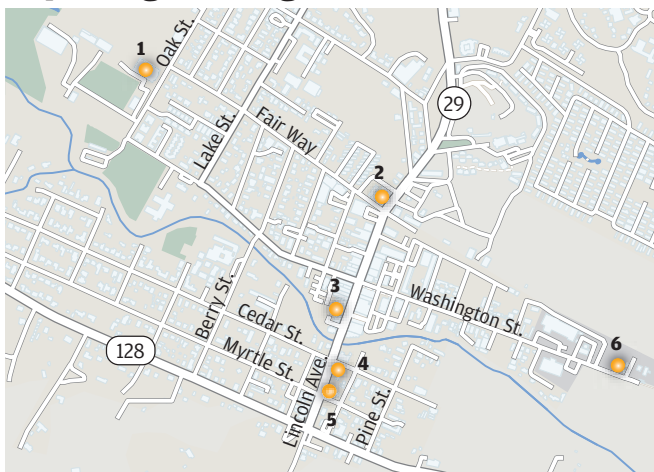
1507 Lincoln Ave., Calistoga — (707)



Outdoor tables are set at Lovina in Calistoga on Wednesday, Jan. 24.

Nick Otto, Register

Exploring Calistoga: Laid back sites



- 1 Calistoga Arts Center
- 2 Dr. Wilkinson's Backyard Resort & Mineral Springs
- 3 CAMi Vineyard Art + Wine

- 4 Lovina Calistoga
- 5 Calistoga Library
- 6 Evangeline

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942-4102—<https://drwilkinson.com/>

The hotel and spa — with its postcard perfect midcentury vibe — boasts some of the best-known mud and mineral baths not only in Calistoga, but perhaps in all of Northern California. In addition, the facility offers a full range of spa services — it just added facials to its lineup — and a wide variety of food, wine, and non-alcoholic drink options. There are discounts available for bookings Sunday through Thursday. (Spa/Baths: \$199-\$349; Entrees: \$12-\$20)

Calistoga Arts Center

1435 N. Oak St., Calistoga—(707) 942-2278—[https://](https://calistogaartcenter.org/)

calistogaartcenter.org/

Located on the Napa County Fairgrounds — which the city of Calistoga recently agreed to purchase from Napa County — the Calistoga Art Center has an impressive variety of classes available for the general public, including ones focused on painting, stained glass and ceramics. Perhaps its most famous event, the Souper Bowl, is a competition-slash-fundraiser featuring the creativity of the soup recipes — and the containers that hold them. It is scheduled for April 20 this year. Costs vary depending on type and length, but start at around \$30 for single classes.



Nick Otto, Register

A life size chess board is seen at the restaurant House of Better at Dr. Wilkinson's Backyard Resort & Mineral Springs in Calistoga on Saturday, Jan. 27.



Nick Otto, Register

Program Director Anna Johansson leads children in the Afterschool Creative Club at the Calistoga Art Center on Tuesday, Jan. 23.



Nick Otto, Register

Visitors walk through the Petrified Forest in Calistoga on Saturday, Jan. 27.

Calistoga Library

1108 Myrtle St., Calistoga—(707) 942-4833—<https://www.countyofnapa.org/612/Calistoga-Library>

Though it might feel like merely stepping outside in Calistoga — or Napa County generally — will cost you a twenty-spot, that’s not entirely the case. Grab a book, pull up a chair and sink into the bliss of the written word in the city’s well-appointed temple of reading. In addition, all Napa County libraries participate in the “Library of Things” program, meaning items from magnifying glasses to power tools to microscopes are available to check out.

The Petrified Forest

4100 Petrified Forest Rd., Calistoga—(707) 942-6667—<https://www.petrifiedforest.org/>



Nick Otto, Register

Visitors inspect a petrified tree while walking through the Petrified Forest in Calistoga on Saturday, Jan. 27.

