



NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

The City of Napa, No Longer Willing to Be Left Behind



Jim Wilson/The New York Times

The Copia center, top left in the foreground, and the Oxbow Public Market in the distance, are among Napa's new developments.

By KRISTINA SHEVORY
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NAPA, Calif.



Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Cathy Mathews is wary of all the changes.

THERE is Napa, the valley, with its picturesque vineyards, boutique hotels and wineries. Then there is this blue-collar community of diners and bowling alleys, sitting at the southern end of the affluent valley to which it lent its name.

For years, it was virtually impossible to confuse the two. Napa, the city, rarely gave outsiders much reason to stop. And residents here were proud of that distinction, content to shirk the limelight as limousines sped along nearby Route 29.

"You travel around the world and everyone knows where Napa is, but the town of Napa had been left behind," said Mike DeSimoni Sr., the president of Channel Properties in Richmond, which is building Napa's first mixed-use development.

The city of Napa is quickly catching up with its more famous neighbors farther north, like Yountville, St. Helena and Rutherford, adding wine-tasting rooms, upscale restaurants and hotels in its drive to remake itself into something of a Yountville South. Developers have poured more than \$300 million into new stores, offices and condominiums, which promise to double the size of Napa's downtown. A Westin hotel is under construction; the

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Ritz-Carlton has one planned.

“This is a huge change for Napa,” said David Buurma, a vice president at NAI BT Commercial, a real estate brokerage company with offices in Napa. “Ten years ago downtown was a ghost town.”

Built on a flood plain, the city is one of the most flood-prone in the state. But in 1998, Napa County residents voted to raise taxes for an ambitious flood-control project.

The Napa River Flood Management Plan, sponsored by the Napa County Flood Control and Water Conservation District, would widen the river’s channel, restore wetlands, raise bridges and move low-lying homes. The \$300 million project, which was supposed to be completed this year, is only halfway done because federal money has been slow in coming, according to the city.

It was this project, though, that has given the developers the confidence to build. In 2001, Copia, a food, wine and arts center developed by the wine pioneer Robert Mondavi, opened its doors. Other projects followed, and in the last eight years, more than \$400 million in private and public funds have been invested in various developments.

“Most of this didn’t just happen by accident,” said Arthur Jacobus, Copia’s president. “Mondavi knew it was a strategic decision to put Copia in Napa, and he viewed it as an economic catalyst for the city.”

New housing developments have also started to change the face of Napa, bringing in hundreds of new residents — from second-home buyers to people from the San Francisco Bay area looking for less expensive housing.

Former rangeland is being plowed under for new homes around the city and more are expected. In the last 10 years, there have been 2,969 building permits for new apartments, condominiums and single-family homes filed with the city. Builders have included the Castle Companies and Edenbridge Homes.

Among the newer projects is Oak Leaf Ranch by Delco Builders and Developers — 45 single-family homes being built on former pasture land for horses. Prices for the three- to four-bedroom homes, which will have vaulted ceilings and porches, start at \$832,000. “The speed of development and gentrification has shocked a lot of long-time Napers,” said Lauren Coodley, a professor of psychology and history at Napa Valley College who has written about Napa. “Some people who grew up here feel like their town has been taken away from them.”

Blue-collar workers could afford to buy in Napa, and for decades, Napa was the industrial heart of the valley. Many people worked at a nearby Navy shipyard until the federal government shut it down 11 years ago. A pipe plant was another large employer, but that closed three years ago because of rising expenses.

But over the last seven years, median housing prices have risen 99 percent to \$550,000 in June, according to DataQuick Information Systems, a [San Diego](#) real estate company.

Some long-time residents, concerned about Napa losing its small-town flavor, say they are selling their homes and moving to Oregon, Nevada and Washington State. Others who cannot afford to buy are also leaving.



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"This is a very hard thing to watch," said Cathy Mathews, 59, a fifth-generation Napa resident. "Most people I've worked with or grown up with have gone out of state because they can't afford to live here anymore."

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Napa the city has clearly been discovered. Tight restrictions on agricultural land elsewhere in the valley have forced hotel operators to look at Napa. Intrawest spent three years scouting the valley for property large enough to build its 161-room condo hotel before it bought a 3.5-acre parcel from Copia in 2005. Hit with soaring debt and slow ticket sales, Copia has sold or leased some of its land.

"It's literally the only place in Napa where you can develop projects of this scale," said Benno Nager, a vice president of development at Intrawest.

If sales at the Westin Verasa, Intrawest's project, are any indication, condo hotels should do well in Napa. More than half of its 161 units, ranging in price from \$500,000 to \$1.2 million, have sold since November.

The Oxbow Public Market, a new artisan food hall going up nearby, has also helped to attract buyers. John Moore, an ocean lifeguard in Newport Beach, bought a studio for \$417,000 in November without even seeing the property.

"Napa is internationally known; it's one of the places that people want to visit," said Mr. Moore, who is 34. "How could I go wrong?"

Other businesses, encouraged by all the development, have moved into the area. Last fall, Mason Cellars opened its first tasting room in Napa.

"If a business has the ability to wait, I think it will be spectacular," said Randy Mason, the owner and winemaker at Mason Cellars.

Mr. DeSimoni of Channel Properties is betting big on Napa. A Napa resident, he has invested \$50 million in the Riverfront, a two-tower project with offices, condominiums and retail space, on the banks of the Napa River. Construction began in June.

Although prices have not been set for the 50 condos, which range in size from one to three bedrooms, Mr. DeSimoni said he has already collected 178 names of people who are interested in buying. That alone has convinced him the project will do well.

"At times you get butterflies," Mr. DeSimoni said. "I think the time is right and downtown is finally on the right track."



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