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POETRY ON THE MAP SONOMA COUNTY

by Rich Rubin





Just a short drive north of San Francisco is Sonoma County, a vast and diverse landscape that includes everything from vineyards to redwoods, from pounding surf to leafy plazas. Every little town has its own character, from the laid-back LGBT environs of Russian River towns like Guerneville to tony Healdsburg, hippie-ish Sebastopol, artsy/agricultural Petaluma, and historic Sonoma, and the land between them is as powerfully beautiful and unimaginably varied as the towns. I'm warning you ahead of time, I'm going to be waxing poetic before this story is over, because that's the kind of feeling Sonoma County gives rise to: it's a poetic kind of place.

Well that all sounds amazing, I hear you saying, but how do you actually get there, and what's there once you arrive? The scenic route is Highway 1, one of the most beautiful coastal roads in the world. As soon as you cross the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco, the scenery begins to get spectacular, and as it twists and turns along the coast, it's pretty sublime (though not exactly quick). This time, though, I head straight up Highway 101, saving the delights of the coast for later, and within 45 minutes I'm in **Petaluma**, the nearest Sonoma County town.

PETALUMA

I love Petaluma's combination of chic and agricultural—there may be stores with names like “Earth Song” or boutiques offering aromatherapy candles, but one of the biggest events in town is “Butter and Egg Days.” Since it's so close to San Francisco, it has long attracted artists and craftspeople who want the studio space but don't want to pay city prices. This has brought an artsy air to a town founded on poultry (you'll still see Petaluma chicken on many menus), and once you've left the city on your Sonoma County adventure, it's a perfect starting point and a charming place to while away an afternoon and get in the mellow Sonoma mood.

I walk along the Petaluma River and stroll among late 19th and early 20th century architecture. I visit **Vintage Bank Antiques**, three floors packed to the gills with temptations in the gorgeous 1920's American Trust Building, where I almost buy a rustic 19th-century grain bin (how on earth would I get that home?). Around the corner in **Sienna Antiques**, I'm tempted by a nine-foot needlepoint panel with dragons and flowers, and a 1920's French puppet set. I have coffee served by the friendliest staff in creation in **Acre Coffee** before stopping in one of my favorite little eateries, **Petaluma Pie Company**, where you can get pies including a lunchtime mushroom/goat gouda and such sweet treats as dark chocolate/tart cherry. Want a sit-down meal? Check out **Graffiti**, set right on the river that offers a laid-back contemporary elegance and creative cuisine. As I leave the restaurant and head down 4th Street, a sudden gust of wind rustles some wind chimes outside a store into pleasant cacophony. Before long, the street corner is filled with people watching and listening as the chimes clang like it's a major event. That's all I need to know about Petaluma.

GUERNEVILLE AND THE RUSSIAN RIVER

I can't linger too long, though, as I'm headed to heaven on earth: the **Russian River** resort area. Since the 1970s, Russian River is one of the grand-old LGBT resort areas in the country, on par with Fire Island or Rehoboth Beach. As I drive along wooded River Road, a feeling overtakes me as it always does: I'm headed to Russian River! Here in Guerneville and surrounding towns, there's a laid-back quality to the beauty, a take-you-as-you-are feeling that makes it my favorite LGBT resort destination.

I'm trying something new on this trip, and rather than staying in a hotel, I've booked a house through **Russian River Getaways**. To put it

Guerneville Gay Pride Parade



Picnic Time



Photo: www.sonomacounty.com

Lovers walk hand in hand down the diagonal paths, and people smile at me as they pass. I'd say this is all too storybook perfect to be real, except that I'm experiencing it. At this exact moment, I really don't want to leave Sonoma County. Ever.

simply: they're a great company, and I don't hesitate to recommend them. They have houses of all sizes, in all price ranges, and if you have a few couples venturing to Russian River together, you're actually paying much less than you would in a hotel for unrivalled privacy and truly wonderful quarters. I'm in this amazing house with large, airy living room/dining room, fireplace for cool nights, and a wall of windows overlooking the Russian River. Bedrooms are large, well appointed, and comfy, the kitchen better than anything I have at home, and the deck boasts a grill, hot tub, and incredible views all the way down the river (there's also a private dock and boat). The house's name? Not surprisingly, it's "Paradise." Thank you, Russian River Getaways.

