

10 Wine Country openings to check out in 2023

By [Jess Lander](#)

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Markham Vineyards recently completed a head-to-toe renovation of its St. Helena winery. - Alexander Rubin

There are many exciting [new places to dine in Wine Country in 2023](#), including a fried chicken hot spot that's worth the drive, an oyster bar, a mostly vegan endeavor and the region's first Georgian restaurant.

Downtown Napa's revitalization got another big boost from two big names: Chef Masaharu Morimoto expanded with a [Morimoto Asia outpost](#) and the owners of the popular Bistrot Don Giovanni introduced a new restaurant [focused on Southern Italian cuisine](#).

Of course, there were wine developments in recent months, too, including a classic winery's major makeover and a former French Laundry sommelier's new bottle shop.

A classic Napa estate makes a comeback

Napa Valley [gets glitzier by the day](#), which has left many of the region's classic estates fighting to keep up. St. Helena's Markham Vineyards is the latest historic Napa Valley winery to embark on a [head-to-toe makeover](#) for the first time in over 30 years. Best known for its commitment to producing high-quality Merlot — despite widespread fallout for the grape since the movie "Sideways" premiered over 20 years ago — Markham transformed its dated stone tasting room into a bright, airy haven with high ceilings and midcentury modern furnishings. The winery also updated the barrel cellar, giving guests a peek behind the curtain, and added new outdoor tasting spaces in the courtyard complete with sleek fire tables for the chilly winter months. Just as Merlot is finally coming back into fashion, Markham is, too.

2812 St. Helena Hwy North, St. Helena. markhamvineyards.com

Slurp oysters and sip Champagne at the Barlow

A new oyster bar has opened inside Sebastopol's buzzy Barlow district. Simply named Oyster, the tiny Parisian cafe comes from the same owner as the Barlow's Sushi Kosho (located across the street) and serves oysters three ways — raw, baked or fried — alongside a robust Champagne list. There are several other types of shellfish, including scallops, mussels and prawns, and heartier dishes like an oyster po'boy. The Captain's Platter (\$62) makes for a great sampler, stacked with fried scallops, oysters and calamari, plus duck fat fries, sauces and a lemony slaw. Grab a seat at the counter or on the outside patio.

6751 McKinley St., Suite 130, Sebastopol. oystersebastopol.com



Belfare, a fried chicken pop-up, has opened a brick-and-mortar in Petaluma. - Jess Lander

Fried chicken pop-up opens permanent digs

Belfare, a popular fried chicken pop-up, has opened a brick-and-mortar in south Petaluma. The classic fried chicken sandwich (\$15.50) is no joke: A hefty piece of fried chicken is topped with a messy slathering of sesame mayo, pickles and spicy cabbage on a fluffy Parker House bun, leaving most people feeling incredibly full. If you dare, upgrade to the Firehouse Special (\$18) served with habanero hot sauce and smoky bacon. The pickle plate (\$12), loaded with an array of pickled vegetables tossed in goat cheese and Belfare's own chile crunch, is a great light side. Located in a strip mall that's nowhere near Petaluma's historic downtown, this mom-and-pop operation is only open for lunch Monday-Friday, so you'll have to come up with an excuse for a midweek Wine Country excursion. The sandwich just might be enough on its own.

1410 South McDowell Blvd., Suite D, Petaluma. belfaresonoma.com

Morimoto comes to Napa (again)

Japanese celebrity chef Masaharu Morimoto's second Wine Country restaurant [opened on the Napa Riverfront](#), and it's hard to miss, thanks to a pair of enormous statues of the celebrity chef at the entrance. The new restaurant, Morimoto Asia, is only a few doors down from the original Morimoto, which launched in 2010. The large, 170-seat restaurant has an extensive menu. You can pair rice and noodle dishes like lobster pad Thai, mapo tofu and beef chow fun with nontraditional dim sum like soft shell crab bao, pork and shrimp shumai, and pork gyoza. For a splurge, get the roasted half Peking duck (\$46) or Wagyu rib eye (\$98). Morimoto Napa is also offering table-side dim sum brunch on Saturdays and Sundays.

790 Main St., Napa. morimotoasianapa.com



Scala Osteria is a new restaurant in downtown Napa from the owners of the popular Bistro Don Giovanni also in Napa. - Yalonda M. James/The Chronicle

Napa institution opens a new Italian restaurant

The team behind Bistro Don Giovanni, one of Napa's oldest and most popular destinations, has opened a second Italian restaurant after 30 years. While "Don G's" — as locals call it — has a broadly Italian menu, the new Scala Osteria is focused on seafood-driven Southern Italian fare, inspired by owner Giovanni Scala's upbringing outside of Pompei. The Mediterranean-inspired space in downtown Napa serves several types of whole fish, pizzas, oysters and seafood pastas, like Spaghetti alla Luciana from Naples tossed with slow-braised octopus, tomatoes and black olives. Dishes are made to share alongside a selection of cocktails, punch on tap and a white-heavy wine list.

