

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE: *Carmel Valley*

by SERENA RENNER

ADVENTURE ONE

Country

Ride and dine like a cowboy.

ADVENTURE TWO

Wine

Discover the land of pinot and chardonnay.

ADVENTURE THREE

Outdoors

The new-and-improved Carmel Valley Ranch.

HIDDEN VALLEY
OPPOSITE: (clockwise from top right) The Lodge Restaurant; hiking at Carmel Valley Ranch; Julien's Chardonnay; Stonepine Estate's equestrian director.

OPPOSITE PAGE: COURTESY OF BERNARDUS LODGE. THIS PAGE: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT) PAUL DYER PHOTOGRAPHY (2); ZMAK; SERENA RENNER





TUCKED INTO THE GOLDEN FOLDS OF THE SANTA LUCIA FOOTHILLS, Carmel Valley straddles past and present. Pinot and chardonnay grapes ripen where vaqueros once roamed; fragrant pear orchards have given way to quaint antiques shops and tasting rooms; and high-end resorts and golf courses stretch out where beef production thrived. While the small town keeps growing in size and sophistication—new wineries continue to sprout and Carmel Valley Ranch recently debuted a \$35-million makeover—much has remained the same. Here, one can experience the old and the new, the roots and the wine, the down-home and the decadent, in a place that still feels like a secret.

RIDE BACK IN TIME
THIS PAGE: Explore one of the region's earliest ranchos like the cowboys did. OPPOSITE: Stonepine Estate's new Blacksmith Bar can be rented out for events.

SERENA RENNER

ADVENTURE ONE

Country Hoedown

Grab your cowboy boots for a wild Western ride.

AS MY HORSE ONE HEART HOOFS UP A Spanish moss-lined hill, the entire sun-dappled valley comes into view. I'm trotting through 400-acre Holman Ranch, one of the region's earliest ranchos, but the past is hard to picture between the vineyards and olive trees that now dot the landscape.

Yet following the trails through live oak and chaparral on a guided horseback ride in spring, I can imagine the old days, when ranchers traveled these same paths to deliver beef, leather, milk, and cheese to the Monterey Peninsula via horse and wagon. While the valley was known for hard work, it was also the site of rustic adventure and a down-home good time, experiences still prevalent today.

"I remember a grandstand at the end of the ring blasting Marty Robbins' 'El Paso,'" our trail guide Eileen says as she gestures toward an old arena that once hosted rodeos, branding parties, and barbecues. We could also see the ranch's red-tile-roof hacienda, built in 1928, as a Hollywood hideaway for celebrities like Charlie Chaplin and Marlon Brando. Eight guest cabins were recently restored to a modern-rustic splendor, and for groups that rent out the property, celebrations continue in the form of weddings and private events.

Having worked up our appetites, we head to the Wagon Wheel Coffee Shop, one of the first signs of the Old West you'll encounter as you enter Carmel Valley from Highway 1. This breakfast and lunch joint, camouflaged in a modern-day shopping center, serves up cowboy history—vintage spurs, ropes, horseshoes, and black-and-white photos—alongside your short stack and eggs. To really get in the country spirit, snag a seat at the bar (quite possibly next to a real live cowboy), and order "the cookout," a steamy bowl of baked beans topped with poached eggs.

Just a few miles further east, the Historic Farm Center—look for a big red barn—was built by local families in 1890 to house midnight quadrilles followed by "supper," and then dancing until dawn. Today, the center houses a number of retail stores, including the Bob Mattson Saddlery, which sells refurbished saddles and custom leatherwork out back—a must-stop for horse lovers and history buffs.

"What has happened in California is that lots of horse people with tack and accoutrements pass them on for generations, and then all of a sudden, it stops," the near-deaf Mattson says beneath a playful mustache, as he shows us around his tiny shop. Thanks to Mattson, forgotten saddles are brought back to life and old-time belts, holsters, and boots are re-created to look like they were taken straight out of a John Wayne film.

He points out a cherry-stained saddle from 1880 that he restored after it was salvaged from a fire in Big Sur. He also stops upon a replica of Roy Rogers' belt, with intricate details that Mattson carved by hand.

If it's about time for a siesta, check into your digs, which range from wood-paneled suites converted from old Vanderbilt horse stables at the historic Los Laureles Lodge to the Paddock House at Stonepine Estate that butts up against the equestrian center—home to the largest thoroughbred ranch west of the Mississippi—and the new Blacksmith Bar, complete with saddle seats, a dartboard, and ample room for line dancing.