Sitting a few miles outside of town — and 3.4 million years back in time — The Petrified Forest offers easy half-mile hikes and self-guided tours. The peaceful quietude

of the surroundings belies its violent birth, when prehistoric Redwoods were torn from their roots following the explosion of the now-extinct Mt. St. Helena volcano. The

ash buried the trees, keeping out the bacteria that would have otherwise decomposed the fallen giants, leaving the three-dimensional fossils now on display. (Open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Thursday to Monday; \$12 adults, \$6 children.)

EVENING

Now that you’re fully relaxed, it’s high time to take in a little culture. Fortunately, there’s no need to go far to appreciate the fine arts — and sip on a bit of the elixir that made Napa Valley famous at the same time. Here’s an idea of where to go:

CAMi Vineyard Art + Wine

1333B Lincoln Ave., Calistoga—(707) 709-6889

Founded in 2013, the downtown Calistoga facility showcases owner Laurie Shelton’s



Nick Otto, Register

The space at CAMi Vineyards ART + WINE in Calistoga is on Saturday, Jan. 27.

twin passions: winemaking and contemporary art. The wine, of course, comes from the nearby estate vineyard, part of the Calistoga AVA, but the art comes from a variety of sources and is rotated on a regular basis. In addition, the facility has a calendar of events that often involve interviews of artists or presentations. Open Friday through Sunday

only. (Tastings: \$30-\$50).

ACTIVE

Though a healthy majority of visitors to Calistoga are there to be pampered, the city and its environs have a wide range of things to do that will keep your feet – and hips – moving from dawn to late night.



Nick Otto, Register

Visitors take in Old Faithful Geysir of California in Calistoga on Saturday, Jan. 27.

MORNING

If you're normally first up on vacations, planning the day while your sleepy companions (or partner) continues to snooze, Calistoga has your number.

Calistoga Roastery

1426 Lincoln Ave., Calistoga—(707) 942-5757—<https://calistogaroastery.com/>

Open daily at 6:30 a.m., this mainstay is part coffee shop, part community meeting space. The coffee is excellent, the service friendly, and the wide tables are perfect for planning the rest of the day. There are free refills on coffee, a bit

of a rarity these days, and a wide selection of breakfast sandwiches and baked goods to get your day going. It's a fun, casual place, and kids of most ages should be just fine here... though we don't recommend giving any 9-year-olds a latte.

Café Saraformia

1413 Lincoln Ave., Calistoga—(707) 942-0555—<https://cafesaraformia.com/>

This might look like a standard-issue diner, but saying so is akin to fighting words among the locals. It has all of your favorites, indeed, but of such high quality to entice you to return

Exploring Calistoga: Active sites



- 1 Old Faithful Geysir of California
- 2 Calistoga Roastery
- 3 Café Saraformia

- 4 Susie's Bar
- 5 Calistoga Bikeshop
- 6 Calistoga Inn Restaurant & Brewery

- 7 Buster's Original Southern BBQ
- 8 Bothe-Napa Valley State Park

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Nick Otto, Register

Visitors are seen reflected in a mirror on the grounds of the Old Faithful Geysers of California in Calistoga on Saturday, Jan. 27.



Nick Otto, Register

A visitor plays with a goat on the grounds of the Old Faithful Geysers of California in Calistoga on Saturday, Jan. 27.



Nick Otto, Register

A pedestrian walks past Susie's bar in Calistoga on Friday, Jan. 19.

again and again – no matter the commute. The menu claims it has the best Huevos Rancheros in Napa Valley. Believe it. (Breakfast/Lunch: \$12-\$18)

AFTERNOON

Now fully fueled, it's time to get out there! Your challenge will be figuring out what you want to do most. There are dozens of trails to hike, roads to bicycle and nature to take in. Here's a few places to start your adventure:

Bothe-Napa Valley State Park

3801 St. Helena Hwy, Calistoga—(707) 942-4575—https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=477

For outdoor enthusiasts, Bothe-Napa is a must-see. The large – 1,991-acre – park has a variety of hiking trails, from the gentle to the more challenging. If you're looking to camp, or try out the cabins or yurts available for rent, it's best to make a reservation via Reserve California (<https://www.reservecalifornia.com/>). Rates vary on time of year, but campsites start at \$43/night, yurts at \$65/night and cabins at \$125/night.

