Thanks to a wave of young chefs, the Napa Valley is becoming as known for its dazzling food as for its wine. By Martin Hemmings

The menu was 100% vegetarian and there was a yoga studio upstairs. But don’t let that put you off. I was in California, you might not be that surprised to hear, in the town of Napa, 90 minutes north of San Francisco, for dinner at Ubuntu. A former self-professed, it’s now, yes, a yoga studio, but also a Michelin-starred restaurant. The waiters wore T-shirts saying “Practice humanity towards others”, but I forgave them after the padron peppers soaked with lime, salted heirloom tomatoes and spicy almonds that reminded me of beef Monster Munch. Those were the nibbles. Next came an eye-opening nine-course menu — without a meat course in sight.

The Napa Valley is all about eating and drinking. Mainly the drinking. There are 300 wineries crammed into its 100 miles of hot, green slopes, and its back roads are busy with oenophiles hiding from the drive-drink-deal.

Good wine begets good food, though, and talk of good food in Napa normally turns to one man and one restaurant: Thomas Keller’s three-Michelin-starred The French Laundry, in Yountville. It’s been called the most important restaurant in America, and the best restaurant in the world. Bookings open two months in advance and go like handmade hot cakes. You have to have the tasting menu, and it costs $137 a head, before tax. Yountville may as well be called Bel Air — the 50-year-old Californian superchef owns two more restaurants and a bakery in the boxy town. He’s got joints in New York, LA and Las Vegas, and earlier this month he took a pop-up version of The French Laundry to Harrods.

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The daddy of Napa chefs is not getting it all his own way, though. There are now nine Michelin-starred restaurants in the valley — including the well-established Auberge du Soleil in Rutherford, La Toque in Napa and Redd in Yountville, as well as Keller’sBrandon. Napa could get more star power this week, when the 2012 guide to the San Francisco Bay Area is published, and it’ll probably be thanks to a new wave of young, talented chefs who have only just started strutting their stuff. It’s an exciting time to take a culinary California road trip, and it’s food cooked by these young upstarts that I wanted to taste.

At **Ubuntu** (60 1-707-925-9566, ubuntu.napa.com), Aaron London, 28, a native of neighboring Sonoma Valley, runs his own kitchen with a swagger. His hair slicked up into a samurai’s bun, he looks more like a rock star than a vegetarian chef. He uses the word “dude” and talks at speed of his philosophy of “whole plant gastronomy”. Just as Ubuntu’s own garden, seven miles away, are not planted in row, eating London’s dishes was like grazing a wild meadow. A garden snake — looked like the emptied contents of a lawnmower, smoked cucumber tasted like Benifire Night. For pudding, blocks of chocolate, root beer float and carrot ice cream come perched on an upturned bowl. It was like The Good Life guest-starring Ritzon Blumenthal. At £74, Ubuntu’s tasting menu costs less than a third of the French Laundry’s.

Fifteen minutes north, the vibe is more Don Jones than downward dog. Just off the St Helena Highway is the Chandon estate. That’s as in Moet & Chandon, part of the £3 billion French empire that owns Louis Vuitton and Hennessy cognac. Credit to them, then, that they plumped for a Napa lad, Perry Hoffman, to make their restaurant, **Etoile** (888 342 6866, chandon.com/etoile/restaurant), more than just a Ell- up spot for coach parties. Hoffman looks younger than his 22 years. “I feel older,” he says. His grandparents ran The French Laundry before Thomas Keller, and it was in their kitchen as a kid that he took his first steps to becoming the youngest American chef to win a Michelin star. On the shaded terrace of the chalet-like dining room, with squirrels scurrying across the lawn, I tucked into his vaguely Mediterranean cuisine: full of fresh Californian flavour. Spanish octopus was accompanied by gai farin, cucumber and squash blossom. A rectangle of beef carpaccio with cherry tomatoes, quail eggs and pea shoots resembled a Italian constructivist artwork. A slab of halibut was as juicy as filet mignon. The foie gras torchon definitely wouldn’t be on the menu at Ubuntu. Mains started at £27; bottles of fess at £30.

Hold up. We’re in America. Where are the burgers, pizza, ribs and french toast this nation was built on? For all of the above, head north on the lovely Silverado Trail — preferably on a hired bicycle, stopping at any of the dozens of wineries you pass — to the spa resort of Solage and its poolside Solbar restaurant (707 226 0850, solagecalistoga.com). The chef here is 36-year-old Brandon Sharp, who at Sunday brunch had his arm in a sling, from, in all action Californian fashion, a mountain-bike accident. For a place that sells fired chicken and waffles (that’s one meal, served on the same plate, with maple syrup), where mains start at £16, you might be surprised to learn that Solbar isn’t on the Napa Michelin list. This is no simple junk-food joint, mind. I dabbled with a cool corn chowder, halibut tacos and a pink in the middle tuna burger on a steamed bun with kim chi cabbage. Sensational.

