

The Visionary of Calistoga, California: Sam Brannan's Hot Springs



By Lee Foster

Author's Note: This article "The Visionary of Calistoga, California: Sam Brannan's Hot Springs" is a chapter in my new book/ebook *Northern California History Travel Adventures: 35 Suggested Trips*. The subject is also covered in my book/ebook *Northern California Travel: The Best Options*. That book is available in English as a book/ebook and also as an ebook in Chinese. Several of my books on California can be seen on my Amazon Author Page.

In Brief

Mormon entrepreneur Sam Brannan was among the first to see the possibilities of the hot springs of Calistoga as a major travel attraction in Northern California.

The Historic Story

Sam Brannan envisioned a resort at Calistoga in the north end of the Napa Valley as early as 1852. He pushed through a railroad spur to the area, only 75 miles north from San Francisco, so journeying there would be easy. The place at which to trace the footsteps of Sam Brannan is a small museum in Calistoga known as the Sharpsteen Museum.

Brannan inadvertently named the area Calistoga. The story of the naming is amusing. What does Calistoga mean, anyway? What happened was that Brannan liked sipping the wine and brandy of the Napa Valley as well as soaking in the hot springs. One day, after drinking a few glasses of liquid sunshine, he found himself in a social situation and proposed a toast. Thinking of the other great hot springs resort area in the U.S., at Saratoga in New York State, Brannan attempted to say that he wanted his resort area to “be the Saratoga of California.”

But Brannan’s tongue was not as lucid as he might have wished that day, so it came out to “be the Calistoga of Saraformia.” Those who heard the toast wouldn’t let him forget it, and the name Calistoga stuck.

Sharpsteen Museum

At the Sharpsteen Museum you can see a diorama presenting Brannan’s grand vision of his Calistoga Hot Springs Township, which had a hotel and 13 cottages, plus a racetrack. Brannan owned 2,000 acres in the area. He had visions of starting a silk industry and raising Merino sheep, but these plans failed. Part of the Sharpsteen Museum is in one of Brannan’s original cottages, filled with a piano, bed, and chest of drawers from his day.

Beyond the Sharpsteen Museum, some interesting things to do here are look at the

Old Faithful Geyser of California and then soak in hot water or take spa mud treatments, as Brannan would have encouraged.

Old Faithful Geyser

The Old Faithful Geyser is indeed faithful. Geothermal activity under Calistoga is so predictable that the geyser, on Tubbs Road, spouts into the air at regular intervals, though the times vary with the amount of ground moisture. This faithful geyser, said to be one of only three in the world, spews forth 350-degree water roughly every 20 minutes on a predictable timetable, shooting into the air a 30-foot plume of steam.

When the geyser pattern becomes irregular, there is a good chance of a regional earthquake in the works, a correlation that becomes documented more thoroughly with each major quake. The entire region has much geothermal activity, with electrical generation taking place to the north at The Geysers, one of the world's largest geothermal electrical production sites.

There are many opportunities to soak in hot water or take mud bath treatments in Calistoga at spas. A "the works" treatment might involve a hot mud pack, hot mineral bath, towel wrap, and massage. Some of the lodgings, such as Carlin Country Cottages, have natural hot water piped into hot tubs in their rooms. Indian Springs Resort (707/942-4913, www.indianspringscalistoga.com) has a large outdoor pool of hot water, available to people who lodge and spa with them. Calistoga has many commercial spa establishments where you can take a hot mud pack or a hot water mineral bath.

The town of Calistoga is one of the most enjoyable small towns in Northern California to explore. The people are friendly in this one-street egalitarian town. The main street is also located off of Highway 29, unlike Saint Helena, so there is peace and quiet. The town has a bookstore, brew pubs, and several fine restaurants.

Getting There

Calistoga is at the northern end of the Napa Valley, beyond St. Helena. Drive north on Highway 29 and exit east into Calistoga. Get to the Napa region by driving north

from San Francisco on either the west side of the Bay on Highway 101 or the east side on Interstate 80.

Be Sure to See

Everything in Calistoga is within easy walking distance. The Sharpsteen Museum (707/942-5911; www.sharpsteenmuseum.org) shows many Brannan-era artifacts and is generally open 11 a.m.-4 p.m., manned by volunteers. The Old Faithful Geyser is at 1299 Tubbs Rd.; 707/942-6463.



Old Faithful Geyser Calistoga California

Best Time of Year

Any time of the year is good for Calistoga. The town gets busy in summer and autumn. Winter months are quiet.

Lodging

Carlin Country Cottages is an example of a lodging where the hot water from the thermal underground source is piped right into the hot tub in your room. A central hot swimming pool and tub is open to all guests. There are 15 comfortable motel-type rooms with refrigerators to chill down a bottle of Chardonnay or store picnic fixings. Carlin Country Cottages is at 1623 Lake St. (707/942-9102, www.carlincottages.com).

Booking.com

Dining

Calistoga is known for its unpretentious good food and service. The All Seasons Café (1400 Lincoln Ave., 707/942-9111) is an example. Try the cassoulet or seared duck breast. Wines purchased from the restaurant wine shop are served at the economical retail price.

For Further Information

Contact the Calistoga Chamber of Commerce (1133 Washington St., 707/942-6333, www.visitcalistoga.com). The overall area tourism source is Visit Napa Valley (Welcome Center at 600 Main St, Napa, 707/226-7459, www.visitnapavalley.com).