

Roots in Napa have grown like a grapevine

By [Janet Fletcher](#)

Published 6:20 pm, Thursday, February 25, 2016

Eighteen years ago, my winemaker husband and I moved from Oakland to Napa to shorten his commute. I didn't cry, as I did when we left San Francisco for more-affordable Oakland, but I wasn't happy about it.



Chicken flautas at Taqueria Michoaca

We bought a home and planted a garden, and within a few years I had a revelation. If Doug left me — unlikely, but stuff happens — I wouldn't race back to the central Bay Area. I sort of liked Napa.

Now I'm entrenched. I have taken root in this valley like the thick, gnarly grapevines I drive past every day. I love residing in a world-famous wine destination where others fantasize about living. When I give my address to a sales clerk on the phone, I hear a sigh on the other end.

This valley is scenic every day of the year — as lovely in January, when bare vines poke their knobby arms up through carpets of mustard, as it is in July, when the Cabernet Sauvignon grapes start to color up. Years ago, wineries and other local businesses began sponsoring wildflower plantings along Highway 29 and the Silverado Trail. With so much rain, this year's show will be awesome, a riot of

poppies, marigolds and cosmos. The floral performance seems to crescendo in front of Regusci Winery (because they irrigate, my husband says), but the 'Joseph's Coat' roses in bloom at Pine Ridge Winery in April also take my breath away.

Yes, traffic clogs Highway 29 on weekends, but locals avoid it. We use the Silverado Trail instead, and we know the back streets that skirt St. Helena. In growing season, I can't drive up the Trail without stopping at the strawberry stand, about a half mile north of Trancas, for a half flat of berries, still warm from the field. In the last couple of years, the produce selection here has gotten more varied, with tomatoes, potatoes, onions and beans, well priced and fresh. I spend most of my produce dollars at the Napa Farmers' Market in season (May through October), but this family-run enterprise is my fallback.

I relish living in a town with a large Latino population and the Mexican food that comes with that. Jefferson Market, a Napa grocery store that caters to the Latino community, keeps me supplied with avocados, limes, chiles, queso fresco and the odd pig parts that I love to cook. Sometimes, if I'm there in the late morning, I'll pick up warm tamales for lunch. I have no clue who makes them — probably somebody's grandmother — but they are delicious and displayed under a flimsy paper sign that always makes me laugh. Tamales Calientitos, it says, followed by

a mysteriously precise time frame, like 9:27 a.m. to 1:27 p.m. Are they no longer hot at 1:28 p.m.?

The Napa taco truck that Doug and I patronized for years has done so well that the owners now have a fleet of them and a sit-down restaurant, Tacos Michoacán. We go here often for lunch on Saturdays — three \$1.75 tacos each — and I sneak in a couple of craft beers from the convenience store next door. No fancy \$5 San Francisco taco is any tastier.

When the weather is nice, I like to get a porchetta sandwich at Fatted Calf, in the Oxbow Public Market, and eat it outside at the picnic table. Nothing makes me happier than to see the full parking lot at this “mini Ferry Plaza” market. The merchants here had a rough beginning — like most retail businesses that opened in 2008 — but the crowds are persistent now. On Saturday mornings, a line snakes out the door of the Model Bakery. The breakfast-pastry display peaks then and is so tantalizing that it unnerves me; I typically grab a levain baguette and rush out.



Service window at Taqueria Michoacan

My food life in Napa would pale seriously without Oxbow. I buy cheese for my table and my classes at the Oxbow Cheese Merchant; have business meetings at Ritual Coffee; meet friends for a beer at the Oxbow Wine Merchant; pick up za’atar and harissa at Whole Spice. For a couple of years, I worked with Margrit Mondavi on her memoir, and she loved going to Hog Island Oyster Bar in Oxbow for lunch: raw oysters, clam chowder, a glass of Sauvignon Blanc and buttered Acme bread.

I go Upvalley — the locals’ term for anything north of Napa — less than I used to now that Napa’s retail scene is livelier. I’ll check out the stylish dress shops in St. Helena and ogle the tabletop goods in Vintage Home, but nobody is getting rich on my purchases. These days, for me, St. Helena’s main attraction is Bruschettaeria, a kelly green food truck parked just south of town. If you want to meet local winemakers, grab a seat at the bar at Rutherford Grill by 11:30 a.m. (this tip from my husband, who has a near-weekly chicken salad there). But if you want to taste sublime bruschetta, choose the truck.

Come visit Napa anytime, but please move to Sonoma. I’m enjoying my little town just the way it is. When Berkeley Bowl opens its Napa branch (in my dreams), my happiness will be complete.

Food writer [Janet Fletcher](#) writes the *Planet Cheese* blog and teaches cheese appreciation classes in Napa Valley.

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My Napa

Clif Family Bruschetteria: 709 Main St., St. Helena; (707) 968-0625.
www.cliffamilywinery.com. 11:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday.

Jefferson Market: 1704 Jefferson St., Napa; (707) 224-7112. 7 a.m.-2 a.m. daily.

Oxbow Public Market: 610 and 644 First St., Napa; (707) 226-6529.
www.oxbowpublicmarket.com. 7:30 a.m.-9:30 p.m. daily (individual merchants' hours vary).

Rutherford Grill: 1180 Rutherford Road, Rutherford; (707) 963-1792.
www.rutherfordgrill.com. Lunch and dinner daily.

Tacos Michoacán: 721 Lincoln Ave, Napa. (707) 256-0820. Lunch and dinner daily.

Vintage Home: 1201 Main St., St. Helena; (707) 963-7423. www.napavalleyvintagehome.com.
10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. daily.