



The glitz and glamour of
FESTIVAL
NAPA VALLEY

STORY BY JESSICA YADEGARAN

Food, wine, music and fresh air forge a cultural extravaganza

Strains of Brahms waft over the courtyard of the Castello di Amorosa in Calistoga, where hundreds of guests are seated, surrounded by the medieval grandeur of this 13th-century Tuscan-inspired winery and castle and its 30 acres of estate vineyards brimming with grapes.

As the composer's Piano Quartet in C minor flows from the stage and rises into the Napa air, an impossibly perfect day becomes only more so. Depending on the Festival Napa Valley season, we've lunched with winemakers at Cliff Lede or perhaps Stag's Leap. A Chris Cosentino dinner lies just ahead — and then a chance to witness the jazz genius of Arturo Sandoval or the grand jetés of the San Francisco Ballet.

Suffice it to say, Festival Napa Valley is not your typical music festival. It's not even your typical classical music festival. It's something much more lavish: a rare combination of world-class musicians, dancers and artists, gourmet food and postcard-perfect scenery. No lines. No roiling crowds. And you don't even have to be well off to attend. Many performances are free.

Now in its 13th year, the festival formerly known as Festival del Sole draws 10,000 people annually to see legendary talent in sublime surroundings, from violinist Joshua Bell to Broadway and Disney singing sensation Lea Salonga.

It's certainly California's most glamorous festival, attracting the likes of Sophia Loren, Bill Murray, Kristin Chenoweth and, last year, the cast of "Hamilton" for 10 days of performances in iconic outdoor settings. Think opera under the stars, al fresco winery parties and gourmet dinners amid the beautiful, sun-kissed vines.

IF YOU GO

Festival Napa Valley features a total of 60 events. This year's festival runs from July 18 to 29 at 33 venues around the Napa Valley. Ticket prices vary. Find a complete list of events, including free concerts, and ticket information at <https://festivalnapavalley.org>.

The festival's strong emphasis is on music and dance, but it's the culinary arts that take the limelight at its Taste of Napa component. More than 70 award-winning Napa Valley wineries and cutting-edge restaurants offer delicious sips and bites at this gastronomic showcase, which changes locations from year to year. This summer, you can picnic and play on the spacious community lawn while listening to live music at the new Tuscan-inspired Vista Collina resort.

Yet for all its glitz and glamour — and extremely spendy VIP passes — Festival Napa Valley is surprisingly accessible, offering a plethora of free concerts and tickets under \$80. Well-heeled patrons may drop a grand on the opening night patron dinner and concert at Meadowood, but there are plenty of galas and concerts — including Concertos at Castello di Amoroso — for a tenth of that.

Organizers relaunched the festival in 2016 with an emphasis on attracting younger audience members — in the classical music world, "younger" means audiences in their 40s and 50s — and spotlighting an eclectic mix of domestic and international artists. That means both big names and emerging talent, like soprano Nadine Sierra, who first performed at Festival Napa Valley in 2017 and is now arguably the new face of New York's Metropolitan Opera.

But the festival's primary guiding principle has always been for





guests to have an unforgettable cultural experience. According to Sonia Tolbert, the festival's chief operating officer, the celebrity elbow-rubbing may get a lot of press coverage, but this festival is really about musical discovery.

"When it comes to the performing arts, you don't really have to have knowledge of the music," she says. "Just having a desire to appreciate great music and experience it in this iconic setting is enough. Getting to see music in an outdoor scenic setting like this can sometimes be a transcendent experience."

Especially when you add amazing wine.

The festival's strong emphasis is on music and dance, but it's the culinary arts that take the limelight at its Taste of Napa component. In previous years, you could enjoy artists like Franc D'Ambrosio, top, at Round Hill Estates, Cirque du Soleil at Meadowood Napa Valley and Sergio Mendes at Castello di Amorosa or take a break to dine on fine food at the Culinary Institute of America.





Cycle off the grid through private vineyards in Carneros.

Stop at Basalt for a toast with their Topsy Carrot, a brunch cocktail.

Get up close and personal with falcons and hawks at Bouchaine Vineyards in Napa.

3

Whether you're enjoying Festival Napa Valley's classical music in the vineyards or winery hopping at back-to-back tastings, don't forget everything else the valley has to offer.

Cycling in the Vineyards

Napa Valley Bike Tours offers casual guided rides (\$124) that send visitors soaring off-road and through private vineyards in Carneros, a region famous for milder-climate grape varietals such as chardonnay. With an easy pace and frequent stops, the emphasis is on enjoying the scenery and learning about vineyards; <https://napavalleybiketours.com>

Downtown Napa Brunch Tour

Food tour company Rooted Fork runs a 3-hour walking tour (\$95) on Saturdays that visits seven of Napa's best restaurants, from a casual pub to a Southern Italian restaurant and a French bakery. At each stop, you'll experience the chef's signature brunch dish, accompanied by a cocktail or mocktail; www.rootedforkfoodietours.com

Falconry Vineyard Experience

Bouchaine Vineyards' sustainable farming practices include using hawks and owls to chase pest birds away during the end of grape-growing season. They'll show you how it's done and even let you balance a bird on your gloved arm during this tour overlooking San Pablo Bay and Mount Tamalpais. The tour (\$200) ends with a garden lunch and wine tasting. Call the winery to book a tour for July 8 or later; www.bouchaine.com.