At the top of the valley is Calistoga, an oddball neighbourhood known for its volcanic ash baths (see panel, right), petrified forest (petrifiedforest.org $6) and Old Faithful Geyser, which spouts every 90 minutes (oldfaithful.geyser.com $15). Also causing eruptions is **Jole** (707 942 9558, jolerestaurant.com), run by the husband and wife Matt and Sonja Aguirre (36 and 38). Don’t bother looking at the wine list; the chunky sommelier, Dan Kaiser, does his thing — it could be the best wine to taste in all of Napa. Four courses goes for €32; add €39 for wine pairings. A call from the Michelin men can’t be far away.

**Ditto Domeni**, back down in Napa town (707 252 1402, dotti.com), where Curtis Di Fede, 36, and Tyler Rodde, 29, flip unpretentious sensible-sized pizzas (from €9) out of a Neapolitan wood-fired oven, make their own salami and do clever things with pickled watermelon rind. Check out, too, Napa’s **Oxboot Public Market** (oxbootpublicmarket.com), a food hall filled with self-service gourmet concessions. Once the sleepy gateway to wine country, Napa now feels like a destination, with new riverside developments and foodie walking tours (gourmetwalking.com). The vacant shops have art installations in their windows (see napaartsandfirst.com).
Christopher Kostow, his three Michelin-star Meadowood restaurant and, below right, his cooking. Right, ‘whole-plant gastronomy’ at Ubuntu

com). I was going to the ball. They had a table for me. Time for the old master to show the valley’s young upstarts a thing or two! Well, no, as it turned out, the food was good, great even, but it was all somehow just too... French. Sitting in a dim, low-ceilinged room eating rich, buttery, salty quail and veal was a stuffy end to a thirty-four days cruising the valley. I wanted more of those sun-blessed Californian flavours. When the waiter brought a little pot elaborately stacked on top of five other dishes, lifted the lid to reveal, well, not much, then poured in the soup from a separate little jug. I wanted a smile to prove they were in on the joke. When I tried to remove my jacket, the maître d’ told me off. There were nice touches, such as the iPod wine list and the sauce with the egg, but I left the French Laundry disappointed. And a bit hot.

Christopher Kostow was pretty to blame. The night before, I’d been at his restaurant, The Restaurant at Meadowood (707-967-1255, meadowood.com) and I’m still pinching myself. Meadowood is a posh country-club resort with croquet, tennis and chiselled men in polo shirts who drive guests about in golf carts. As of last year, it’s also got Napa’s second three-Michelin-star restaurant. Not bad going for the spectacular, 35-year-old Kostow, who says the aim of his food is to be “evocative, not provocative”. The dining room was cozy and airy, like a big bay window overlooking the golf course. Jeans were permitted. The waiters announced the ingredients of each dish like they were doing a voice-over for M&Ms, but the small talk and the smiles came naturally.

The food was breathtaking, physics-defying balls of clam chowder, cured mackerel with pooled green grapes; a mighty salad of pine-roasted cucumber and cold-smoked potatoes; a broth of shiitake and chicken thigh as subtle and earthy as anything from Hong Kong hawkers’ market; a pretzel stuffed with pont-Lévy cheese and served with a flute of Belgian beer. I definitely needed the golf cart home.

A word of apology. Meadowood is hardly the cheap alternative to the French Laundry. It’s $143 for the full tasting menu, $123 if you have the wine pairings. And that’s before tax. And a tip. As the young guns of the valley prove, you don’t need to spend anything like that to have a cracking meal in Napa. But if you’re saving up for one grand, permanent-grill-breaking, entirely Californian meal, make it Meadowood. I’ll probably never go back. Not just because it’s jolly expensive. Because I’m worried it really was a dream.

Travel brief

Getting there: fly from Heathrow to San Francisco with British Airways (0844-489-0762, ba.com), Virgin Atlantic (0844-209-7910, virgin-atlantic.com) or United Airlines (0845-444-4777, united.com); from JFK, car hire starts at $48 a day with Alamo (0871-284-1086, alamo.co.uk) or试着 Budget (0844-544-3409, budget.co.uk). Where to stay: in Napa town, the White House Inn is a whitewashed clapboard mansion turned boutique B&B, with a pool and small spa (01-707-947-9038, napatelwhitehouseinn.com; doubles from $285, B&B). Doubles at the Napa River Inn, set in an old mill building, start at $158, with breakfast in bed and an afternoon-tasting (07725-4500, napariverinn.com). For a splurge, stay at Meadowood, outside St Helena, where cabins among the trees start at $638, room only (070-962-3400, meadowood.com).

Tour operators: Tailor Made Travel (0800-588-5887, tailor-made.co.uk) can arrange bespoke trips to California and the rest of the US. Three nights in San Francisco, at the Tuscan Inn, and four nights in Napa, at the River Terrace Inn, start at £1,099p, including flights and car hire. Or try Bon Voyage (0800-130-3102, bon-voyage.co.uk) or American Sky (0844-332-9392, americansky.co.uk). More info: legendarynapavalley.com.