



THE RESURGENCE OF LUXURY TRAIN TRAVEL ON THE NAPA VALLEY WINE TRAIN

| BY TRACY ELLEN BEARD

Although many illustrious trains in the United States, Britain, and Europe made their inaugural runs between the First and Second World Wars, history tells us that the love of luxury train travel began after the Victorian Era ended in 1901. Visitors from the New World—North, Central, and South America—began to visit the Old World and became enthralled with the luxuries surrounding railway travel.

However, with the invention of faster ships, airplanes, and motorcars, train travel took a back seat. Today in this fast-paced world people are eager to slow down and smell the roses. The Napa Valley Wine Train is the perfect way to take a moment, enjoy the glorious views in Napa Valley, spend time with a friend or loved one, sip on fabulous wine, and enjoy a delicious lunch or dinner.





THE BIRTH OF LUXURY TRAIN TRAVEL

Luxury rail travel began in the mid 1880s. Until then, trains consisted of four- to six-wheeled, non-connecting carriages. Many in the industry only saw the expense of improving this model, but the passengers traveling to and fro understood the possible advantages. The crucial moment came in 1883 with the launch of the Orient Express; it changed everything. Chefs incorporated regional and local food between routes, and passenger expectations rose. Sleeping cars, saloons, and a dining carriage were linked between passenger and luggage cars, which gave the media something to write about. Luxury train travel became an event and not just a means of transportation.

THE NAPA VALLEY WINE TRAIN

It was finally my turn to experience luxury train travel. My friend, Alyson, joined me on this step back in time. While waiting in the train station, I was struck by a group of young women adorned in lovely dresses, high heels,

and broad-rimmed hats. I spied couples dressed to the nines anticipating a romantic journey through the vineyards of Napa Valley. There was no rush at the gate, just a glorious stroll out onto the platform where we climbed aboard the 1085 Pullman Standard Dome Car for our three-hour, 36-mile round-trip journey from downtown Napa to St. Helena.

THE HISTORY OF THE NAPA VALLEY WINE TRAIN

The railroad, built in 1864 by San Francisco's first millionaire Samuel Brannan, has a long and arduous history. Still, today the Napa Valley Wine Train is one of only a few active historic passenger railroads left in the United States.

Samuel constructed the rail line to transport guests to his spa in Calistoga; and after an expensive divorce, he had to sell many of his holdings. The rail line became the property of the California Pacific Railroad, and in 1885 Southern Pacific bought the Napa Valley Railroad.

The introduction of the automobile in the 1930s diminished the glory of train travel. In 1960 Southern Pacific forsook the right of way between two major towns in Napa Valley, St. Helena and Calistoga, and soon only one freight train traversed the tracks each week.

Southern Pacific attempted to sell the property in 1984, but several Napa Valley residents wanted to rebuild the rail line. After one failed purchase attempt, a group of citizens led by Dr. Alvin Lee Block formed the Napa Valley Wine Train Inc. This group worked to create a railroad to preserve the transportation corridor for future use. The group sought out investors, and finally Vincent DeDomenico, the inventor of Rice-A-Roni and former owner of Ghirardelli Chocolate and Golden Grain Pasta, purchased the entire operation. Vincent loved the wine train idea and purchased most of the shares.

REBUILDING THE NAPA VALLEY WINE TRAIN

Vincent helped buy the line from



Southern Pacific. He hired experienced railroad personnel, maintenance staff, and food service professionals. He began to rebuild the Napa Valley Wine Train from the ground up by purchasing antique Pullman rail cars and restoring them with Honduran mahogany paneling, brass accents, etched glass partitions, and luxurious armchairs. On September 16, 1989, the Napa Valley Wine Train took its first passenger trip.

EXPERIENCE THE GLORY DAYS OF TRAIN TRAVEL

The Napa Valley Wine Train offers memorable experiences. Guests can book three- to six-hour trips with wine-tasting stops, gourmet lunch tours, and evening dining excursions. There are numerous options, including which luxury car to ride in while enjoying your experience. Many people choose to celebrate special occasions with a trip on the train.

OUR TRAIN RIDE

Alyson and I enjoyed lunch in the two-story Vista Dome car built in 1952. This car was one of the first ten full dome cars built by Pullman Standard. We sat back in the lush booths, sipped on the bubbles, and took in the 360-degree view. The bubbles were tasty, the perfect indulgence for any opulent adventure, but we wanted more of Napa's finest. Alyson and I reviewed the menu and purchased the Deluxe Wine Flight. Guests can buy the Deluxe Wine Flight, Standard Wine flight, or a bottle of one of the many hand-selected wines on the train.

As the engine began to rumble, we passed by the gorgeous scenery in Napa Valley. This area boasts some of the most famous vineyards in the world and some of the most expensive real estate in California.

A GOURMET FOUR-COURSE LUNCH

Rombauer Chardonnay is one of my favorite styles of chardonnay. It boasts beautiful oak and butter notes and the scent of vanilla spice. This wine paired fabulously with Alyson's appetizer of figs, prosciutto, and balsamic glaze, and my White Bean Ragout with duck sausage, bacon lardons, and Italian salsa verde.

As we traveled through the valley, passing famous vineyards like Opus One and Robert Mondavi, our second courses arrived at the table. Both the Roasted Beet Salad with frisée, arugula, goat cheese, pistachios, and a honey-citrus vinaigrette,

and the Broccoli Cheddar Soup, paired well with the cherry jam, vanilla, black raspberry, and plum notes in the Markham Merlot.

I ordered the Ricotta Cheese Gnocchi as an entrée. The creamed leeks, forest mushrooms, porcini cream, and Parmesan cheese were rich and luscious, and the solera vinegar brought a delightful freshness to the dish. Alyson chose the Fresh Catch, salmon over polenta with sundried tomatoes and basil oil. The dishes were tasty and paired famously with the soft tannins, blackberry, and clove notes in the Grgich Hills Cabernet Sauvignon.

A TOUR OF THE TRAIN

After the first three courses, we got up and stretched our legs. We walked over to the kitchen and visited the open-air car. We let the wind blow through our hair as we passed famous wineries and vineyards like Louis Martini, V. Sattui, and Beaulieu Vineyard. We chatted with other passengers and soon returned to our seats for dessert.

A SWEET FINISH

We finished our wine flights and asked our server, Rick, about digestives. We were in luck, and Rick poured each of us a glass of ten-year-old Sandeman Old Tawny Porto. We ordered two different desserts to share. Our vanilla crème brûlée was sweet, crunchy, and creamy, and the lemon tart was the perfect sweetness with a lemony punch. The tawny port went fabulously with both desserts.

We continued to watch the stunning vineyard landscapes pass by and soon found ourselves back at the station in Napa. The train ride was an incredible way to step back in time, slow down, and enjoy tasty food, delicious wine, great conversation, and the famous vineyards of Napa Valley. ♦

