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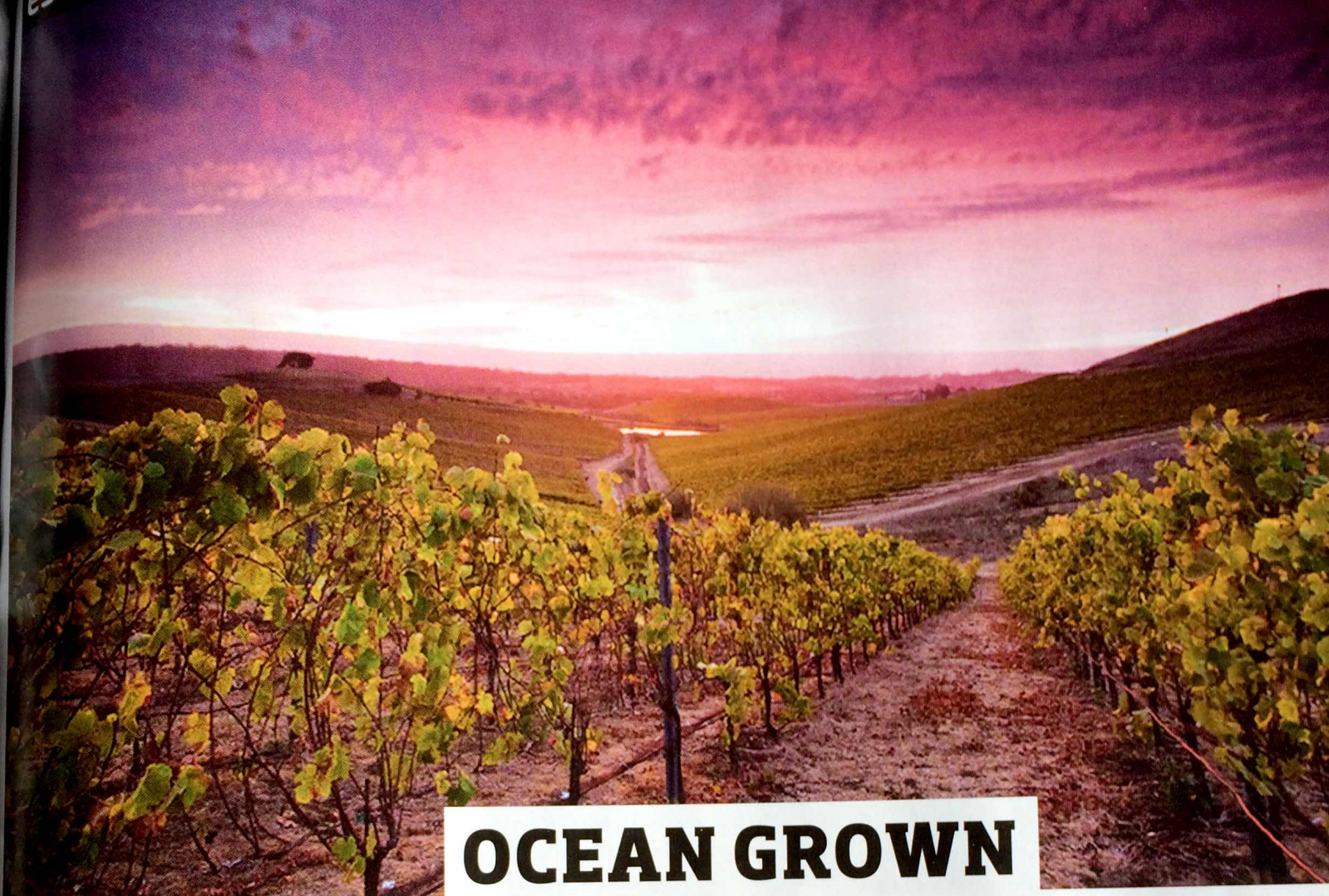
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OCEAN GROWN

BETWEEN THE MOUNTAINS AND THE BEACH, THE RELAXED LITTLE WINE COUNTRY IN SAN LUIS OBISPO ROLLS OUT A WARM WELCOME. BY KRISTA MINARD