The best bet for a Western-style dinner is Will's Fargo Dining House and Saloon, a roadhouse-turned-steak house that's been refining its fare since the owner of Bernardus Lodge, Ben Pon, took over in

2002. You'll still find steaks galore—including a 20-ounce porterhouse—but the meat is au naturel, and it's served with organic produce from nearby Earthbound Farm.

The most memorable country experience, however, is 30 minutes deeper into the valley. Every Monday night, the Cachagua General Store transforms into a rollicking supper club, often featuring live music, where cowboys and winemakers dine side by side, welcoming the new in with the old.

ADDRESS BOOK

Bob Mattson Saddlery 24004 Robinson Canyon Rd., Carmel, (831) 624-8146. / **Cachagua General Store** Mon. nights, reservations recommended. 18840 Cachagua Rd., Carmel Valley, (831) 659-1857, cachaguastore.blogspot.com. / **Holman Ranch** Horseback riding offered in spring and summer. 60 Holman Rd., Carmel Valley, (831) 659-2640, holmanranch.com. / **Los Laureles Lodge** 313 W. Carmel Valley Rd., Carmel Valley, (831) 659-2233, loslaureles.com. / **Stonepine Estate** 150 E. Carmel Valley Rd., Carmel Valley, (831) 659-2245, stonepineestate.com. / **Wagon Wheel Coffee Shop** 7156 Carmel Valley Rd., Carmel, (831) 624-8878. / **Will's Fargo Dining House & Saloon** Closed Tues. and Wed. 16 W. Carmel Valley Rd., Carmel Valley, (831) 659-2774, bernardus.com/lodge/restaurants.

ADVENTURE TWO

The Wine Escape

Savor the fruit of the valley.

TOURING A VINEYARD THAT'S TURNING A toasted auburn for winter, I'm reminded of the truism often ignored on wine tours: that wine is all a matter of taste. "Think of wine like music," says Bill Anderson, winemaker at Château Julien Wine Estate, one of the few places in the valley where you can learn about winemaking, grape to glass. "It's a sensual thing that you might like or you might hate."

It was a welcoming remark to kick off a low-key day of wine tasting. Yet you're bound to find something you like in Carmel Valley Village—the tiny town center that boasts 11-plus tasting rooms. It's a perfect place for a wine crawl, where you can sample the valley's various appellations and microclimates within a short walk. And when you're done, you can stumble home to the crown jewel wine resort, Bernardus Lodge, which has its own vineyards and more wine than you can imagine.

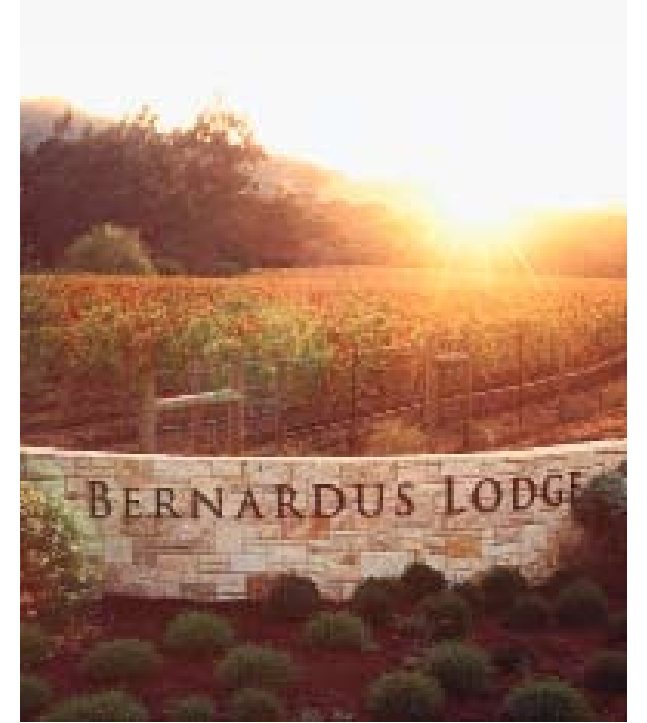


SERENA RENNER



PLAYFUL REMODEL
 THIS PAGE: The new Carmel Valley Ranch offers opportunities to play and learn, as well as experience fine food, romantic suites, and a pampering spa.