Calistoga Bikeshop

1318 Lincoln Ave., Calistoga—(707) 942-9687—<https://www.calistogabikeshop.com/>

Many people come to the Upvalley for wine tastings, but how many people do it via bicycle? If two-wheeling it strikes your fancy, the Calistoga Bikeshop will rent you the bike, make the winery reservations and pick up your purchases so you don't have to balance your precious cargo while cycling on Highway 29. It doesn't include the cost of the tastings themselves, though, which usually run about \$50 per person. (\$84.99 for bike, helmet, itinerary planning and reservations. Add another \$50 for an electric-assist bike.)

Old Faithful Geysers of California

1299 Tubbs Ln., Calistoga—(707) 942-6463—<http://www.oldfaithfulgeysers.com/>

Though perhaps not quite as famed as the geysers of the same name in Yellowstone National Park, Calistoga's version is still pretty impressive. The grounds also boast numerous farm animals, an expansive picnic area, a bocce court and a mini geology museum, making it a fun place for the younger crowd as well. It's also one of the lower-priced things to do in the area. (Adults \$15; Children 12 and under \$9).

EVENING

With all of that running around, you're bound to have gotten a bit hungry and thirsty. Though many places in town close relatively early – as befitting a fairly small town – you do have a few options. Here's a few:

Buster's Original Southern BBQ

1207 Foothill Blvd., Calistoga—(707) 942-5605—<https://www.bustersouthernbbq.com/>

If you're in the mood for excellent BBQ at a good price in a no-nonsense setting, look no farther than Busters, on Highway 128 (Foothill Boulevard) just



Nick Otto, Register

A look inside Susie's bar in Calistoga on Friday, Jan. 19.

a block north of Lincoln Avenue. You order at the window, grab your food and take a seat in the adjacent indoor dining room or at the counter outside. Beware of a couple things. First, the spicy BBQ sauce truly has a kick (try a mix of the mild and hot first). And second, the bathroom is airplane-lavatory small. Open daily 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. (Sandwiches: \$13.50; Plates: \$17-\$42)

Susie's Bar

1365 Lincoln Ave., Calistoga—(707) 942-6710—<https://www.instagram.com/susiescalistoga>

One of the oldest bars in the Napa Valley, Susie's is a fun — and occasionally raucous — place to sip on an adult beverage. If you

come in via the Lincoln Avenue side, you may be momentarily confused by the long hallway. Just keep going. You'll find the bar soon enough. The patrons are friendly, the drinks cheap and strong and the pool tables often have a game going. Susie's opens at 2 p.m. and stays that way until 2 a.m. Happy hour specials include \$3 well drinks and \$6 wines, perhaps one of the best deals in the county. That runs from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. daily.

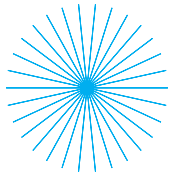
Calistoga Inn Restaurant & Brewery

1250 Lincoln Ave., Calistoga—(707) 942-4101—<https://www.calistogainn.com/restaurant>

Located near the western end of Lincoln Avenue, the Calistoga Inn has a beautiful indoor-outdoor seating area, giving patrons the option of chatting with whosoever at their elbow at the bar or just people watching the folks making their way downtown. The pub area is one of the hottest places in town for locals, with an excellent selection of draft beers, wines and cocktails. Open until 9:30 p.m. on weekends; 9 p.m. on weekdays. (Entrees \$22-\$65) ■



VIEW: For more from Calistoga, point your smartphone at the QR code and click the link.



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Owners and operators of Mary's Pizza Shack Vince Albano and Mayra Martinez-Cornejo stand in front of the re-opened restaurant on Friday, Nov. 17.

Nick Otto photos, Register



A re-dough

Mary's Pizza Shack reopens after pandemic-related closure

SARAH DOWLING

The smell of pepperoni and peppers baking. The metallic swinging sound of oven doors opening and closing. Guests smiling while waiting for their takeout orders.