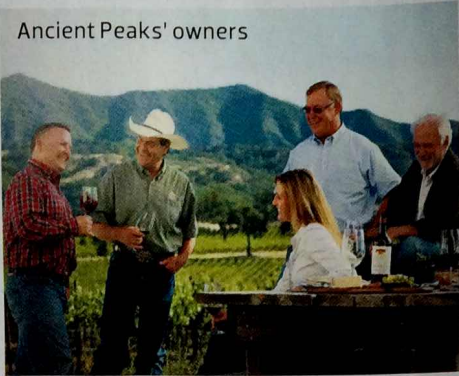


Top: Laetitia Vineyard & Winery
Bottom: Novo restaurant

On the deck at The Casitas Estate, the breeze curls in from the ocean, whitecapping the water in the lap pool and flapping the umbrella over the table. It's too early for sunbathing—give it another month or so—but the sun splashes between fluffs of almost-spring clouds and sparkles off the glass of wine in your hand. Look—over here, the fog-clogged coast. Down there, the Arroyo Grande Valley; just behind, the Edna Valley. In these picturesque furrows between the Santa Lucia mountain range and the accompanying hillsides, grapes grow stressed all season long, challenged by wind and heat and sun and chill and soil that changes with practically every hillside.

Halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, San Luis Obispo might be known more for its California Polytechnic university than anything else, but it's also a quietly phenomenal food-and-wine destination. This wine country is as friendly as it is beautiful, an agrarian world of rural roads and deep-blue sky, where vintners share rather than compete and tasting room visitors are welcomed with warm smiles and flights proudly poured. You'll find a pinot noir on almost every wine-tasting counter here, although some 20-plus varieties of wine come out of this region.

Ancient Peaks' owners



Just listen to Mike Sinor, board president of the SLO Wine Country association and director of winemaking at **Ancient Peaks Winery**, and you get a sense of the community. "There's the small-town vibe and so much camaraderie," says Sinor, who acquired **Bassi Ranch Vineyard** in 2013 and makes artisan wines under his own Sinor-LaVallee label. "We're farmers. Everyone shares."

Do a winery hop, and you discover he's right. Sinor might make wine for Ancient Peaks and grow his own grapes for his label, but he'll send visitors to **Tolosa** winery for chardonnay or to **Kynsi Winery** for a certain pinot noir from a specific block of a certain vineyard (Estate Stone Corral, actually) that takes its name from the original Spanish land grant for much of the Edna Valley. Sinor knows his stuff, and he knows his neighbors. He tilts glasses with them regularly and tells stories that go back decades. Similarly, Brian Talley of **Talley Vineyards/Talley Farms** will happily speak highly of wines from **Laetitia** or **Chamisal** wineries—as he sits sampling with yet another winery's winemakers—and so forth. The people in the SLO wine industry, from the winemakers to vineyard owners to Cal Poly viticulture interns, all speak of information shares, idea swaps and equipment trades, and whenever more than one SLO wine geek turns up in the same room, they talk grapes, soil, wind, harvest. When asked

if awards erupt jealousy, they laugh and shake their heads. "There's plenty to go around," says Jac Jacobs, winemaker for **Kelsey See Canyon Vineyards**. "This is a lifestyle, not a competition."

Food goes with wine—or it might be the other way 'round. Either way, the region teems with the goods. Olives, avocados, berries, apples, asparagus, melons, lettuces and other greens, corn, pomegranates, herbs—name it, and it grows in San Luis Obispo County, some of it on Brian Talley's family farm, which runs one of the area's most active Community Supported Agriculture programs. Add to that the local meat and poultry, much of it sustainably pasture raised, and seafood plucked straight from the sea, and the SLO plate packs a tasty punch.

Go ahead, head south for some food and wine. Yes, we realize we're sending you right past Paso Robles, the more famous wine region to San Luis Obispo's north, but nothing's stopping you from stopping there as well. Just make sure to devote at least a few days to the SLO scene. It's got its own flavor. But before you go, one bit of advice: Bring a cooler.