THIS PAGE: PAUL DYER PHOTOGRAPHY. OPPOSITE PAGE: CLOCKWISE (FROM TOP RIGHT): COURTESY OF BERNARDUS LODGE (2); PAUL DYER PHOTOGRAPHY (2)



NOT ONE, BUT TWO
 standout resorts now rule the valley. RIGHT SIDE: Bernardus Lodge wins over guests with to-die-for food and estate wines. LEFT SIDE: Carmel Valley Ranch's luxe additions.



To understand what makes Monterey County wine unique, though, it's best to start at Château Julien, just seven miles from the sea.

"We have something that no one else has," says Anderson, as he talks about the "Blue Grand Canyon" that stretches far and wide beneath the Monterey Bay. This underwater trench (similar in size to Arizona's famed chasm) not only creates a fog-drenched climate, it produces great wine. "It's really cold out there," Anderson adds. "We have upwelling, and then you get this warm, moist air further inland. When that comes to the top, it forms fog, and all this defines what kind of grapes you can grow where."

Here at Julien's five-acre vineyard, sangiovese grapes take root, but the winery is best known for its Merlots, produced in the warmer reaches of Monterey County to the south. High-temperature days calmed by ocean-cooled nights achieve just the right balance for nourishing acid-rich Merlots and Cabernets. Julien's chocolate-cherry, oak-finished Merlots can be sampled in the airy French château-style tasting room after a complimentary tour. Or if your taste buds are like mine, you might prefer the fuchsia Sangiovese Rosato, with a flavor as bright as its color.

Our first village stop was Talbott Vineyards, where award-winning Chardonnays and potent Pinots are named after owner Robb Talbott's relatives. Compare the tropical Kali Hart Chardonnay to her spicier brother, Logan, and



elegant grandmother, Cuvee Carlota—a beautiful blend of the 10 best Chardonnay barrels selected by winemaker Dan Karlsen. The tasting room is no-frills, but the wine is first-rate. Take special note of the Sleepy Hollow Chardonnay, Talbott's flagship white that earned a perfect 100 from *Wine Spectator* in 1990. While Talbott is well regarded as one of California's top Chard producers, don't neglect the Pinot Noir, which has been getting noticed ever since Karlsen came on board in 2008.

Like what you've tasted? Then check out Chock Rock Vineyard, Karlsen's side project, with a new tasting room a block and a half away. You may even find Karlsen there, pouring Pinot, Syrah, or Chardonnay from behind the wine barrel counter, wearing a Talbott T-shirt; it's just this down-to-earth nature that gives this intimate wine country its charm. Boekenooogen is another newer kid in town, with a sleek earth-toned tasting room and friendly patio. The winery's only been in business for four years, but it already scored a 96 from *Wine Enthusiast* on its 2007 Estate Chardonnay.

If you like ambience as much as mouthfeel, pull up a chair in the gardens at Georis Winery, and enjoy your wine paired with cheese and crostini, among flowers, cork oak, and the gift shop's brick facade. Or peruse the selection of jams and oils at Heller Estate Organic Vineyard's tasting room, known for its whimsical sculpture garden and wine made from 100-percent organic grapes.

We decided to forgo the Bernardus tasting room in an old Bank of America branch in favor of the real deal: Bernardus Lodge, a boutique luxury resort with its own colorful maze of trellised grapevines and adobe-style guesthouses that transport you straight to Tuscany. Once the wine buzz settles in, there's not much better than a sunset from your garden-view balcony or the couples Vineyard Romance Experience at the Mediterranean-style spa, which offers an oenophile affair of a different flavor. For dinner, look no further than Bernardus' signature restaurant, Marinus, where award-winning chef Cal Stamenov sets the bar high with artistic artisan dishes that can be paired with one of 1,850 different wines, indoors or on the heated patio next to croquet lawns. You can even reserve the

eight-person table in the wine cellar for the ultimate wine-and-dine experience.

"This is the best steak I've ever had," my dining companion declares matter-of-factly, slicing effortlessly into the luscious oak-grilled prime rib before taking another attentive bite. Maybe it was the Bernardus Cabernet blend talking, but I had similar feelings about my perfectly browned quail resting over a creamy spread of mashed potatoes. The night couldn't have tasted much better.