Occasional bursts of laughter from the crew. This was the backdrop during a recent visit to Napa's Mary's Pizza Shack.

In early 2023, the Jefferson Street restaurant stood silent, empty after a decision to close Napa along with two other Mary's Pizza Shack locations. The Sonoma-based company announced the closures of the Napa, Dixon and Novato locations via its social media channels on Jan. 7, 2023.

"Unfortunately, this was a necessary



The spaghetti and meatballs are seen at Mary's Pizza Shack on Friday, Nov. 17.

action as we continue restructuring our Noni's business amidst the evolving challenges that every locally owned restaurant is tackling," a post on the company's

Facebook page stated. "We announced this summer that our family was embarking on a succession plan that would involve direct owner-operator oversight of each location. While we had hoped that these three locations would be included in this succession plan, the unchanging realities of increased food and labor costs mixed with other compounding issues facing our industry led to this difficult decision."

Vince Albano — grandson to founder Mary Fazio — said the day of the closures was a "difficult day — very sad for the family."

Albano attributed the closures to the coronavirus pandemic, which caused constant pivoting from members of the restaurant industry. From shutting

down entirely to offering curbside pickup and outdoor seating, it was a challenging time for restaurants everywhere. While many Mary's locations were able to bounce back financially from the pandemic, Napa was not one of them.

"There were a lot of unhappy folks when we closed," Albano said. "People were disappointed."

But this wasn't the end of the story, but a beginning.

The move to close Napa's location saddened many in the community, including longtime Mary's employee and Napa resident Mayra Martinez-Cornejo.

Martinez-Cornejo has spent 25 years working for Mary's Pizza Shack, from a 16-year-old cashier to server to general manager and every position in between, working her way up the Mary's ladder at multiple locations across the North Bay. Asking her to rattle off the ingredients of Mary's signature soups and salads, or the best method for making a pizza, is no trouble for Martinez-Cornejo.

"She knows everything about the business," Albano said, noting that three months after Napa's closure, the Fazio family received a call from Martinez-Cornejo. She wanted to know what it would take to reopen the Napa location.

"I didn't feel like Napa needed to be closed," Martinez-Cornejo recalled.

However, ownership of a Mary's restaurant requires that a family member be involved. Albano said to himself "hey, I'm a family member," and worked out an equal partnership with Martinez-Cornejo to own and operate the Napa location full time.

Napa's Mary's was on track to reopen.

"Mayra and I got permission, and we put together a plan," Albano recalled. Luckily, the restaurant — located at 3085 Jefferson St. — was more or less intact. The space had not been occupied since January and the landlords welcomed Mary's back with open arms. With help from Martinez-Cornejo's family to clean up and organize, Napa was poised to rejoin the company, bringing the number of Mary's locations up to 10.

Meanwhile, word had spread in the community once a "reopening soon" sign appeared on Jefferson Street.

A slice of pepperoni pizza and a slice of cheese topped with fresh tomato are seen at Mary's Pizza Shack on Friday, Nov. 17.



Mary's Pizza Shack co-owner and operator Vince Albano prepares pizza dough on Friday, Nov. 17.



“It is up to us to do the job to keep us happy and keep people coming back.”

Vince Albano

Albano remembers people asking him about the sign as he went about town in his Mary’s Pizza Shack shirt, gathering supplies for the restaurant. Napa’s Mary’s officially relaunched in September.

As for staffing, Albano and Martinez-Cornejo estimated about 50% of the site’s former employees returned. This did not surprise the co-owners, who noted that a lot of Mary’s employees stay with the company 20, 30, even 40 years. There are people who started with the business as a teenager and stayed up until their retirement.

Asked what contributes to the lengthy tenure among employees, Martinez-Cornejo said it has to do with the management style. Employees “see that manager, side-by-side with them,” she explained. Whether it be on the line making a pizza, or cleaning the bathroom, managers at Mary’s step in and help.

This is just part of being an owner-operator, Martinez-Cornejo explained.

