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A Waking Giant or a Monster? Developers Eye Once-Sleepy Napa

By KATHY CHIN LEONG



JaM Cellars, a rock-and-roll themed wine tasting room, in downtown Napa, Calif. The city now has 24 wine cellars. Peter Prato for The New York Times

In the 1980s, when John Truchard was a teenager, the most happening watering hole in downtown [Napa](#) was the McDonald's on Jefferson Street. "It was a ghost town," said Mr. Truchard, the owner of a wine room, JaM Cellars. "There were no good restaurants, nothing good to do."

Napa, with a population of about 80,000, is Napa Valley's largest city and the county seat. Until recently, even as Napa Valley became an international wine destination, tourists tended to bypass the city in favor of venturing "up valley" for wine tasting, luxury lodging and upscale restaurants. Places like St. Helena, Yountville and Calistoga attracted tourists while Napa, an hour north of San Francisco, tended to be a pit stop for gas. It didn't help that there was also flooding in the downtown streets after torrential rains.

Downtown Napa now has 65 restaurants and 24 wine tasting cellars, said Craig Smith, the executive director of the [Downtown Napa Association](#). Two decades ago, downtown had one tasting room and approximately 30 restaurants — mainly serving breakfast and lunch, because there was no reason to open for dinner, he said. Aiding the growth has been a river bypass flood project, completed in 2015, that diverted waters away from downtown.



Todd Zapolski, a developer working on First Street Napa, a 275,000-square-foot project. "We would not be here if the locals were not supportive," he said. Peter Prato for The New York Times

To further counter its image as a sleepy county seat, downtown Napa is getting a makeover. Three major new building projects are set to be completed this year.



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One of them, [First Street Napa](#), is a 275,000-square-foot development that will cost \$200 million. It will cover three square blocks and include more than 40 spaces for retail outlets, offices and restaurants. Anchoring the project will be the 183-room [Archer Hotel](#), which at five stories, with an additional sixth-floor rooftop with pool and restaurant, is the tallest building in Napa Valley. The hotel will be a contrast to the city's mostly one- and two-story buildings. It will not be adding more parking, but will use existing structures and lots.

Opening nearby will be the [Culinary Institute of America's](#) new outpost, called the [CIA at Copia](#). The two-story, \$12.5 million project will include five-day cooking boot camps, a culinary arts museum and wine tastings. Its retail shop, classes and restaurant are already open.

Finally, the [Feast It Forward](#) network, an internet TV channel, is finishing a two-story, farmhouse-style building that will include shopping, wine and food, live cooking demonstrations and music. Katie Shaffer, the president of the Feast It Forward, said the development meant that "people will finally take downtown Napa seriously.



The Culinary Institute of America's new outpost in Napa, the CIA at Copia. Peter Prato for The New York Times

“The sleeping giant is about to wake,” she added.

Ken Tesler, the managing director for Blue Note Napa, a new jazz club downtown, said, “Thank God, the streets no longer roll up at 9 p.m.”

He added: “This is definitely not the old Napa. Ten years ago, St. Helena was the place to be. Five years ago it was Yountville. Now downtown Napa is the hot ticket, and it is on a serious rise.”

Mr. Truchard said he was seeing millennials in downtown Napa for the first time. Bars and clubs are staying open until midnight daily. “There’s lots of energy here now,” he said. “We even open until 2 a.m. on weekends.”

Not everyone is enthusiastic about the change. Some believe that the town is tipping too much toward tourism and that residents will suffer for it.



Katie Shaffer, the head of Feast It Forward, in the farmhouse the network is renovating in Napa, Calif. The project will feature shopping, live cooking demonstrations and music. Peter Prato for The New York Times

“I am all for revitalization, but the locals feel like they have been edged out,” said Harris Nussbaum, 81, who has lived in Napa for more than 60 years. “What I am opposed to is overdevelopment and high-rise buildings approved without additional parking. Once you build a monster, you cannot undo it.”

The Archer Hotel is far too large compared to its surroundings, said Patricia Damery, a ranch owner in Napa County. She is concerned about the long-term effects of development on the community. “Why are we building more and more hotels?” she said. “We don’t have enough workers to serve the ones now.” Ms. Damery is a member of the [Napa Vision 2050](#) coalition, which says it advocates responsible and sustainable Napa County planning.

Ms. Damery said that low-wage workers cannot afford to live in Napa, so they move to the neighboring towns and commute into the city. “I’m not anti-development,” she said. “I am for balanced development. Downtown is wonderful and so much better than before, but we have to invest in quality-of-life things like mass transit and housing.”

Jill Techel, Napa's mayor since 2005, said most residents were happy about the city's economic growth. The city's planning commission has approved downtown businesses including five additional hotels and bed-and-breakfasts and two tasting rooms. At least four more restaurants will break ground in 2017.



Marcy Schwartz, an owner of Yarns on First, in Napa, Calif. Many local business owners are encouraged by the development projects. Peter Prato for The New York Times

“We would not be here if the locals were not supportive,” said Todd Zapolski of Zapolski Real Estate, the developer of First Street Napa. “They said they needed new energy downtown, and they wanted to take advantage of the momentum that was already happening.”

Jim Brandt, the owner of the Napa General Store, said the block where the Archer Hotel was going up had long been dormant. “Guess what? We’re are going to have them filled now. I am absolutely looking forward to the new hotel. More hotels are a great idea and help the tax base.”

A view to the future is essential, said Mr. Brandt. "When we opened 16 years ago, it was a ghost town," he said. "And we had to suffer through the building of the flood wall and road closures. Now we have more visitors than ever before."

He added: "Locals are coming here in droves. I try to stay out of politics, but I talk to all sorts of people who think the changes are overwhelmingly positive."