ADDRESS BOOK

Bernardus Lodge 415 W. Carmel Valley Rd., Carmel Valley, (888) 648-9463, bernardus.com. / **Château Julien Wine Estate** 8940 Carmel Valley Rd., Carmel, (831) 624 2600, chateaujulien.com. / **Village Tasting Rooms:** **Boekenooogen** 24 W. Carmel Valley Rd., Carmel Valley, (831) 659-4215, boekenooogenwines.com. / **Chock Rock Vineyard** 1 Del Fino Pl., Carmel Valley, (831) 659-7625, chockrockvineyard.com. / **Georis Winery** 4 Pilot Road off Carmel Valley Rd., Carmel Valley, (831) 659-1050, georiswine.com. / **Heller Estate Organic Vineyards** 69 W. Carmel Valley Rd., Carmel Valley, (800) 625-8466, hellerestate.com. / **Talbott Vineyards** 53 W. Carmel Valley Rd., Carmel Valley, (831) 659-3500, talbottvineyards.com.

ADVENTURE THREE

The Outdoor Encounter

Play (and learn) at Carmel Valley Ranch.

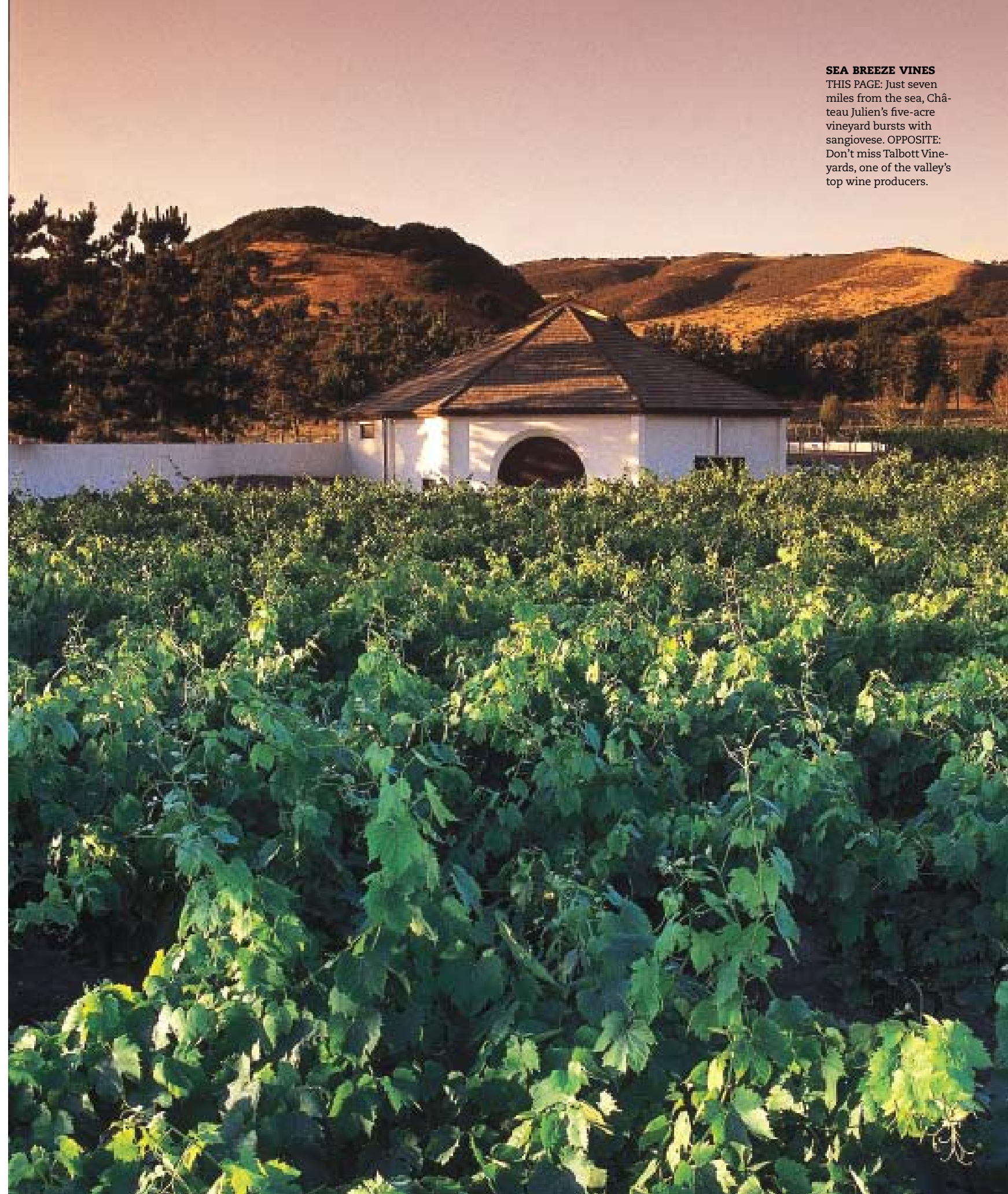
Perhaps the best example of the valley's present incarnation is the newly renovated Carmel Valley Ranch. After several attempts at redefining itself since the resort first opened in 1987, the hotel's new owner, Joie de Vivre partner John Pritzker, looked at the 490 acres of rambling ranch land set against the 4,000-acre Garland Ranch Regional Park and the 5,000-foot peaks of the Ventana Wilderness, and got to work reimagining the resort. He invested \$35 million to create a hotel that blends upscale comforts—a spa, fitness center, first-rate cuisine, and modernized accommodations—with earthy programs such as guided nature hikes, organic gardening, beekeeping, and cooking classes. The result is a place that's equally sophisticated and carefree, a kind of refined summer camp where you can play sports, take classes, explore the outdoors, and eat great food.