“We all work together,” said Albano, who served as CEO before the company adjusted its ownership model. “We are working side-by-side with them (employees), and they really appreciate it.”

While pizza is in the company’s name, the Mary’s menu boasts Italian comfort food with the Fazio family’s flare. The recipes belong to Mary’s father, according to the company website, and include pizza, pasta, soups, sandwiches and – surprisingly super popular among catering orders – Mary’s signature salad. The first Mary’s opened in 1959.

Another trademark of the Mary’s menu is that everything is made from scratch. Albano emphasized that customers appreciate that.

“The community was overwhelmingly supportive,” he said, noting Napans have been “beyond grateful” throughout the reopening process.

In turn, Albano and Martinez-Cornejo extended their gratitude to the Napa community.

“It is up to us to do the job to keep us happy and keep people coming back,” Albano said. ■



The fresco pesto breadsticks and Mary’s house salad are seen at Mary’s Pizza Shack on Friday, Nov. 17.

Nick Otto photos, Register

The dining room at Mary’s Pizza Shack is seen on Friday, Nov. 17.



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Interior designer Amelia Robison in her studio.

Emma K. Morris photos



JESSE DUARTE

Diners at Charlie's in St. Helena often remark on the restaurant's homey, inviting atmosphere.

A lot of the credit for that ambience goes to the interior designer Amelia Robison, a St. Helena native who worked closely with restaurateur Elliot Bell.

"We wanted it to feel like you're welcoming someone into your home," Robison said.

Robison's interest in restaurant design "was a product of growing up around here, surrounded by food and wine."

"I loved food from an early age," said Robison, who founded Amelia Sakiko Design. "My parents made really good food and we had amazing friends who had restaurants here."

Among those friends were Udo and Mei Nechutnys of Miramonte, a restaurant that occupied the Charlie's space in the 1980s. Robison also remembers celebrating her 16th birthday in the space when it was Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen.

"A dish can transport you to a place, a memory and a time," Robison said. "I wanted to find a way to support that, so I chose interior design."

Robison studied interior design at California College of the Arts in San Francisco and Oakland.

"A lot of people have a preconceived notion that interior design is decorating," she said. "It is, in some regards, and there are some fabulous designers out there who focus mostly on décor. But California College of the Arts deep-dives you into conceptual thinking. How do you tell a story through a space? How do you relate everything together to create a package that embodies what you're trying to do with a space?"

Robison said her design work is informed by her travels and her love of learning.

"I'm constantly inputting things I see and experience," she said. "I glean details, store them in the Rolodex of my mind, and take them out when I need them."

Robison worked for a design firm in Marin County, but the pandemic prompted her to rethink her career, return to St. Helena and start her own company, Amelia Sakiko Design.

She met Bell through a mutual friend, Nikki Ballere Callnan of NBC Pottery, who was also contributing to Charlie's.

Making Charlie's feel like home



The bar at Charlie's has been remodeled and expanded since the days of Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen.

“Elliot and I absolutely clicked, and I was very excited to have the privilege to design that space,” Robison said.

In the main dining room Bell wanted a bigger bar, and he wanted to reconfigure the space to emphasize the connection to the kitchen.

“It’s fun when a client is willing to make big moves like that — tear down a wall, pop up the ceiling,” Robison said. “Those are daring gestures that can sometimes be financially detrimental. When you peel back a layer, you’re not sure what you’re going to get.”



Amelia Robison’s “inspo wall.”

Robison helped Bell realize his vision of a family-owned and family-friendly restaurant “where people could come any day of the week and celebrate good memories — something that generations can experience.”

The double French doors at the entry were replaced with a more residential-style door meant to evoke the feeling of entering someone’s home. The slatted woods of the

new bar suggest a wine barrel, but not too obviously.

The décor reflects everything Robison loves about the Napa Valley, with “warm textures and materials, leather, but bright and lively at the same time.”

“Definitely modern,” Robison said, “but with a timeless, classic aspect.”