If you want the amenities of a hotel, check out **Highlands Resort**, which Ken and Lynette McLean have run for 20 years. It's a typically Russian River story, this straight couple running an LGBT resort for decades, with its sweet little cabins and clothing-optional pool. Says Lynette in between bites of her homemade granola, "We just started comparing every other place to here. Everywhere else came up short." It is, in fact, a pretty perfect location, a woodsy setting that takes you by the hand and says, "you're going to relax now, aren't you?"

Guerneville has the comfort of a long-established mecca, whether you visit for Women's Weekend in May, Pride Weekend in June, or late July/early August's Lazy Bear Weekend. Or just come whenever you feel the need for

some beauty and a lot of fun. While the LGBT roots are unmistakable, and locals estimate that half of Guerneville's 5,000 or so residents are LGBT, the area has recently been "discovered" by a young and hip crowd. While I'll always make time for such down-home spots as funky little coffeshop **Coffee Bazaar**, now there's actually beginning to be a Russian River dining scene, thanks to such restaurants as out Chef/Proprietor Crista Luedtke's **Boon Eat + Drink**, where the emphasis on fresh, local food from flash-fried Brussel sprouts to seared local duck keeps the dozen or so tables packed. Even tiny Forestville down the road boasts a restaurant as spectacularly cozy as **Backyard**, where Chef Daniel Kedan dishes up "comfort food plus" in a lovely country-house atmosphere. Not to be missed: their amazing version of chicken pot pie, topped with tiny buttermilk biscuits, and the chocolate budiño, with a surprising hint of salted caramel.

What gay nightlife exists in Sonoma County is in Guerneville: namely, **Rainbow Cattle Company**, which seems unchanged every time I visit: pool table, laid-back staff, and a mainly male crowd. While you're on a nightlife prowl (I use the term loosely), stop in **El Barrio**, a tequila bar recently opened by the owner of Boon, whose evocative Southwestern décor and mind-boggling assortment of tequilas draws a mixed and mellow crowd to sip and chat. You'll also want to see what's on at **Triple R**, a "party central" kind of resort where you might relax in the piano bar or strut your stuff on karaoke night (open to non-guests).

Mainly, though, this area is about nature, and you'll spend your Guerneville days exploring some of the most gorgeous scenery in the area. I always make a trip to **Armstrong Woods State Natural Reserve**, where over 800 acres of redwoods beckon with their humble majesty. Come here during the week and you can almost feel the silence descend upon these trees that have been here for centuries. Spend an afternoon watching the sunlight filter through the branches of trees that rise hundreds of feet into the air. Stroll along verdant paths that lead from wonder to wonder. Are you relaxed yet?

If the answer is "not quite," head to the river. Whether you choose to rent a kayak or simply stroll along its banks, let the ever-changing enchantment of Russian River take over, gently demanding that you let go of stress. I watch in delight as ducks dive-bomb into the water, birds tinged with blue and green dart between treetops, kayakers paddle by looking very, very happy, and the light moves across the river, dancing on the banks. I've been to a lot of beautiful places in the world, but there are very few that hold for me the magic of Russian River, and I suspect you'll feel it too. It's hard not to, so irresistible is the river's pull.

SEBASTOPOL

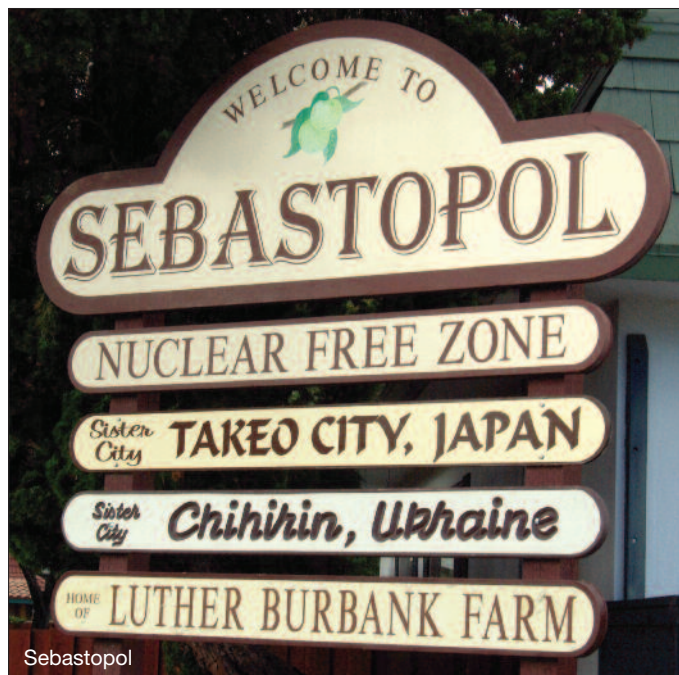
As much as I want to stay by the side of the river for days, there's more exploring to do. A half hour southeast of Guerneville lies appealing, hippy-ish little Sebastopol, one of my favorite Sonoma County towns. As I walk down the street, a banner overhead proclaims, "Local flavor, global vision," and that's the perfect description of this winning little town, where the 1960s still live and people are unashamedly and devotedly left-wing (in other words, my kinda people). There's not a hell of a lot to "do" in Sebastopol—unless you count a bunch of great restaurants and some very wonderful shops.

