

Headway in Healdsburg

The Sonoma County town has quickly evolved from a sleepy hamlet into a chic destination.

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FOR THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The chic wine country town of Healdsburg has a little secret. Fine wine is just the beginning of the attractions on tap here.

Poke around antique shops, eat at a Michelin-starred restaurant, float down a lazy river – those are just some of your options.

Not that long ago, Healdsburg was a sleepy spot known as “the buckle on the prune belt.”

The prunes are long gone, replaced by vineyards. And these days, if you're doing any sleeping here it may very well be on the Coyuchi organic sheets of the h2hotel, one of several new or newly refurbished boutique hotels that have sprung up in recent years.



PHOTOS: ERIC RISBERG, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

This is the lobby of one of Healdsburg's boutique hotels, the h2hotel. Guests sleep on Coyuchi organic sheets.

"It's really come a long way," says iconic rock artist Stanley Mouse, whose work is featured in the Rockin Roses gallery just off the tree-lined plaza that is the heart of Healdsburg. "It used to be a really quiet town. Now it's the place to go."

About 70 miles north of San Francisco, Healdsburg is conveniently located just off U.S. Highway 101. The Central Healdsburg exit will take you to Healdsburg Avenue, which runs along the plaza.

Where to start your day? Breakfast options include the Downtown Bakery & Creamery, where sticky buns are a specialty and a cafe menu is served on weekends.

Spend the morning shopping the boutiques and antique stores that line the plaza or browse the thousands of titles at Copperfield's Books on the south side of the plaza.

Looking to explore the art of rock 'n' roll? The Rockin Roses gallery just around the corner from Copperfield's is stocked with works by Mouse, including paintings that became classic Grateful Dead covers, as well as art by some of his friends, like painted drum heads by Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart and some vivid



The Rockin Roses gallery is stocked with works by Stanley Mouse, such as this painting.

"Alice In Wonderland"-themed paintings by Grace Slick.

Mouse sometimes paints in the gallery in the afternoons, so you may bump into the unassuming artist.

A few doors down on Healdsburg Avenue is the tiny but striking Hand Fan Museum, the first in the United States dedicated to this useful cooling and communication tool, with a vi-



Donna del Rey, right, helps cooking students prepare ravioli at Relish Culinary Adventures. Prices range from \$39 for summer lunch classes to \$125 for off-site classes.



A patron enjoys a glass of sparkling wine at the Boisset Taste of Terroir wine tasting room in Healdsburg.

brant collection that includes some gorgeously ornate specimens.

Lunch is what you make of it; nearby restaurants range from fancy to family friendly. Or, you could opt for a simple sandwich eaten on one of the plaza benches.

Maybe you want to put a little polish on your own spatula? Relish Culinary Adventures offers cooking classes that range from bread-baking sessions to visiting a farmers market with a chef and returning to the up-to-date kitchen to cook up the meal. The ingredients and the talent are local to give visitors a sense of Sonoma County. Prices range from \$39 for summer lunch classes to \$125 for off-site classes at local farms and wineries.

If traveling on two wheels is your idea of freewheeling fun, check out Wine Country Bikes or Spoke Folk Cyclery. Or, if you're staying at the h2hotel, hop on one of the bikes available for guests.

If you're feeling more nautically inclined, take a kayak out on the Russian River; inflatables are available that are stable enough to take a dog along. For a different take on relaxation,

try a spa treatment; a number of places are nearby and The Spa at the Healdsburg Hotel offers day packages for non-guests that include use of the hot tub and pool.

As cocktail hour rolls around, drop into Spoonbar, where mixologist Scott Beattie incorporates seasonal flowers and produce into classic and original drinks.

In the summer, ease into the evening with free music on Tuesdays as artists play in the plaza's bandstand from 6 to 8 p.m. For dinner, you can try casual fare - the Bear Republic Brewing Co. offers a fun atmosphere and locally produced beers - or go upscale at Cyrus, a two-star Michelin restaurant, or Charlie Palmer's Dry Creek Kitchen.

Palmer puts on a Pigs & Pinot event each March that includes butchery and charcuterie classes, cook-offs, private tastings and dinners.

As night falls, rest your head at one of Healdsburg's boutique hotels or try a bed and breakfast like Camellia Inn.

Relax, recharge. Maybe tomorrow you'll get around to checking out some of those wineries.