

# Lessons from Napa Valley

By Mark Schnell



Sometimes a place becomes the standard to which many others are compared. Seaside is one of those places. From time to time, I hear of a place described as the “Seaside of [fill-in place name here].” Some have even described a community I designed called Cinnamon Shore as the “Seaside of the Texas Coast” — a comparison I’m honored to hear. Another example is California’s Napa Valley. When I lived along Colorado’s Front Range, some



The fountain, sculptures, and view make Artesa one of the more striking and memorable wineries in the area. Photo by Mark Schnell



Lincoln Avenue is the walkable Main Street of Calistoga. Photo by Mark Schnell

locals proudly described the area as the “Napa Valley of Beer.” It’s a testament to the very strong brand of Napa Valley — for wine, obviously, but also for quality, beauty, and a great vacation — that people use it as a comparison and standard.

Think about this striking statistic regarding Napa Valley: it only produces four percent of California wine. To have that kind of reputation and brand is astonishing for such a small valley with such small production.

They are clearly doing something right in Napa Valley, and I wanted to understand what it is and why. So I decided to spend a month living there and working remotely. I called it a “working sabbatical.” I asked a lot of questions, and I observed what makes the place so special.

Although they are very different types of destinations (beach vs. wine), there are some interesting

parallels between 30A and Napa Valley, including: tourism as a key sector of the economy, the small towns linked by a scenic highway (of similar length), and relatively expensive real estate.

The following are a few takeaways from my time in Napa Valley:

**Napa Valley planned for the future** — and it worked. As someone who designs communities for developers, I was shocked to see so little sprawl development in such a beautiful and accessible valley. Years ago, local leaders acted to preserve agricultural and undeveloped land, while keeping their towns within boundaries. They did so largely through zoning and a non-profit land trust that has protected 10 percent of Napa County. Their towns are fairly walkable,



The amazing Restaurant at Meadowood is one of two restaurants in Napa Valley to achieve a three star rating from Michelin. This photo shows the front lobby. Photo by Mark Schnell

feature a mix of uses, and locally-owned small businesses thrive. On 30A, we’re fortunate to have a significant amount of public land and a height limit, both of which shape our communities for the better. However, we should learn from Napa Valley and begin to really think about what we want to be as our communities grow

and mature.

**They understand that design and beauty are important parts of their brand.** Wine is the attraction, but there is so much more to the Napa Valley experience. There is clearly a focus on the quality of place and design for the wineries, tasting rooms, restaurants and beyond (even if some of the design appears a bit dated). It seems as though most local residents simply understand that design and beauty are important to their economy and quality of life. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I discovered a front page newspaper story about the local county government rejecting a bridge design. They sent it back to the engineers because it wasn’t a good enough design for Napa Valley. It’s hard to believe that Walton County would reject a bridge design on such grounds, but I’d like to see the day when they are just as in tune



Excellent design and merchandising - as well as great sandwiches, of course - make Oakville Grocery Co. a favorite in Napa Valley. Photo by Mark Schnell

with the brand of our place.

**Landscape can be the difference between a good place and a great place.** A view of a scenic feature like a vineyard can be breathtaking, but it’s usually even better when perfectly framed by trees. A driveway is just a way to reach a winery, until it’s transformed into an experience by the surrounding landscape design. This kind of attention to detail in landscape — as though a photographer composed every view — was evident throughout Napa Valley. It’s often expensive and/or difficult to achieve, but it can be the difference between good and great. I hope that more South Walton communities will follow this lead and create a great landscape in the public realm, and I’d like to see our county preserve tree canopies rather than clear cutting every right-of-way.

**The magic lies in the stories.** After a month in Napa Valley, I learned a lot about wine, and consumed more than my share. But more than anything, I think I’ll remember the people, their stories, and their connection to the place. In a world full of homogenized global corporate culture, Napa Valley remains a unique and very locally-focused place: the quality of the soil still matters, the restaurateurs and shopkeepers are still entrepre-

neurs, and people still chase their dream of making the perfect wine. Places like our very own Seaside are full of stories, too. Seaside founders Robert and Daryl Davis had a story to tell from the very beginning — about how to create a real community from scratch — and we’ve collectively built many more layers of stories over the years. The goals for 30A, I believe, are really not that different than Napa Valley. We just need to protect and enhance everything that makes us unique and great, and we need to make sure we take care of that white sand the way the people of Napa Valley take care of the “Rutherford dust.”

*Mark Schnell is an urban designer based in Seagrave Beach. His firm Schnell Urban Design (schnellurbandesign.com) offers a wide range of services, from designs for entire communities to parks to houses. He also offers walking tours of Seaside by appointment. To schedule a tour, contact Mark at (850) 419-2397 or mark@seasidewalkingtours.com. Tours cost \$20 per person (cash only), start at the front porch of Sundog Books, and last approximately two hours. Tours are given in conjunction with the Seaside Institute.*



The tasting room at T-Vine Cellars is one of the newest and best designs among the many wineries of Napa Valley. Photo by Mark Schnell