

Yountville— A Personal Perspective

By Curtis Van Carter



The year was 1972—and there were two reasons I went to Yountville for a visit—to buy a pair of Mennen clogs at the Highwayman (run by John Caldwell of Caldwell Vineyards) and have a Vintage Burger at the Vintage Café (now Pacific Blues). Both were at the Vintage 1870, which was being managed by Don and Sally Schmidt, Sally the culinary force at the Chutney Kitchen (now Michael Chiarello's Bottega). They are the same couple who originally opened the French Laundry now of Thomas Keller fame.

Yountville with its six Michelin stars is known as the eatery capital of the United States, if not the world, and is said to have more stars per capita than anywhere else. Yet lost in the glitter of the many upscale restaurants, the early morning balloon flights is an illustrious, if not ribald past. Yes, this Napa Valley Mecca was once known for its many bars and brothels. Bouchon Bakery in a past life was the Rex Hotel, the priciest house of ill repute around. Bouchon itself was the Wells Fargo Bank and James Beard Plaza, another Thomas Keller property, was a horse coral used to hold the fresh teams used to pull the stage coach.

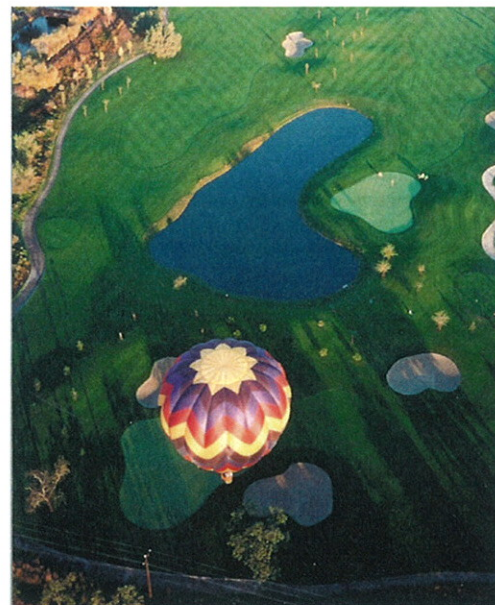
In 1977, I moved to Yountville to open a gift business, Caboose Noir, in the train cars adjacent Vintage 1870. The Napa Valley was then more of a sleepy dell with only approximately 40 wineries. Heck, the owners of the Vintage 1870 nearly tore it down to sell the bricks. Fortunately this didn't happen and the property was purchased by a group of investors lead by Mark

Power, whose family opened and ran Nut Tree in Vacaville. They have transformed the property and several of them still own and operate the Vintage complex consisting of two Inns, a spa and the renamed V Marketplace, now upscale shops and a wedding facility.

Through the years since my arrival, Yountville has continued to attract many like me who are drawn here by its charm and small-town friendliness. But maybe due to its past, Yountville continued to appeal to many who have helped keep its more notorious character alive, the likes of the late Howard Lane, a local legendary maître d' and true southern gentleman, to Miss Terri', a transsexual who ran for mayor in 1990 and made the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. I remember a 1980s *Los Angeles Times* article said one could find a Heineken Beer at Tonascia's Market (formerly Gordon's Café and currently leased by Leslie Rudd of Dean & DeLuca), yet Yountville has the lowest per capita income of any city in California.

Now four decades later, I have seen this town evolve and become my home. From a past steeped in bars and brothels, to the enchanted enclave it has become, Yountville is the true heart of the Napa Valley.

If you're in town, please say hello for I have many more stories to tell you such as the time a big rain storm flooded the Pacific Blues basement where a three-day poker game had to be halted when the table started floating.



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