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# The New York Times

Late Edition

Today, morning fog, periodic rain and drizzle, becoming windy, high 50. Tonight, periodic rain, windy, low 42. Tomorrow, rain, windy, high 43. Weather map appears on Page A18.

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SUNDAY, JANUARY 22, 2017

## Travel

The New York Times

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HEADS UP | CARMEL VALLEY, CALIF.

### Another Wine Country, Casual and Quiet



Travelers are opting for this small but growing alternative to Sonoma or Napa.

By NICK CZAP

With an eye toward catching a California sunset, we arranged a dinner reservation on the early side one evening last spring. Our table overlooked a vineyard, three acres of pinot noir. Dinner began with a silky cauliflower soup garnished with roasted cauliflower florets and summer truffle. The restaurant, Valley Kitchen, had recently released its first estate vintage, and we ordered two glasses of the pinot to go with the main — risotto with purple asparagus and trumpet mushrooms.

As my wife and I munched and sipped, our eyes took in the view beyond the vineyard, phalanx upon phalanx of high rounded hills fading from green to gray in the softening light.

So this was Carmel Valley. Or rather, Carmel Valley Ranch, a 500-acre resort whose recently completed \$20 million revitalization added wine education classes, a well-being workshop with horses, 30 new indoor-outdoor suites, and a redesign of the resort's restaurant, whose chef, Tim Wood, devised our dinner. The changes at Carmel Valley Ranch are among a number of developments bringing attention, and new visitors, to this lesser-known side of Monterey County.

Many people equate the name Carmel with Carmel-by-the-Sea, a tourist magnet whose downtown shopping district channels a 16th-century European village. But Carmel-by-the-Sea has a country cousin — a vast expanse of grassland, forest and



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOE FLETCHER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

chapparral-covered hills a few miles in from the coast.

Carmel Valley was settled 2,000 years ago by the Esselen and Costanoan Rumsen tribes. The Spanish built a mission here in 1771, then parceled off enormous ranches to private owners by way of land grants. Today, Carmel Valley is still home to many cattle ranches, some encompassing thousands of acres.

Grapevines, likewise, have been growing here since the 1800s. In 1983, Carmel Valley was designated an American Viticultural Area, but with only 300 acres under cultivation, its production is minuscule relative to the 45,000 acres of the Napa Valley, about 160 miles north.

Still, the number of tasting rooms in Carmel Valley Village — a hamlet whose focal point is a small cluster of shops and restaurants — has been multiplying exponentially. In 2000, there were five tasting rooms on Carmel Valley Road, the main thoroughfare; today, there are 25. That many of these wineries get their fruit from nearby growing regions like Arroyo Seco makes their wines no less delectable.

For a taste of local terroir, we visited two small Carmel Valley estate wineries — Boëté (pronounced "bwah-tay") and Parsonage — whose intensely fruity cabernets illustrate just what the valley's yearly average of 300 days of sun can achieve in a per-



Top row, from left: Valley Kitchen, the restaurant at Carmel Valley Ranch; a gate to Calamity Farms in the valley; Parsonage vineyard and winery. Above, the entrance to Bernardus Lodge and Spa.

fectly situated vineyard.

Increasingly, locals say, wine aficionados from Southern California are opting for Carmel Valley rather than Sonoma or Napa. The appeal of a shorter drive is clear, but there's also a more laid-back vibe, and the fact that visitors can simply walk from one tasting room to another. But Carmel Valley will likely never accommodate the crowds that flock to the other regions. Development is sharply curtailed by local laws limiting the amount of water that can be taken from



the Carmel River. So while the valley's hotels and resorts have something of a captive audience, they still have to compete. Those at the higher end in particular have been upping the ante.

Bernardus Lodge and Spa, which opened in 1999, is finishing a multimillion-dollar expansion. Bernardus redesigned all of its guest rooms and added 14 suites and villas; the villas accommodate up to eight guests and cost from \$950 to \$2,500 a night.

It added new treatment rooms to its spa and created a "curated wellness component," including yoga, hypnotherapy and guided meditation. It also redesigned its highly regarded restaurant, Lucia, whose longtime chef, Cal Stamenov, honed his skills alongside luminaries like Alain Ducasse and Pierre Gagnaire.

Luxury resorts don't own all of the valley's charms, though. One of the most affordable accommodations, Los Laureles Lodge, offers a captivating window on Carmel Valley's bucolic past. Originally part of a roughly 7,000-acre land grant, the property was used in the 1910s and '20s by a Monterey hotel as a hunting lodge for its guests.

In 1930, the East Coast heiress Muriel Vanderbilt Phelps bought the property, adding stables for her racehorses. Today, rooms in those former stables start at \$110 a night.

For \$175, I sprang for a simple but cheery private cottage. At dawn I tiptoed to the porch perched at the edge of the live oak forest, where, as the sun rose so did the sounds of nature — the tappings of acorn woodpeckers, the twitter of a chestnut-backed chickadee, and from somewhere deep in the shadows, the soft, insistent song of a Western bluebird.