1141 First St., Napa. scalaosteria.com

Acme Burger continues rapid expansion

Popular Sonoma County burger joint Acme Burger has opened in Petaluma. Set inside a former gas station — refreshed in shiny red, white and blue paint — it has a casual, 1950s vibe. This is the third Acme location for chef-owner Todd Kniess, formerly of Berkeley's Le Petit Cochon and Bistro Liaison, in three years. Acme has options for many diets, including Sonoma Mountain beef burgers, a turkey burger, vegan burger and fish options (choose from a variety of classic and fancy toppings), plus several flavors of fries and tots, salads and milkshakes. Dine at blue picnic tables on the patio, or have your order sent next door to the Crooked Goat Brewing taproom, which opened earlier this year.

330 Western Ave., Petaluma. acmeburgerco.com



Piala is the first Georgian restaurant and wine shop in Wine Country. - Jess Lander

First Georgian restaurant lands in Wine Country

This tiny, cozy tavern located in an unassuming Sebastopol strip mall feels like a hidden gem. Piala, Wine Country's first Georgian restaurant and wine shop, serves tasty, simple and traditional comfort dishes, like Chashushuli, lamb stew poured into a little clay pot, and Pkhlovani, a cheese pie with greens and herbs (ask for the sour green plum sauce on the side). As for the wines, they're very different from what visitors will find throughout Sonoma County: natural wines, often a bit funky, made from grapes you've probably never heard of. It's fun to try several and get a taste for the birthplace of wine — plus, pours are cheap during happy hour. This opening was not without controversy; [it was delayed due to the involvement of co-owner Lowell Sheldon](#), who was [accused of sexual harassment by several former employees](#). The alcohol use permit eventually got approved on the condition that

Sheldon does not consume or serve alcohol at the restaurant and doesn't work there during business hours.

7233 Healdsburg Ave., Sebastopol. pialanaturalwine.com

A far-out wine shop opens in downtown Napa

Napa certainly isn't short on wine shops, but a new one called Outer Space Wine Shop is worth a browse. Despite its location at the center of tourist traffic, Outer Space manages to feel like your friendly neighborhood wine shop: The small setup doesn't feel overwhelming thanks to its concise, 100-bottle selection of California and European wines — and judging by the name, it doesn't take itself too seriously. Owner Dan Dawson formerly owned Napa's mainstay bottle shop, Back Room Wines, and was the head sommelier at the French Laundry in the late '90s. Outer Space hosts \$15 tastings and themed events on Thursday and Friday evenings, which often include guest wineries or importers.

974 Franklin St., Napa. outerspace.wine



An Aztec mocha served at Flying Goat Coffee in Healdsburg. - Sarahbeth Maney/Special to The Chronicle

Beloved Healdsburg coffee shop returns

Former fans of Flying Goat Coffee in Sonoma County can rejoice: Their coffee mainstay is back. Founded in 1994, Flying Goat locations in Healdsburg and Santa Rosa closed in recent years following a [slew of challenges](#), but the company is on the rebound with a new location on Healdsburg Plaza. The new space serves the same quality beans as before from countries like Ethiopia, Guatemala and Peru. Try the Goat Herder, a double espresso poured over

brewed coffee, paired with a pastry, like a chocolate mochi donut. (There's also a small, takeout-only cafe attached to Flying Goat's roastery at 419 Center St.)

300 Center St., Healdsburg. flyinggoatcoffee.com

Vegan options come to Petaluma's waterfront

There's a new mostly vegan restaurant in Sonoma County. Luma Bar and Eatery, set on Petaluma's waterfront, has opened in the former Dempsey's bar. From the owner of Petaluma's popular Shuckery, the 3,600-square-foot space is calming with ample seating inside and out. The menu is concise, including dishes like crudités with seaweed hummus and gnocchi with roasted sunchoke and mushrooms, but there are a few meat options, such as Liberty duck rillettes. Guests will also find an impressive selection of low- or no-alcohol drinks on Luma's cocktail menu.

50 East Washington St., Petaluma. lumaeatery.com

Editor's Note: This story was updated with Flying Goat Coffee's new address, 300 Center St., and to distinguish it from its takeout-only cafe at 419 Center St.

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WINE REPORTER

Jess Lander joined the food and wine team at The San Francisco Chronicle as wine reporter in 2022. Based in Napa Valley, Jess has extensively covered California wine country for numerous national and international publications since 2014. In 2021, Jess published "The Essential Napa Valley Cookbook," a project that raised more than \$100,000 for Napa Valley restaurant workers impacted by the pandemic and fires. Jess hails from Boston, where she studied journalism at Emerson College and started out as a sports reporter before making the switch to wine.