

Learning To Do A Napa Weekend Right, With Lexus Culinary Master Carlton McCoy

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Culinary Master Carlton McCoy was a young student in culinary school when he earned a scholarship that took him on a three-week educational trip through Italy.

He can draw a direct link between an experience on that excursion to the job he has today, as CEO of Lawrence Wine Estates in Napa.

At a dinner in Montalcino, in the heart of Italy's prestigious Tuscany region, McCoy learned for the first time that a locally made wine isn't necessarily a drink. It's an ingredient when it's paired with the signature dishes of the same region—they work together seamlessly.

"It was like I connected the dots that night," he recalls. "That the style of wines is selected and engineered to be part of this meal."

So, it shouldn't come as any surprise, first, that McCoy dedicated himself to learning as much as possible about wine and turning it into his career. And second, that he'd partner Lawrence Wine Estates with Lexus and its Culinary Masters program.

Destinations by Lexus, specifically, offers Napa visitors with tasting experiences at the Lawrence wineries—Heitz Cellar, Stony Hill, Burgess, Haynes Vineyard, Ink Grade, and Brendel—and transportation to, from and between those properties in a Lexus vehicle.

On leveraging the transportation benefit of the partnership, McCoy says "you can hang out with your friends, your family, whoever you're there with, and you just show up at the next winery. It makes it so much easier. Just use these resources to be able to just focus on having a good time."

Insider Secrets, VIP Treatment



As part of the Destinations by Lexus program, visitors to Lawrence wineries get discounts on tastings along with transportation. But McCoy's team will also work with visitors to book hotel, restaurant, and spa reservations with discounts as high as 20%—which is helpful in Napa, one of the world's most luxurious wine destinations.

McCoy stresses that the joy in visiting Napa, or any wine region for that matter, involves exploration and discovery. “[What] the wine industry and the food industry offers you is this sort of never-ending stream of things to learn,” he says. “I’ve been doing this here for seven years and I’m still very much a newbie, which I love.”

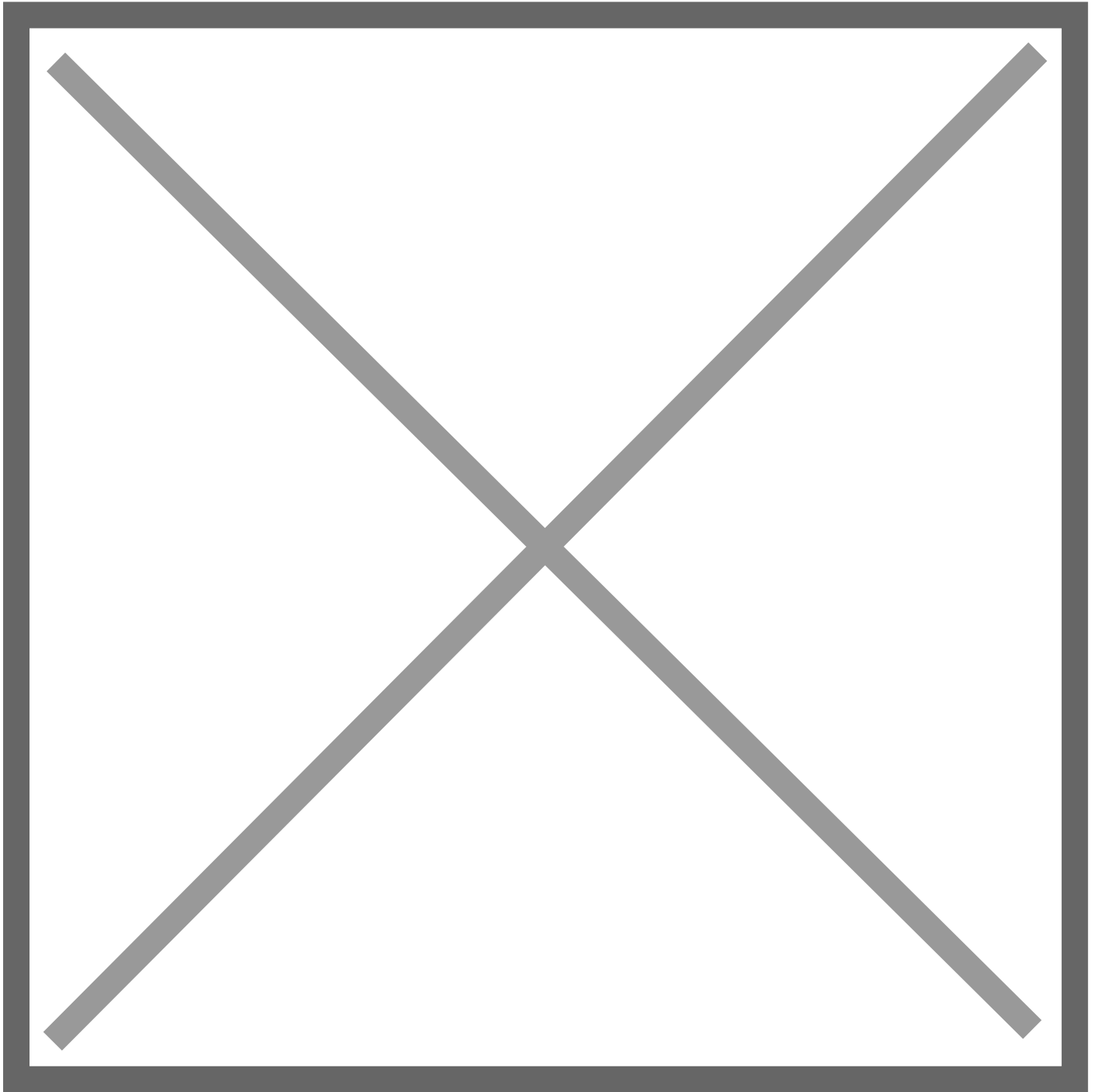
Speaking of exploration, the Lawrence concierge staff will go out of its way to reserve tastings for visitors at other wineries nearby. Just tell them the price point or style of wine you’re looking for, and they’ll set you up.