I start my Sebastopol day at **Sumbody**, my favorite skin-care products place in the world. Along one wall are lined up tall towers of soaps, striped in deep hues and ranging from avocado/goat's milk to apricot/rose. Tables at the center are filled with fizzy bath bombs, salts, and other products for total submerged relaxation. Shelves along the walls hold shampoos and skin toners.

I supplement the familiar with some new discoveries, like the **Tibetan Gallery and Studio**, where Proprietor Tashi Dhargyal is pretty much single-handedly keeping alive the traditional art of the Thangka, or Tibetan scroll painting. Watch Tashi hard at work on the massive, five-year artwork on the studio's wall, admire his smaller paintings, listen to him explain the tradition behind the Thangka, and browse among a variety of Tibetan pleas-



Photos: www.sonomacounty.com



ures from silky scarves and jewelry to bold pillow covers.

It's part of a new development called **The Barlow**, which is carved out of an erstwhile apple-canning factory and holds a variety of great spots. I love **Taylor Maid**, a two-story coffee palace where the aroma of beans roasting in the back room prepares you for some of the best caffeinated drinks in the area. **Spirit Works**, a gin/whiskey distillery, offers an interesting tour of the whole works, though due to odd California law you'll have to run to a nearby store to get their products (I suggest sloe gin, a uniquely old-fashioned liqueur that's experiencing a revival). I love the food at **Vignette Pizzeria**, where Chef Mark Hopper is going way beyond the ordinary. I start with these amazing dried chiles that are slightly but not incredibly hot, crispy, salty, and delicious. Then I dig into a pizza bianca whose crust seems to be made of air and whose topping carries a hint of honey. It's honestly the best pizza I've ever had.

Practically across the street, one of my favorite Sonoma County spots, **zazu kitchen**, has moved from Santa Rosa, and Chef Duskie Estes is still on her game. Many of the dishes feature the products of her Black Pig bacon company, such as a "bacon burger" with the bacon chopped up in the burger itself. Vegetarians, fear not, such pleasures as pasta with fava leaf pesto, ricotta, and fresh peas await.

Down on the southern edge of town, in a nondescript strip mall, I discover a wonderful place called **The Kefiry**, where I sample several varieties of this "healthy soda." While we think of kefir as a dairy beverage, these are non-dairy, using the kefir culture as a fermentation agent. You can sample flavors like lemon/ginger or turmeric (surprisingly my favorite) or go for a sweeter root beer-style beverage or chocolate/chili. Healthy, delicious, and just a little offbeat: where else could this drink be made but Sebastopol?

HEALDSBURG

How different it all feels in the town of **Healdsburg**, about a half hour northeast of Guerneville, whose shady central plaza is surrounded by boutiques, galleries, tasting rooms, and restaurants, staying just on the right side of too chi chi (for now). Surrounded by rolling hills covered in vineyards that have supplanted the once-active prune growing industry that built the town, there's plenty here that's down to earth, accessible, and very



Photos: www.sonomacounty.com

pleasant. I mean, the town's baseball team is named the Prune Packers. How can you not love a town like that?

The **H2 Hotel**, built by the owners of the larger Hotel Healdsburg, is a LEED-certified boutique property with a hip overlay. Check in at the "receptobar," where espresso or wine is available to ease the process (not that it's difficult with their sweet staff). Relax in the lounge, across which are strewn a colorful assortment of chairs and a many-sided arrangement of cushioned couches. Rooms are clean-lined, modern, and appealing, with bamboo floors, fabric headboards, and balconies overlooking the green hills. Their **Spoon Bar** is one of the town's most popular, featuring elaborate creations devised by a celebrated mixologist, Scott Beattie.

