



A TASTE OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Get off the beaten path on this food-and-wine
getaway in San Francisco and Sonoma.

JANICE AND GEORGE MUCALOV

PETER TOOLE / THINKSTOCK

PHOTO COURTESY SONOMAWINE.COM

If you think you've "done" San Francisco, think again. Each time you visit, the city reveals new and different facets to discover. On this northern California getaway, we want to indulge in the city's food and wine. San Fran started the "eat local, eat fresh" movement, and it's hailed as one of the best food cities in the world.



PHOTO COURTESY FOG HARBOR FISH HOUSE

STOPPING TO LEAN AGAINST the rust orange railings, we feel the vibrations of hundreds of cars thundering by. The sharp wind blows strong at this height, and the fog, like a living beast, rolls and claws its way across the dry hilltops opposite. Far below, seemingly tiny sailboats skim across the choppy water. Too chilled to linger more, we hop back on our bikes – and suddenly, as we roll down into the quaint seaside town of Sausalito, we enter a different microclimate, where the wind dies down, the sun shines warm and we can sit with cappuccinos by the bay.

It's an understatement to say that biking across San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge is a dramatic experience. It doesn't matter how many times you've seen the city's most famous icon in pictures or on TV. Looking up from the bicycle lane at the 746-foot high twin towers anchoring the massive single suspension span, you can't help but be awed at this amazing engineering feat.

Above: Fog Harbor Fish House

Right: Le Colonial

Facing page: Fresh seafood at Fisherman's Wharf.

If you think you've "done" San Francisco, think again. There are many layers to peel. And each time you visit, the city reveals new and different facets to discover. On this northern California getaway, we want to indulge in the city's food and wine. (Hey, San Fran started the "eat local, eat fresh" movement, and it's

hailed as one of the best food cities in the world.) And then we want to indulge some more on a side-trip to Sonoma. But staying somewhat active is important to us too. And we want to experience something more edgy than simply visiting the usual touristy sights.

We reflect on this over dinner one night at the Michelin-starred SPQR on eclectic Fillmore Street. Tiny SPQR packs them in with Chef Accarrino's inventive and exquisite pastas, like his buckwheat tagliatelle with braised suckling pork and smoked fettuccine with sea urchin, bacon and quail egg. We ponder this some more another night at Fog Harbor Fish House at Fisherman's Wharf, as we crack whole garlic-roasted crab, soaking up the delicious buttery garlic sauce with crusty sourdough bread. And we think on this further at Le Colonial, where rattan furniture and lazily turning fans transport us back to 1920s Indochine, as we sample delicate Vietnamese offerings.



PHOTO COURTESY LE COLONIAL





PHOTO COURTESY ADVENTURE CAT

PERHAPS WE SHOULD slip in a run on our visit? Explore San Francisco offers a new sightseeing “Art in Nature” running tour. The six-mile run starts from the DeYoung Museum and winds through the Presidio’s man-made forest, incorporating several hills and viewpoints. For something less strenuous, Urban Hiker offers a five-mile urban-jungle jaunt climbing quaint staircases and an unmarked trail to the summit of Twin Peaks.

We choose, however, to walk, walk, walk everywhere. And we opt for a sailing trip on a large catamaran with Adventure Cat that whisks us past the rocky prison island of Alcatraz and under the Golden Gate Bridge. This is no gentle sightseeing granny cruise. We’re under sail 90 percent of the time, blasting through white caps on the bay. It’s exhilarating and gives us a real feel for being out on the unprotected Pacific.

To excite the soul, we’re told the new state-of-the-art SF Jazz Center blows the roof off with performances by



PHOTO COURTESY COQUETA

the Alfredo Rodriguez Trio and 14-time Grammy winner Herbie Hancock (but that will have to wait for our next visit).

Later, we return to the goal of eating our way through more of San Fran’s great restaurants. And with somewhere between 4,000 to 5,000 restaurants, there’s no lack of choice. Of the new ones to hit the culinary scene, the re-invented Tosca Café in North Beach reels in the crowds with its crispy pig tails appetizer and cream-cloaked

lumaconi pasta topped with lemon breadcrumbs. Coqueta is also much-hyped. On the Embarcadero waterfront, this 50-seat show-stopper, with wood floors, cowhide rugs and views of the San Francisco Bay Bridge, features a Spanish-influenced menu of tapas like duck-and-pork meatballs and grilled razor clams with salsa verde, along with paella.