“Everyone here has a vested interest in making sure that when guests come here, they have a great experience” McCoy says.

Trust their judgment—it’s a lesson McCoy learned well when he was coming up in the wine world, working as a sommelier in high-end restaurants and, ultimately, spending years studying for and passing the notoriously difficult Master Sommelier exam (globally, less than 300 people have earned the distinction).

People like McCoy live and breathe wine, taking time to absorb more wine knowledge so they can do a better job pointing the rest of us toward new and interesting wines that suit our personal preferences—and slake our thirst for discovery.

Riding with Lawrence and Lexus



When McCoy was considering which automaker to partner with, he says it was an easy choice to partner with Lexus because of the shared values between the two companies.

“One is a sort of obsession with our craft and trying to be the very best at that. Two is not being market followers but really defining our identity and staying true to that,” McCoy says. And the third is quality. “When you maintain a certain level of quality for so long, that’s what you’re known for.”

While he recommends that visitors take their time to experience Lawrence wineries (even if that means multiple Napa Valley visits), there’s one winery in particular McCoy says that no one should skip: Stony Hill.

Visitors are taken in the latest Lexus GX vehicle on a steep ride up Napa's famous Spring Mountain through the dense state park forest. It suddenly opens up to a small seven-acre vineyard overlooking the entire valley where you'll taste through a selection of new and rare older Stony Hill wines in the shadow of the estate's original, midcentury modern home.

"It's such a cool experience," McCoy says. "It's one of those really encapsulating experiences where you've sort of been taken away from all the cares of the world and you're very much in the moment."

Carlton McCoy's Perfect Napa Weekend Itinerary



We asked McCoy to tell us his perfect Napa weekend itinerary which, he says, should consist of four wineries over two days—with two of those wineries being places you’ve never heard of, since wine is all about discovery.

Here are his tips for the creating perfect Napa Valley visit:

1. When you call to reserve a tasting at a winery, ask the team if they could refer you to other wineries. They’ll usually handle the reservation and send you someplace special.
2. Focus on smaller lesser-known wineries for a more intimate experience.
3. Stop at Bouchon Bakery in Yountville, right in the heart of Napa Valley, for the pastries. They’re worth the wait, even if the line is long.
4. Each day, have a long lunch and a long dinner—take your time and enjoy it. Don’t rush yourself. (McCoy’s favorite lunch spot is Mustards Grill, right on Highway 29; the best dinner in Napa, if not the entire world, is at the French Laundry.)
5. Do a full spa treatment—not just a massage. Really pamper yourself so you have a completely relaxing weekend.
 - Lexus does not condone combining driving with the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Please drink responsibly.
 - Statements made in this story by Mr. McCoy are representative of his experiences and opinions and do not necessarily reflect those of Lexus.