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Healdsburg: A happy hamlet for escape

By Fran Miller



Hotel Les Mars Photo courtesy Hotel Les Mars

The farmer frequented feed stores that once surrounded Healdsburg's central, tree-shaded plaza have been replaced with wine tasting rooms and charming restaurants, yet the agricultural essence of this tiny Sonoma County town persists. Located at the crux of three world-class wine growing regions - the Russian River and the Alexander and Dry Creek Valleys - the proliferation of tasting rooms and farm-to-table cuisine is apropos. Added to this vinous and gastronomic scene are quaint boutiques, art galleries, and antique shops that seemingly haven't missed a beat over the past tumultuous year. A vibrancy continues to exist in this happy hamlet, making it an ideal spot in which to seek 24 hours of bucolic refuge.

STAY: Central to the town's appeal is Healdsburg Plaza, flanked by lodging, restaurant, and shopping options. Within steps is the elegant Hotel Les Mars, a Relais & Chateaux hotel featuring 16 comfy rooms

furnished with stately French antiques, stone-mantel gas fireplaces, and hand-carved canopy beds enveloped in Versai linens. Cararra marble bathrooms feature hydrotherapy soaking tubs, Bulgari toiletries, and plush robes. A continental breakfast is included and delivered to your room. From dinner reservations, winery tours, and picnics, the Hotel Les Mars staff has the inside track and will happily help you plan an itinerary. They can also help you surprise your significant other with additional in-room treats, such as a flower arrangement, a plate of cookies, chocolate covered strawberries, or artisan cupcakes from nearby Noble Folk Ice Cream & Pie Bar.

DO: Downtown Healdsburg boasts more than 22 galleries, 50 shops and boutiques, 30 wine tasting rooms, and innumerable eateries, most all continuing to operate safely during these trying times. Yet a trip to this bucolic region is not complete without a proper vineyard wine tasting. A drive down nearby Dry Creek Road offers a plethora of options, and for the lovers of sparkling wines, Amista Vineyards is the way to go. The only sparkling producer within the Dry Creek Valley, Amista, its owner's Mike and Vicky Farrow, and winemaker Ashley Herzberg use the traditional Champagne method in crafting Sparkling Blanc de Blanc, Sparkling Syrah, and Sparkling Grenache, each made from grapes grown on their estate vineyards. They also make estate-grown Chardonnay, Syrah, Grenache and Tres, a GSM blend of Grenache, Syrah and Mourvedre, plus Dry Creek Zinfandel and Rockpile Cabernet Sauvignon made with fruit from their nearby Healdsburg neighbors. Enjoy a tasting on their vast, covered patio that overlooks the vines, or grab a glass and take a 20-minute stroll around the vineyard.

DINE: Plaza-adjacent Dry Creek Kitchen has long been Healdsburg's restaurant 'go-to,' and in spite of increased competition from a plethora of celebrated upstarts, it continues to be the gold standard. Celebrity chef Charlie Palmer's paeon to Sonoma County and its bounty of both food and wine, Dry Creek Kitchen is perhaps best known for its wine list. Pages and pages feature only Sonoma County labels, both the well-known and the more obscure. Management here enjoys close relationships with local producers, affording the restaurant, and its customers, access to brands not easily found. The menu features comfortable American classics, always with a twist; Char broiled filet mignon features duck fat trumpet mushrooms, and a balsamic onion emulsion. King Salmon 'Char Siu' is coated in a light, garlic-sesame crunch. Start with Palmer's signature Lobster Corn Dogs, crispy little bites of goodness, and end with his decadent, also signature Chocolate Peanut Butter Bar. If you're lucky, classic canelé arrives as a last bite. Though the inviting dining room is currently off limits, Dry Creek Kitchen has pivoted perfectly to offer outdoor dining on its expansive garden courtyard lined with warming heat lamps.

For breakfast or lunch, don't miss Costeaux French Bakery, a Healdsburg mainstay since 1923. Known for its handmade breads, irresistible pastries, and weekend Eggs Benedict, this Healdsburg icon is routinely voted in varied polls as 'best Sonoma County bakery.' And fans of the Food Network might be interested in newly opened Quail & Condor from Chef-Owner Melissa Yanc who won \$25,000 as the network's 2019 winner of the Holiday Baking Championship. Yanc, a professionally trained pastry chef, and husband Sean McGaughey, a sous chef at acclaimed SingleThread, serve up homemade breads, croissants, pastries and pies at this artisan bakery.



Amista Winery Photos Dan Miller



Costeaux French Bakery Photos Dan Miller

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