Then, before we know it, we’re off to Sonoma...

Above: Sailing under the Golden Gate bridge aboard Adventure Cat.

Right: Coqueta restaurant.

Facing page: SPQR’s Crispy pig ears with pickled jalapeno and radish.







GEORGE MICHALOV



GARY CRABBE/ALAMY

Mixing up the tried and true with the unexpected is what makes a northern California getaway so fascinating. Fine wine, great food and creative presentations – the combination is magical.

ABOUT AN HOUR NORTH of San Fran, the Sonoma wine-growing region is more laid-back and less visited than neighboring Napa (where you rub shoulders with up to 25 people at a time, compared to only six to ten visitors in Sonoma's wine tasting rooms). Still, Sonoma's more than 350 wineries pack an intoxicating punch.

Up first? A sip-n-cycle tour with Getaway Adventures up the long finger of Sonoma's bucolic Dry Creek Valley. Bike intensive or wine intensive? We opt for wine intensive. So on our ten-mile pedal on quiet country roads, we stop often. In red-earth vineyards, our guide explains how the small bonsai-style tree vines, which produce the rich jammy Zinfandel wines for which Dry Creek is famous, are from 30 to 100 years old. They'll yield fewer grapes than young vines, but the wine will be finer and more focused.

We taste-test different Zinfadels and other varietals at several wineries this day and the next, cycling out on

our own. At Zichichi Family Winery, we love the mouthburst explosion of red currants and wild cherries of their Old Vine Zinfandel (from vines planted in the 1920s). Bella Winery enchants us with its tasting room in a cool, candlelit, cave cellar. Preston Vineyards has an organic farm and country store too – we sample sourdough bread (which the proprietor bakes fresh each morning in a wood-fired oven) while sipping their flagship Sauvignon Blanc in a farmhouse tasting room filled with antique farming implements.

After all that "hard" bicycling, a spa treatment is in order. The Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa boasts the grande dame of Sonoma spas. Its swanky 40,000 sq. ft. Willow Stream Spa has cold and hot mineral pools for a bathing ritual that's included with any treatment. What to have? A lavender facial? Grapeseed body scrub? Chardonnay, olive oil and sugar polish? Too many choices – we settle for a massage.

Another day, we explore by car, heading for the Pacific coast. Here, the surf crashes over gigantic black boulders through thick fog, and gnarled wind-slanted trees grow at a 45 degree angle. A totally different, permanently misty world, and only 45 minutes from wine country!

Looping back, we hit Coleman Valley Road. Truly a road less traveled, it must be one of the world's most beautiful drives. While paved, its one lonely lane is more of a snaking past arbutus trees, shaggy cows and a magical palette of sunlight-diffused colors. It connects with the Bohemian Wine Trail, 11 miles of asphalt meandering by the pastoral hamlets of Occidental and Monte Rio, with their organic markets, cheese boutiques and funky wine shops.

Of course, we have to finish off at one more winery. This time, we hit Chateau St. Jean near the town of Sonoma. Founded in 1973, the winery first caught the attention of wine buffs with its stellar Chardonnays. It has since expanded to add reds to its repertoire of pours. Now Chateau St. Jean is most famous for its Cinq Cépages Cabernet Sauvignon – a Bordeaux-inspired blend (luscious!) and the first Sonoma wine to be chosen by *Wine Spectator* as its "Wine of the Year."

Facing page:
Cyclists touring
the vineyards on
Healdsburg Road.

Above left:
The village of
Healdsburg.

Above right:
The scenic Pacific
Coast Highway
near the mouth of
the Russian River.



PHOTO COURTESY CHATEAU ST. JEAN

THE CHATEAU ST. JEAN ESTATE is also winning. The tasting room is in the restored “chateau”, built as a grand summer home in 1920 for an iron mining magnate. Listed in the National Trust for Historic Preservation, it’s open to the public. And there are plenty of shaded spots to picnic on artisanal cheeses from the onsite deli (along with a glass of wine, of course) among the white roses and tightly-clipped hedges of the elegant chateau gardens.

And what about Sonoma’s restaurants? They rival those in San Fran. Lovely Healdsburg – awash in magnolia trees, high-end boutiques and art galleries – is particularly well-known for its top-notch eateries. There’s Dry Creek Kitchen, one of celebrity chef/owner Charlie Palmer’s restaurants. Its curry-spiced, purple cauliflower soup poured over plump deep-fried shrimp rockets us into gastronomic heaven. Zin’s fried green tomato salad uses veggies pulled from its garden, and its hot peach-and-pear crisp gets rave

reviews. And now the new Chalkboard, which opened in May, 2013, tantalizes diners with a daily-changing menu of small plates like buttermilk-fried quail with parsnip puree and a radiatore pasta of lamb and brussel sprouts.