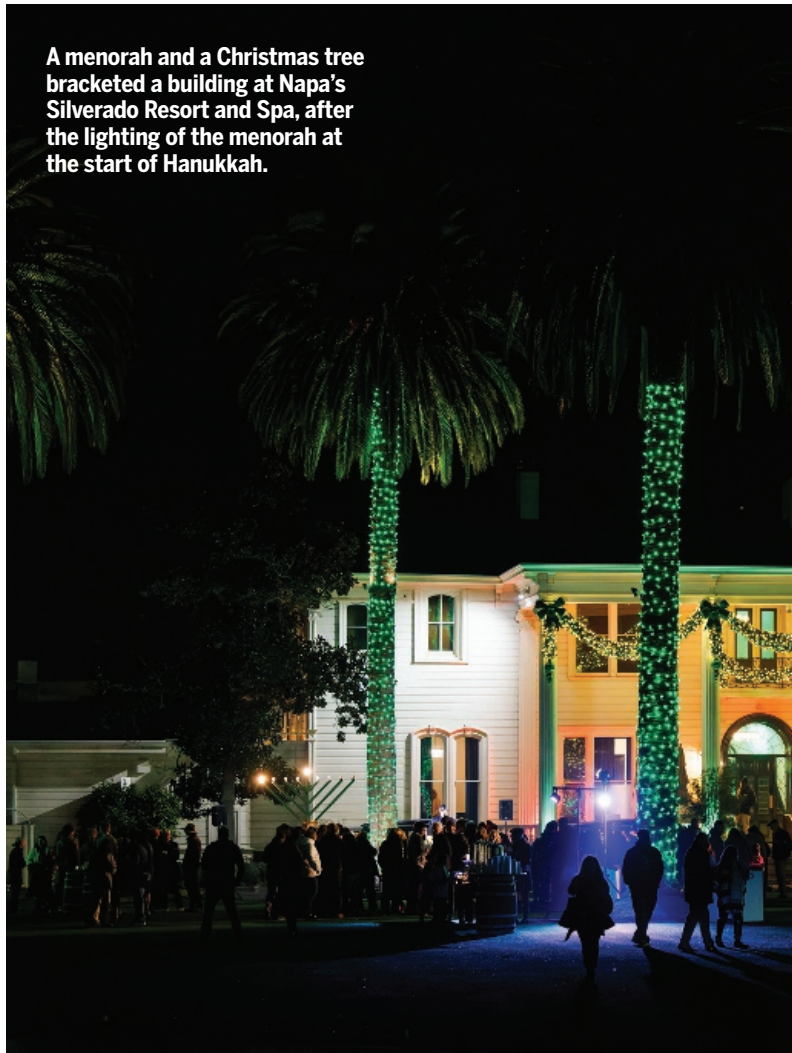
Robison’s website is asakikodesign.com. ■



Amelia Robison drew on this material palette in designing the interior of Charlie's restaurant.

Eye on Napa Valley

Moments captured by Register photographer Nick Otto



A menorah and a Christmas tree bracketed a building at Napa's Silverado Resort and Spa, after the lighting of the menorah at the start of Hanukkah.



▲ Drag queens Amelia Need More, left, and Eva Changing perform during the "Drag Me Down the Chimney" holiday party held at LGBTQ Connection in Napa on Dec. 13.

▶ Tractors, trucks and cars decked in holiday lighting took part in Calistoga's annual Lighted Tractor Parade on downtown Lincoln Avenue.





▲ A bicyclist riding with the Napa County Bicycle Coalition joined the multicolored procession of the Napa Christmas Parade.



◀ A holiday market at American Canyon's Magic of the Season festival included a caricaturist offering to capture visitors in drawings.



▲ Quetzalli Ballet Folklorico out of Vallejo performs during Napa's annual tree lighting ceremony held in Veterans Memorial Park downtown on Wednesday, Nov. 22.



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A chef's career that started with science

JENNIFER HUFFMAN

Executive chef credits culinary instructor for sparking a 'great passion.'

Gustavo Rios explained how he got his start in the restaurant industry – and it started in school.

“When I was young, I took a food science class and it completely shaped my future,” said Rios.

