

The New York Times

Napa With the Family (Great Wine, Minimal Whine)

[nytimes.com/2019/07/25/travel/napa-family-vacation.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/25/travel/napa-family-vacation.html)

By Amy Tara Koch July 25, 2019



Historically, vineyard visits rank high on the eye-roll list for children. But California's Napa Valley is trying hard these days to attract families, aiming to entertain visitors of all ages with hiking, biking, camps and non-snooty farm-to-table experiences. Even some vineyards are getting into the game, offering lawn games and grape juice tastings.

According to Linsey Gallagher, president and chief executive for [Visit Napa Valley](#), the effort seems to be working. In a 2018 study, nearly 20 percent of visitors to Napa Valley had children (18 years or under) in their travel party, compared to around 12 percent in 2016.

On a recent trip with my 13-year-old daughter, Brette, we certainly had fun there. I kept the itinerary simple: recreation-spliced days with foodie interludes to keep energy high and complaints low. Wine would be but a detail in an active mom-and-daughter getaway.

Here's some of our highlights worth sharing:

On the Move

We kicked off the trip at [Skyline Wilderness Park](#), hiking through wildflower and chaparral-speckled woodland where clusters of butterflies and hummingbirds made frequent cameos. Then, we zipped over to [Clif Family Winery](#) (of Clif Bar fame), which was of no interest to Brette until I mentioned their food truck. Over chive-dusted bruschetta and arancini balls, I had three sips (I was driving) of a perky Viognier that elevated the carbs to heavenly heights.

If hiking brings your family together, other options include the [Bothe-Napa Valley State Park](#), where you can walk through towering redwoods and then cool off in the park's swimming pool, and the [Robert Louis Stevenson State Park](#), where the evergreen forests lead to the summit of Mt. Saint Helena.

Spa Afternoon

Calistoga is famous for geothermal hot springs and I was thrilled when the no-frills [Dr. Wilkinson Hot Springs Resort](#) greenlit Brette to join me for a treatment. We showered in summer-camp like stalls, hopped into concrete mud tubs (secret ingredient: nutrient-rich volcanic ash) and finished with a 30-minute massage. (Minimum age for mud treatments, which start at \$105, is 13 years old.)

Wine Country by Bike

One morning, Dave Brazell of [Adventures in Cycling](#) crafted a child-centric wine tasting itinerary that included a picnic lunch. Instead of driving to tasting rooms, we cycled through scenic backcountry roads, past the Old Faithful geyser (yes, there is also one here), where we paused to dip our fingers in steaming puddles.

[Sterling Vineyards](#) was fun, especially the aerial tram trip that transports visitors to the hilltop tasting room. Our favorite was wisteria-draped [Bennett Lane](#), where I sampled juicy cabernets while Brette learned to identify bouquet. During the cellar tour, just enough technical verbiage was dispensed ("bung hole" was a favorite term) along with cool correlations between winemaking and math. Outside, children can also pick blackberries and play corn hole.

[Tamber Bay](#) and [Raymond Vineyards](#) are among the other child-friendly wineries in Napa, as is [Castello di Amorosa](#), which — modeled after a medieval castle — has a drawbridge, a

dungeon cell and secret passageways. Activities you can expect at these sites include playing horseshoes and interacting with farm animals.

Ride Through the Vines

Another way to experience the spectacular landscape is by horseback. We signed on with [Napa Valley Trail Rides](#) for a 30-minute mosey through the rolling vineyards of [Shadybrook Estate at Rapp Ranch](#) (where there is also a tasting room). Our guides were hipster cowgirls and Brette got to visit the stables after the ride.

If you'd rather bike, [the Napa Valley Vine Trail](#) now offers 12 car-free miles, from downtown Napa to Yountville.

Farm-to-Table Treats

It's important to teach children the origins of food. And, Napa, with its celebration of local purveyors (highlighted on practically every menu) is the perfect setting to do so.

Breakfast all day excites every child. [Gillwoods Cafe](#) in St. Helena serves up classics like whipped cream-topped French toast, strawberry pancakes and hearty omelets.

[Gott's Roadside](#), also in St. Helena, is filled with families for a reason, as its burgers, tacos, sandwiches and milk shakes make for an ideal lunch or dinner. In downtown Napa, the artisan food hall [Oxbow Public Market](#) is a crowd pleaser for pizza, barbecue, charcuterie and baked goods.

Brette proclaimed [Farmstead at Long Meadow Ranch](#), which operates an organic farm, livestock ranches and vineyards, as "the best restaurant ever." The food was glorious, but the storytelling and passion for farming is what resonated. With each dish — caramelized beets, garlic confit-kissed burrata, burgers — our 20-something server explained how soil, climate and coastal air (plus minimal corporate intervention) impacted flavor. Even the wine tasted better with the back story: As Brette tapped into her newfound sensory skills, I swigged my way from bubbly and Sauvignon Blanc to Pinot Noir.

And a recommended last stop for all — as it's key to end on a sweet note — is [Calistoga Creamery](#), which serves salted caramel ice cream in a sublime cinnamon waffle cone.



The outdoor area of one room at Calistoga Ranch. Credit Calistoga Ranch, Auberge Resorts Collection

Fun Family Lodging

Tucked within a canyon under a canopy of ancient pine and oak trees, our cedar-shingled room at [Calistoga Ranch](#), felt like a luxe treehouse. Besides the pool, hands-on farm experiences make this property a paradise for the pint-sized. Children can gather eggs from the chicken coop, pluck vegetables from the garden, collect honey from bee hives and take in a performance from resident goats, Olive and Pepper. They will dance for food. It's paradise for parents too who can partake in wine tastings, winemaker dinners and a variety of hikes on property. (Rooms start at \$695.)

The [Vista Collina](#), a 145-room hotel about ten minutes from downtown Napa, offers a condensed Napa experience on its grounds, with a swimming pool, nine on-site tasting rooms, a culinary center offering Mommy and Me teas and cooking classes, and an upscale market with local products and prepared foods. A 16,000-square-foot lawn offers rotating activities (barbecues, green markets, live music) and games (corn hole, giant Jenga, ring toss) to occupy the children while parents sample wine. (Select rooms come with kitchens and rates begin at \$309 a night.)

Another option is [The Westin Verasa Napa](#) in downtown Napa, where families can kayak on the nearby Napa River and many restaurants and parks are walking distance. (Suites start at \$359 a night.)

Amy Tara Koch is a Chicago-based author and travel reporter who writes frequently about family travel.