Our last night is saved for Santé, the Fairmont’s fine dining restaurant. Its wine list features over 600 different wines, but for a reasonable \$25 corkage fee, you can tote in any of those interesting bottles you’ve bought from your wine tasting in the area. Santé has snagged both AAA Four Diamond Award and Michelin star honors. Devouring the OMG mac-and-cheese with succulent lobster and black truffles, we understand why. Mixing up the tried-and-true with the unexpected is a genuine pleasure, just like our northern California getaway. ❖

Janice and George Mucalov are award-winning travel writers and photographers who specialize in luxury travel with an adventurous twist; their work can be seen at www.sandinmysuitcase.com.



PHOTO COURTESY DRY CREEK KITCHEN



PHOTO COURTESY FAIRMONT HOTELS

Top: Chateau St. Jean.

Above: Charlie Palmer’s Dry Creek Kitchen in Healdsburg.

Left: Santé’s mac-and-cheese with lobster and truffles.



FAIRMONT SONOMA MISSION INN & SPA

Old world resort in the heart of wine country

Its unparalleled spa is not the only reason to bed down at the Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa. Built around a pink replica of a 1927 mission, a recent multi-million dollar renovation has only added to its charm. Rooms have a fresh Provence-style décor, but the beautiful Mission Suites – with spa-like bathrooms, sunken tubs, cozy sitting areas and wood-burning fireplaces – are what you want to book. A wide array of outdoor and wellness activities means you can stay fit. Take out BMW bicycles to pedal into Sonoma town, book a private Pilates session, play tennis or join a guided hike. The Fairmont is also home to the nearby Sonoma Golf Club, which hosts the PGA championship each year. Then kick back with a free wine tasting in the lobby.