WHERE TO STAY

For a combination beach, food and wine getaway, stay in Avila Beach, a little village of shops and restaurants hugging the waterfront. At **Avila La Fonda**, a boutique hotel with 28 rooms, you'll find Spanish and Mexican architecture, fountains, stained-glass windows—and a whirlpool tub for two in every room. It's a richly colorful cocoon, and one block away: the beach. Another favorite aspect of Avila La Fonda: the munchies. Morning chocolate chip croissants and



Avila La Fonda

DRINK AND DON'T DRIVE



Laura Jeffrey of **101 Wine Tours** knows how to (help you) have a good time. Behind the wheel of her Mercedes Sprinter van, she will lead you on a tour of San Luis Obispo's wineries and fill you in on the back stories, too. From her time spent volunteering at local wine events—including as wine coordinator for the San Luis Obispo Jazz Festival—Jeffrey knows the winemakers, the wineries and the wines, and she's happy to share her knowledge while she totes visitors to and fro. She and her husband, Dave, moved to the area when their son Kyle began studying enology and viticulture at Cal Poly, and she threw herself into the world of wine, even making a few barrels of it herself. She'll customize a tour for your group; the van seats 12, the air-conditioning/heat works front, middle and back, and the broad windows allow for scenery viewing from all angles. Plus, Jeffrey brings snacks.

escape

coffee, late-afternoon wine and appetizers, later-evening pie and coffee/tea.

For a pure wine getaway, reserve **Biddle Ranch Vineyard's** vacation house, **Un Po 'di Cielo** (loosely translated as "a little bit of heaven"). Parked among the chardonnay vines with views of some of San Luis Obispo's famous Nine Sisters mountains, the three-bedroom, three-bath home could easily house several couples. It's beautifully appointed with wood recovered from Alex Trebek's former ranch

in nearby Creston—Jeopardy wood, we called it—and river rock, and decorated by local designer Anne Fortini. Kick back on the oversize couches in the living room facing the vineyard, or beneath the olive trees on the spacious backyard patio, where you could hold a dinner party for a dozen people comfortably or a cocktail party for dozens more. We're thinking wedding?

Finally, **The Casitas Estate** up on the hillside above Arroyo Grande Valley

has four rooms—private-entrance casitas—available: Cielo (again, heaven), Mariposa (butterfly), Sonrisa (smile) and Sarchi (relaxing place). Each is anchored by a wood-burning kiva fireplace adorned with colorful tilework and a king bed layered with Ralph Lauren bedding; every casita, tucked among lush gardens, showcases the stunning hilltop view.

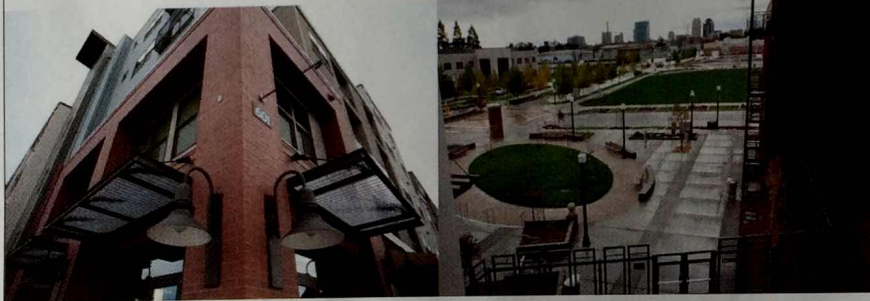
WHERE TO DRINK

Two official American Viticultural Areas exist under the umbrella of SLO Wine Country—Edna Valley and Arroyo Grande Valley—but a number of the association's 29 member wineries fall outside the AVAs as well. The majority of the region's vineyards are SIP-certified, which means they follow Sustainability in Practice methods of grape growing.