He went on to compete (and win several) national high school cooking competitions and received a partial scholarship to the Culinary Institute of America.

“Since we still could not afford the other half of tuition, I decided to slowly work my way through every position in a kitchen instead,” said Rios. “I feel thankful to have taken that route and learned what I have so far.”

Twenty-five years later, Rios is now the executive chef at Solage, an Auberge Resort, in Calistoga.

1. What was your childhood ambition?

When I was a kid, I wanted to be an architect. I was always so amazed by creating something so beautiful that everyone gets to enjoy. But then I took a food science class and realized that I could do that with food too!

2. What was your first job?

My first job was as a dishwasher at River's Inn in Gloucester Point, Virginia. I was 15 years old.

3. What job would you like to try/not try?

Try: A high school culinary instructor because taking that food science class helped spark one of my greatest passions in life at a very young age.

Not try: Being my wonderful wife.

4. What is the biggest challenge the restaurant industry has faced?

Staffing, housing and pay rates – they all go hand in hand.

5. Who do you most admire in the business world?



Auberge Resorts photo

Gustavo Rios, executive chef at Solage, an Auberge Resort, in Calistoga.

I truly admire Anthony Bourdain. Before his untimely death, he was one of the first who shed light on the true life of a chef. He didn't sugarcoat it, he told the truth, no matter how hard it was to hear. He had a truly honest outlook on not only being a chef, but also life in general.

6. What's one thing Napa could do to help local business?

Rental assistance for empty storefronts and restaurant spaces. The focus should be to fill these empty spaces with startup businesses looking for support and bring life and joy back to those spots that have since been forgotten. There is an incredible amount of talent in this Valley and I think we should do all we can to showcase them all.

7. If you could change one thing about the restaurant industry, what would it be?

I think it should be standard practice that the back-of-the-house team members should receive a small percentage of

the food revenue made during their shift. It would help create a culture of teamwork and the idea of “everyone wins.”

8. What is Solbar at Solage known for?

We make real and simple food at a high level. At Solbar, we let the seasons dictate our menu. Here in Napa Valley, we are extremely privileged with what is available at our doorstep. We cook what we cook because of people like Kory at Napa Wild, Tim at K&J Orchards, Luis at Ocomar, Al at Cooks and the list goes on and on. The relationships we have are special – we get the best of the best. The freshest ingredients, the appropriate technique, the perfect seasoning: that's Solbar.

9. What's your favorite charity or nonprofit?

Our oldest daughter, Sofia, participates in Girls on the Run. It is a national nonprofit whose vision is a world where every girl can know and activate her limitless potential. Sofia has only participated in the program for a few months but it has been an amazing experience for her thus far. We had a Girls on the Run 5K Fun Run on Nov. 13 on Mare Island where we ran with almost 1,000 girls, parents and volunteers. It was an inspiring experience for everyone involved!

10. What is one thing you hope to accomplish in your lifetime that you haven't yet?

I am proud of my story and my life experiences thus far. I have never been one to set specific goals and only focus on those because I felt like I could miss out on the exciting twists and turns that life has to offer. I have an incredible wife, two amazing daughters, a great one-eyed dog and a job I love in a town I love – what more can I hope for? My life thus far has been an incredible ride and I look forward to seeing what the future holds. ■

