

Great Wine Capitals - Outbound Knowledge Trip 2025

In early May 2025, Amy Hopkinson-Styles and Holly Girven Russell undertook a five-day research visit to Napa Valley, partially funded by the Great Wine Capitals network. The purpose was to gather insights to support Hawke's Bay operators, with a dual focus on actionable sustainability and visitor experience.

The trip was anchored by attendance at the RISE Napa Valley Climate & Wine Symposium, delivered by Napa Green, alongside a programme of winery visits and industry meetings. Napa Green is a comprehensive sustainability and climate action certification program for vineyards and wineries in Napa Valley, providing third-party, soil-to-bottle verification. Its framework emphasises environmental stewardship, regenerative farming, and social equity, offering a model for integrating sustainability into both vineyard management and winery operations.

Visitor Experience Insights

Across seven winery visits, clear and transferable patterns emerged in how Napa structures tasting experiences. Experiences generally fall into three tiers, each with distinct expectations around storytelling, hosting style, and perceived value. Entry-level experiences (\$35–\$60 USD) are usually straightforward indoor flights, minimal food, and an emphasis on approachability. Mid-tier experiences (\$60–\$95 USD) start to build more depth through curated bites, vineyard walks, sustainability stories, and guided sessions running 75–90 minutes. At the premium end (\$125–\$225 USD), the shift is obvious: small-group or private formats, vertical or library wines, and focused site-driven storytelling promising education on geology, topography, and history.

For Hawke's Bay, Napa's models suggest several transferable principles:

- A stepped pricing structure helps visitors understand what each level offers.
- Estate, site, and farming stories have real value when told plainly and with conviction.
- Small-group or winemaker-hosted formats can lift the experience without major capital spend.
- Culinary elements, even simple but well-curated bites, significantly increase willingness to pay.

Wine Clubs and Loyalty

Napa Valley wine clubs are deliberately structured around scarcity, access, and deepening loyalty, operating less like subscriptions and more like full brand ecosystems. Members are buying proximity, priority, and belonging, with pricing tied to access and intimacy rather than volume. Tiers follow clear patterns, from simple entry levels with modest discounts and limited complimentary tastings, through to premium and collector tiers offering private tastings, priority allocations, en-primeur purchasing, and highly curated hosting. Scarcity and allocation language drive perceived value, while complimentary tastings are a core retention tool. Expanding auxiliary benefits, from events to lifestyle partnerships, reinforce long-term engagement.

Several lessons translate clearly for Hawke's Bay:

- Use intentional scarcity (special bottlings, limited releases, library drops) to anchor higher tiers.
- Keep complimentary tastings central to retention, even if conservative.
- Add personalised elements, such as visit planning or winemaker access, to lift perceived value.

- Recognise the limits of in-region events for a dispersed audience and explore portable tastings or satellite member events to meet members where they already are.

Systems and Operations

An obvious trend across Napa wineries is the use of technology to streamline visitor bookings and wine club operations. All wineries offering online reservations used Tock, a hospitality-focused booking and table management platform that functions like a ticketing system, allowing customers to schedule and often prepay for tastings and tours, and efficiently manage multiple tiers of experiences and capacity. Quintessa was the exception, relying on direct email bookings, a system that limits scale but reinforces exclusivity and enables a highly personalised approach to guest management. Wine club operations follow a similarly clear pattern, with most wineries using Commerce7 or eCellar to manage direct-to-consumer fulfillment, allocations, membership tiers, and CRM integration.

RISE Symposium

The RISE Napa Valley Climate & Wine Symposium was held at the Charles Krug Carriage House in St Helena and delivered by Napa Green across six half-day sessions over two weeks, a format designed to allow attendees to participate in the mornings while still returning to work in the afternoons. Businesses often sent different team members on different days depending on relevance, and each day featured trade sponsors aligned to the theme, with day four shifting focus to industry not-for-profits.

The symposium is structured around Napa Green's Six Pillars of Sustainable Winegrowing Leadership, which shape the certification process from soil to bottle and from farm through production and distribution, and these pillars formed the daily themes of the programme. Across the days we attended, strong emphasis was placed on co-creation, mentorship, and removing barriers to participation before expecting diversity to flourish; on practical, scalable approaches to supply chain and waste prevention; and on climate action and regenerative agriculture that clearly links values, innovation, and visible action, while positioning wine as a powerful conduit for engaging consumers in sustainability in positive, collective ways. Full program, information and session recordings are available at napagreen.org/rise-2025

- Day 1: Water efficiency & savings
- Day 2: Energy efficiency & savings
- Day 3: Proactive farming, soil health & biodiversity
- Day 4: Social justice, diversity & inclusion
- Day 5: Supply chain & waste prevention
- Day 6: Climate action & regenerative agriculture

Conclusion

The Napa Valley visit and RISE Symposium underscored that exceptional wine regions combine sustainability, storytelling, and hospitality in equal measure. For Hawke's Bay, these insights suggest that thoughtful design of experiences, deliberate communication of values, and accessible yet distinctive offerings can build deeper connections, strengthen brand loyalty, and elevate the region's profile internationally.