Visit **Independence Schoolhouse** (where six wineries pour in a quaint yellow schoolhouse), **Chamisal Vineyards** (just pinot noir and chardonnay), **Tolosa** (a solar-powered operation) or **Saucelito Canyon** (the 1880 zinfandel!). At **Claiborne & Churchill**, Alsatian-style wines dominate the flight: dry riesling, gewurztraminer and pinot gris. The tall, green flute bottles will feel especially festive on a table full of olives, peppers, cheeses and charcuterie. If you're staying at the Biddle Ranch vacation house, stop over at the **Biddle Ranch** tasting room near Avila Beach to try the chardonnay that comes from the grapes outside your windows. At **Kynsi**, owner/winemakers Don and Gwen Othman create not only wine but wine equipment; Don is famous in vinicultural circles for his design of the Bulldog Pup, a gas-pressure racking wand that transfers delicate pinot noir from barrels without disturbance and has become a wine industry standard. While visiting Kynsi, ask to hear the owl story. (Teaser: "Kynsi" means "talon" in Finnish, the Othmans' heritage, and barn owls have proven indispensable in keeping their vineyards' gopher populations down.) At **Laetitia**, vineyard pests are kept under control with ravenous goats to gobble weeds and peregrine falcons to bully off those pesky grape-loving starlings. Sip champagne while you watch for Laetitia's charging falcon. At **Talley Vineyards**, sit at shady outdoor tables with a picnic. Admire the El Rincon

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adobe, built in the 1860s. It used to house the tasting room, and it still adorns the Talley wine labels. Across Highway 101, **Kelsey See Canyon Vineyards** sits in an apple orchard on the edge of See Canyon Creek, and some 130 peacocks roam the property, often in full fan. Make sure to try the hard apple cider and the Golden Delicious, a combination cider/wine.

WHERE TO EAT

Downtown San Luis Obispo rocks with good energy on Thursday nights, when the weekly **farmers market** gets underway. Running from 6 to 9 p.m. except Thanksgiving, and not if it rains, the market stretches down Higuera Street for about five blocks. Amid flower and produce booths, with live music in your ear, you'll find real meals, including barbecue. The line for a plate of **F.McLintocks** ribs or brisket runs long (200 people on a warm summer night) but moves fast. You'll also find tamales, sushi, burritos, pasties (pockets of dough filled with meat and root veggies), churros and more. Get some strawberries if you can—these are some

of the reddest and sweetest—and pick up some SLO honey.

Novo restaurant, also in town, makes a mean salmon bisque, best consumed on the patio by San Luis Creek. The menu, which combines “local, global and wholesome” (the restaurant’s mantra), includes curries, seafood (the diver scallops—oh, my), grilled meats and fried Moroccan chicken, and the wine list, of course, celebrates the local bounty. Another downtown spot, **Big Sky Cafe**, has a cool and colorful barn vibe and a menu packed with good stuff like the third-pound organic, grass-fed beef burger (from SunFed Farms) on an Edna’s Bakery bun. Big Sky’s a popular spot for vegetarians, with lots of meat-free choices (the vegan Big Sky noodle bowl with tofu, please). For seafood downtown, go to **Ciopinot** for the Fisherman’s Plate, which includes Asian-style Chilean sea bass, blackened wild salmon, broiled swordfish, grilled jumbo scallop, prawns and deep-fried calamari. Or, of course, cioppino, coupled with the local specialty: pinot noir. Go for the “work” (versus “no work”) cioppino—

sure, no work’s easier and cheaper, but for the work, you get King crab legs, mussels and clams, still in their shells.



Ocean Grill

If you’re staying in Avila Beach, stick close to “home” and wander over to **Ocean Grill**. Take a beach-view table and start with a seared ahi appetizer, a bowl of the bacon-y clam chowder and a glass of Center of Effort (Edna Valley) chardonnay.

BEFORE YOU LEAVE TOWN

Remember that cooler we suggested you bring? It’s so you have somewhere to put the fruits and veggies from the farmers market and seafood you’ll want to grab from **BJ’s Live Seafood** out on Harford Pier at Port San Luis in Avila Beach, specializing in fish brought in that morning. **F**



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