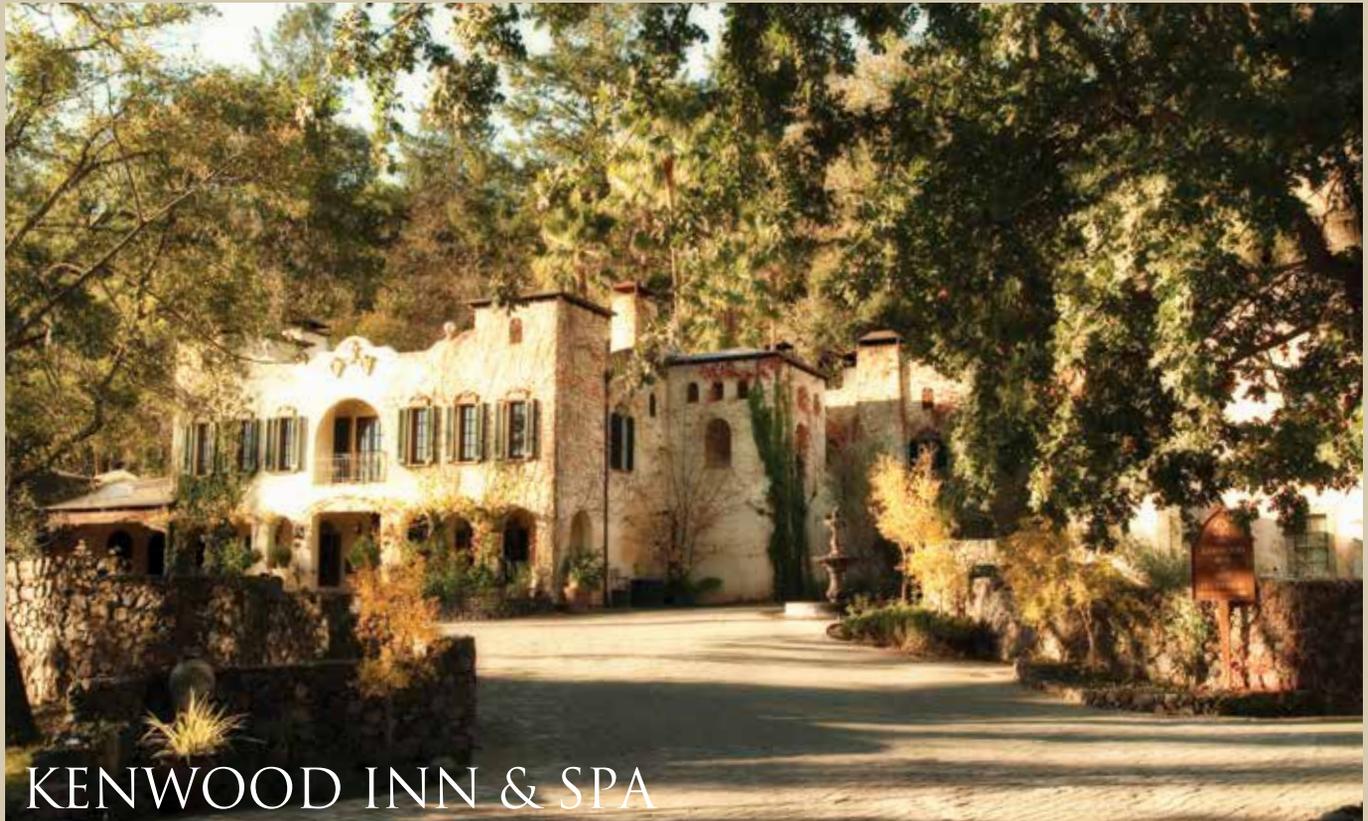
RITZ-CARLTON SAN FRANCISCO

Traditional elegance and the city's best hotel Club Lounge

Named "Best in America" by Andrew Harper's Hideaway Report, the Ritz-Carlton San Francisco's Club Level offers four excellent food presentations throughout the day. We loved the lox and big silver bowls of strawberries for breakfast. In the evening, we sipped port while reading by the wood-burning fireplace. The hotel's Parallel 37 restaurant also gets rave reviews for its fresh oysters and Kobe beef. Built in 1909, the Ritz-Carlton's white exterior is adorned with lions' heads, winged hourglasses and Ionic columns. Inside, chandeliers and 18th and 19th century artworks grace the elegant lobby. The top two floors are reserved for Club Level guests. Pamper yourself with a spacious junior or one-bedroom Club Level suite decorated with gold silk drapes, butter yellow wallpaper, gilt-framed paintings and divinely comfy feather beds with 400 thread count sheets. The hotel enjoys an enviable Nob Hill location, close to Chinatown and Union Square shopping. A complimentary city car is available to drop you off and pick you up from local restaurants – if you feel the need to venture out.



Santé



A taste of Tuscany amid the vineyards

Enter the lobby, and you step right into a tranquil Tuscany scene at Kenwood Inn & Spa. Vine-covered stone buildings. Garden courtyards. Tinkling fountains. Even a mill house with a stream, water wheel and koi pond. An adults-only policy adds to the sense of calm.

There are 29 individually-decorated guestrooms and suites with custom-crafted Italian furniture, featherbeds, fireplaces, tile floors with Persian rugs, and cavernous bathrooms. Outside, two pools invite you to relax with a glass of wine. The lovely spa offers vinotherapy wraps and scrubs that sound so good you want to eat the ingredients (the honey wrap includes raw honey, chamomile and red wine extract).

Yummy breakfasts are included in the rates. The dinner restaurant, presided over by a Michelin star-trained chef, is open only to Kenwood guests, turning out delicious meals like black olive poached monkfish with black cabbage from Kenwood's garden. From spring to fall, you sit outside on a colonnaded stone porch; in winter, a rustic fireplace warms up the inside space.



Romantic Victorian B&B in the heart of wine country

Nestled in the hills outside Healdsburg, Madrona Manor is a romantic Victorian estate with several buildings and a main mansion dating back to 1881.

All 22 guestrooms are Victorian in décor, complete with wallpaper, crystal chandeliers, original antiques and creaky floorboards (the best rooms are the two Schoolhouse Suites). But even though the inn retains its historic charm, every modern comfort has been thought of. Claw foot tubs have rain showers, and bathrooms have make-up mirrors and Aveda rosemary-and-mint products. Air conditioning is individually controlled. King size beds boast great mattresses and silky sheets. And for a homey touch, fresh-baked chocolate cookies are placed in your room daily.

The eight acres of gardens are a joy to stroll through. For decades, a master gardener has been tending the cherry trees, roses, lilies and camellias. An organic kitchen garden also yields lettuces, heirloom tomatoes, raspberries, peaches and more for Madrona Manor's acclaimed restaurant.