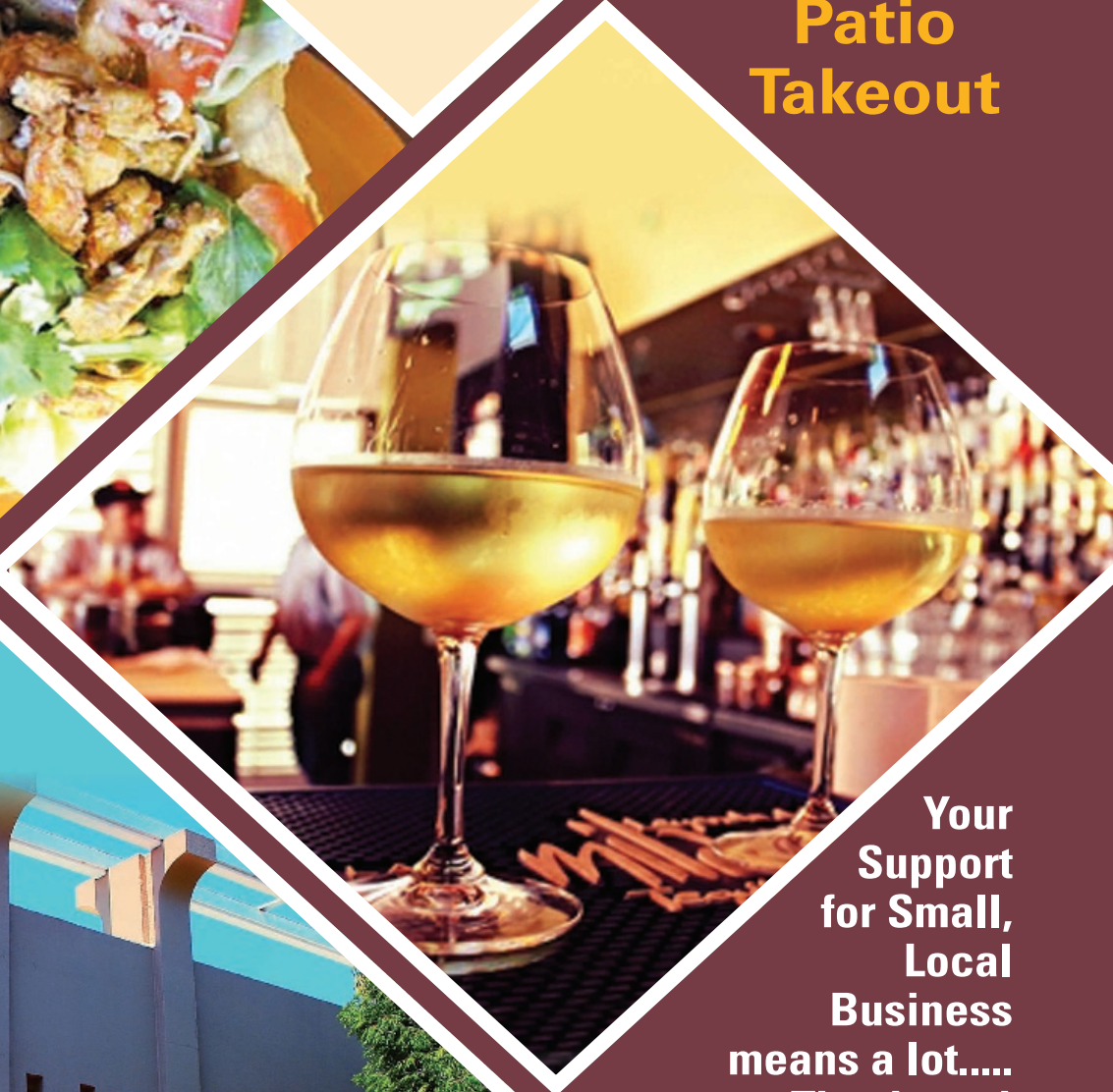
Solage, an Auberge Resort, is located at 755 Silverado Trail in Calistoga. Info: aubegeresorts.com



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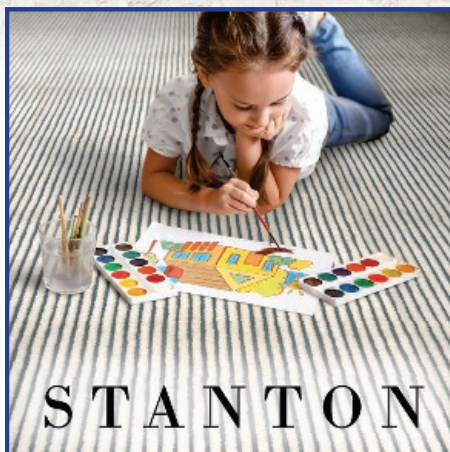
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