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THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF GEORIS WINERY CARMEL VALLEY; OPPOSITE PAGE: CHATEAU JULIEN WINE ESTATE

SEA BREEZE VINES

THIS PAGE: Just seven miles from the sea, Château Julien's five-acre vineyard bursts with sangiovese. OPPOSITE: Don't miss Talbott Vineyards, one of the valley's top wine producers.



carmel valley



(continued from 38) Outside the lobby hangs a rope swing that invites visitors to come and play. That could mean hiking to an oak-shaded deck for an outdoor yoga class; taking a swing at the par-70 championship Pete Dye golf course; or signing up for a tennis clinic at the River Ranch fitness area, which houses seven hard courts, two clay courts, and a slew of other options, from bocce ball and lap swimming to grabbing a grilled sandwich at the casual new café. When you're done for the day, you can roast marshmallows at fire pits near the lodge pool.

And there are quirkier activities like beekeeping with Carmel Valley native John Russo, the mellow-tempered bee whisperer who also manages 7,500 lavender plants, pollinated by the colony of Italian honeybees. The lavender is an example of the resort's Northern California resourcefulness; it will eventually be used, along with the honey, at the restaurant and spa.

Guests can zip on a beesuit and join Russo in the apiary, or look on as he shares interesting facts and unexpected life parallels. "The bees can't live without the colony," Russo says with an incredibly calm demeanor, despite the number of bees buzzing about. "They're not viable without it; it's an interesting comparison for life." The resort even offers seasonal honey harvesting classes and workshops to distill lavender into soap or essential oils.

PAUL DYER PHOTOGRAPHY

Another learning opportunity at "the Ranch" is a cooking class in the Adventure Kitchen with Marinus veteran Tim Wood. Like Marinus, Wood's menu at the Lodge Restaurant emphasizes farm-fresh ingredients—many of which are grown in the resort's two-acre garden—that you can use to make butternut squash soup, grilled vegetables, sautéed green beans, and herb fingerling potatoes.

There are similar homegrown experiences off the premises, which Carmel Valley Ranch encourages guests to explore. We headed to the Earthbound Farm stand near the entrance to the valley, which offers farm tours, jam-jarring and garlic-braiding classes, and a corn maze in the fall. The certified organic kitchen dishes out fresh paninis and house-made frozen yogurt, and features an überfresh salad bar showcasing the best of the company's produce, which began with a raspberry patch in Carmel Valley, and has grown into a salad staple worldwide.

We stroll through the herb garden, breathing in chamomile, rosemary, basil, and lavender. Mmm, lavender—the cocktail and spa ingredient takes me back to Carmel Valley Ranch. I cut myself a bouquet, tuck it in my purse, and take the experience home. ■

ADDRESS BOOK

Carmel Valley Ranch One Old Ranch Rd., Carmel, (831) 625-9500, carmelvalleyranch.com. / **Earthbound Farm Stand** 7250 Carmel Valley Rd., Carmel, (831) 625-6219, ebfarm.com. / **Garland Ranch Regional Park** 700 W. Carmel Valley Rd., Carmel Valley, (831) 659-4488, mprpd.org.



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