GUIDE TO THE PERFECT NAPA WEEKEND

BY DOUG MCLAUGHLIN

Some weekends refuel you, and others that reset your entire outlook on how good life can taste. Napa has always held its reputation as California's adult playground for wine lovers, but spending a few days moving through its vineyards, kitchens, and hillside hideaways reminded me why this valley sets the global standard. This was not a trip built on checklists. It unfolded as a sequence of curated experiences that ran from falconry to focaccia, from sheep grazing between vines to multi-course wine dinners, from panoramic terraces to quietly luxurious suites suspended above the valley floor.

Below is my personal guide to the ideal Napa escape, built around the itinerary I followed on my most recent trip. Consider this your playbook for a weekend that delivers the best of wine country without ever feeling like you are following the crowd.

SULLIVAN RUTHERFORD ESTATE

Sullivan Rutherford Estate sits at the heart of Napa Valley, rooted in a history that began in 1978 when the famed winemaker, Andre Tchelistcheff helped plant the original vines. The estate built its early reputation on Merlot, long before the varietal became a talking point in the valley. That confidence, paired with a commitment to classical winemaking, gave the estate a foundation that has continued to evolve. In 2018, the property entered a new chapter when entrepreneur Juan Pablo Torres-Padilla and a group of partners acquired it from the Sullivan family. Torres-Padilla, CEO of VITE USA, purchased not just the vineyards and winery but the entire legacy, with the goal of honoring its past while investing meaningfully in its future.

Since the acquisition, the estate has been undergoing an impressive transformation. Vineyard enhancements have been underway for several seasons, refining the health and precision of the fruit. The most ambitious project is the state-of-the-art winemaking facility currently under construction. Once complete, in roughly a year, it will give the winemaking team expanded tools to elevate quality while maintaining the style that has defined Sullivan for decades. Even with these modernizations, the estate's soul remains anchored in its original structures, including the striking estate home designed by John Marsh Davis. The residence, with its bold lines and organic architectural influences, provides a dramatic setting for their appointment-only tastings and special events.

WINES TO BRING HOME FROM SULLIVAN

2022 J.O. SULLIVAN FOUNDER'S RESERVE MERLOT | *$ 330.00*

This bottle delivers power and finesse. I loved the way the dark fruit stays bright, never heavy, and how the finish feels endless.

2022 J.O. SULLIVAN FOUNDER'S RESERVE CABERNET SAUVIGNON | *$ 330.00*

A layered, full-bodied Cabernet offering dark fruit intensity, savory complexity, and polished structure that drinks beautifully now while promising years of evolution.

Our evening at Sullivan was one of the most memorable experiences of the trip. We arrived for a dinner set inside the iconic estate home, surrounded by the warm glow of candlelight and panoramic vineyard views. Before dinner, the team hosted a blind Merlot tasting that challenged us to distinguish between world-class Merlots from Napa, Italy, and France. Tasting these wines side by side was eye-opening. Napa's expression stood confidently next to its global peers, proving the varietal's ability to rival the great houses of Bordeaux and the refined elegance of Italy. It was an immersive, thoughtful, and genuinely fun experience that showcased both the talent of the Sullivan team and the depth of their cellar.

Sullivan is an example of what happens when heritage, ambition, and craftsmanship converge. It feels both historic and forward-looking, grounded and elevated, confident and quietly evolving. It is the kind of property that rewards those who return, because the estate itself is in a beautiful moment of transformation.

sullivanwine.com

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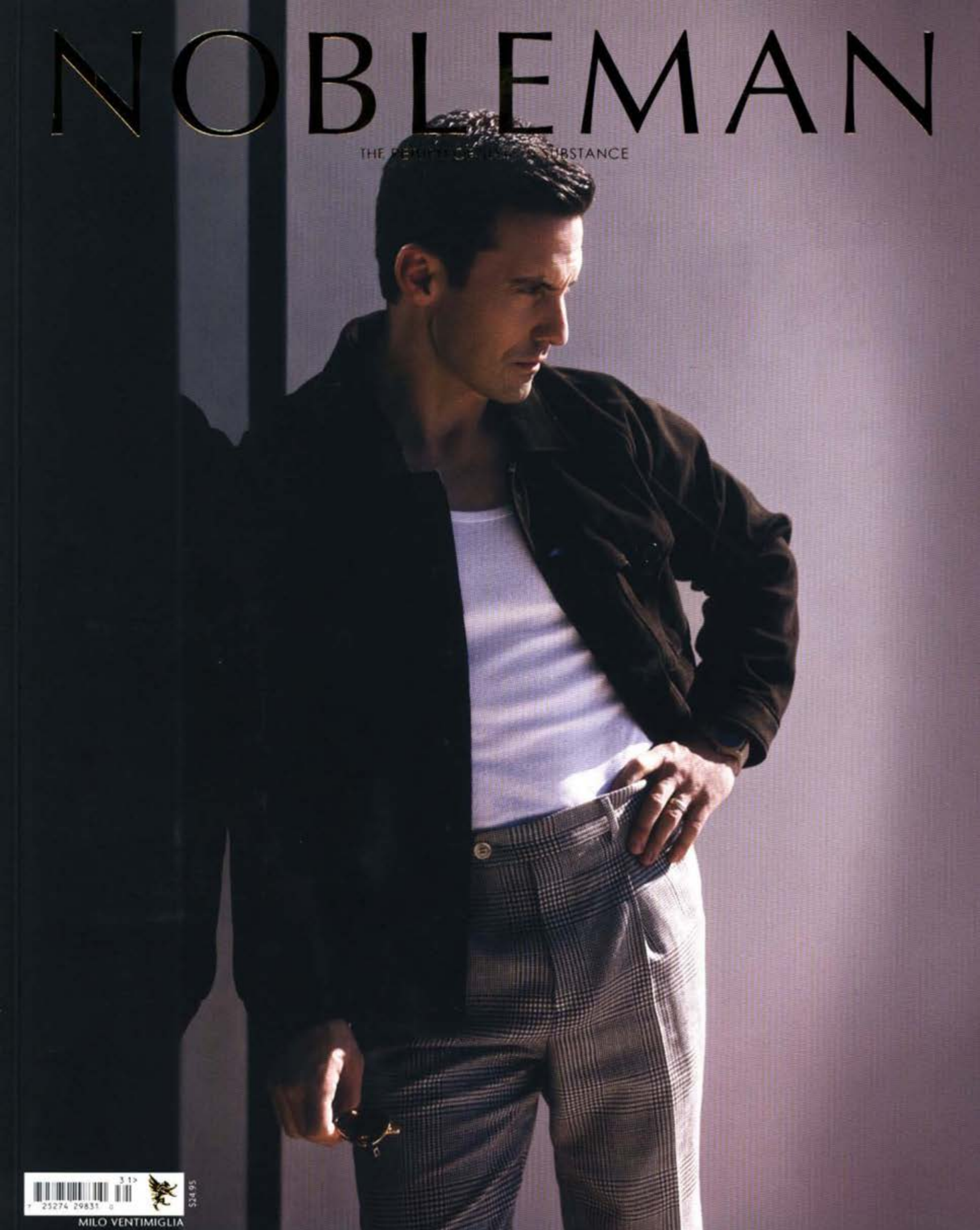

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