



Appetizers

24 hours in Napa

Revved up the car and reached Napa around 12:30 p.m. Friday. First stop was the wine tasting at Spring Mountain Vineyards, which coincided with the celebrations of Premiere Napa Valley weekend. We felt just the slightest dusting of snowflakes there above **St. Helena**, and then headed deep into the Spring Mountain's barrel room, which was housed in a cave cut into the hillside.

The wines here showed plenty of extraction, deep colors and sturdy tannins - all hallmarks of the Spring Mountain appellation - with offerings from Keenan Winery, Newton Vineyard, Vineyard 7 & 8 and more. It was also here where we tasted the best wine of the weekend, a gorgeous 2001 Pride Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, which revealed in that sweet spot of juicy primary fruit and earthy complexity from bottle aging.

Then it was off to the Silverado Trail for a tasting at Shafer Vineyards. The highlight was a mini-vertical of its flagship Hillside Select Cabernet Sauvignon with vintages 1992 (lovely, but drink sooner than later), 1997 (seemed to be in a slightly awkward moment of the aging process), 2002 (impeccably balanced, a real star), 2004 (juicy young pup) and 2007 (terrific, great balance and can't wait to try again in a few years).

Ready for some food, we headed into downtown Napa, first with a stop to taste through a solid line-up at Ceja Vineyards' tasting salon, all poured by the perpetually cheery Amelia Ceja. By now it was time for some food, so we stuffed ourselves down the block at Bistro Sabor, with a tasty menu of Mexican street food that's overseen by the Ceja family. The salmon ceviche tostada, tacos of asparagus, mushroom and poblano chile and spiced up "Latino Mac & Cheese" very much did our palates right.

With night falling, it was time to rendezvous with a crew from Sacramento and check out the debut of "Art on First," an art walk with 20 installations in storefronts along First Street. Despite the cold weather, the reception overflowed at Gordon Huether Gallery and the streets livened up with folks checking out the scene.

Though some of us were already stuffed, we ended up down the street at Morimoto Napa, the wine country home of "**Iron Chef**" star Masaharu Morimoto. On an empty stomach, how great it would've been to sample the seven-course **tasting menu**. Some of the platings coming from the kitchen looked simply stunning - the artistry of some presentations belonged at "Art on First." Instead I settled on a monkfish over couscous (slightly dry fish, but great cous cous) and sampled the ramen soup (pure, clean flavors and tender noodles, but for those used to spicy tan tan men or like their Asian soups with a dollop of sriracha, the ramen needed some extra zap). But Morimoto offers a sleek, urban feel to Napa and the menu offers plenty of possibilities to demand a return some day.

Thank goodness for the Napa River Inn, located just a block away from Morimoto, which offered a plush bed and voucher for breakfast in the morning. Though Saturday offered a whole new set of tasting opportunities, not to mention the high falootin' Premiere Napa Valley auction, real world obligations called. After a solid night's rest, the road back to Sacramento awaited.