Do pay a visit to **SHED**, a wonderful new spot devoted to "good cooking, good eating, and good farming." The owners started as farmers, and it's obvious in their love of growing, preparing, and enjoying culinary wonders. You'll find seeds and gardening equipment, fabulous kitchen supplies, produce, and prepared foods, most of it local. Wandering the aisles, I'm tempted by Meyer lemon jam, smoked chocolate chips (yep!), organic popcorn, hibiscus/lavender syrup, and much more. Be sure to stop by the bar for a Shrub, a traditional farmer's tonic of vinegar and fruit juice that's about a million times better than it sounds! This repository of goodness is a welcome addition to Healdsburg's many culinary offerings.

Speaking of which: right on the plaza, I stop in **Noble Folk**, the latest creation of Christian Sullberg and Ozzy Jiminez, the young couple responsible for the estimable **Moustache Bakery**, around the corner. I've always loved Moustache's creative takes on cupcakes, and now these two dessert mavens have opened Noble Folk, a "Pie and Ice

Cream Bar." With the same clean-lined white look, this place is a true emporium of not just sweetness, but creativity (and local sourcing), with such twists on the traditional as passionfruit/chocolate pie or ice creams like green tea/almond and lingonberry. I never thought there would be any place to satisfy my sweet tooth more than Moustache, but Noble Folk might just be it.

On to **The Taste of Tea**, and more very Healdsburg pleasures. Here you can sip your tea in various concoctions, and perhaps enjoy a bowl of home-made ramen while you're at it. Try one of their treatments, which at the least will leave you feeling relaxed and energetic, and at the most might change your life a little for the better. In the quiet back room my feet are placed in a warm green tea bath, a mask steeped in the same tea on my face. My wrists are sprayed with a tea solution, and the mask is continually re-hydrated as my skin soaks up the moisture. My feet suddenly feel good after days of walking, and when the mask is removed and a mirror brought ... well, I've always thought it sounded hokey to say your skin will "glow," but that's what mine does.

Afterward, at **Valette**, I have a remarkable dinner. Open only nine weeks when I eat there, it's already one of the hottest spots in town and every table in the large open space is filled. The menu gives the option of a multi-course "trust me" menu where Chef Dustin Valette decides what you'll have, and in my newly daring Sonoma County spirit, I go for it. Soon the amazements start arriving. Perfectly seared ahi with a stripe of kimchee purée. Pasta with arugula pesto, peas, and pickled radish. Scallops with leeks in a pernod sauce, under a puff pastry tinted with squid ink. Yes, I end up pleasantly stuffed, but who wouldn't leave room for frozen chocolate mousse with toasted marshmallow meringue?

OUT IN THE VINEYARD

Sonoma County wouldn't be Sonoma County without wine, and while I've tried to guide you to some of the other attractions throughout the area, we really need do some wine exploration now. With 17 different appellations throughout the county, it can get a little overwhelming. Dry Creek is not like Russian River, which is not like Carneros, Alexander Valley, or the Sonoma Coast, and the many microclimates lead to every wine imaginable being produced. According to Gary Saperstein, founder of the invaluable **Out in the Vineyard** (Tel: 707-495-9732. www.out-in-thevineyard.com): "Each region is almost known for different varietals, but the thing that ties them all together is wine."

For Saperstein, the wine industry is just tuning into the ever-growing LGBT population here: "It's great to see wine country really opening up to the LGBT community. The bottom line is, it's all about hospitality." Not that it was ever a huge problem. States Saperstein categorically: "We have not encountered ANY homophobia."

The highlight of Out in the Vineyard's year is **Gay Wine Weekend**, held annually in June, which includes such events as wine tours, winemaker-hosted dinners, tea dances, after parties, brunches, and a wine auction that raises money for Face to Face, the local HIV/AIDS organization. Can't make it in June? Give Out in the Vineyard a call and they can arrange a personally escorted tour for you, so you can do away with the need for a designated driver and let the experts do the transport while you concentrate on the tasting—and what riches there are to sample in this region.

I love **Iron Horse Vineyards** (9786 Ross Station Rd., Sebastopol. Tel: 707-887-107. www.ironhorsevineyards.com), a Sebastopol/Forestville winery, whose Rainbow Cuvee, a Champagne-style wine they released when marriage was legalized in California, was served at the White House LGBT reception last year (amazing views from here, too!). You'll also love **Porter Creek Vineyards** (8735 Westside Rd., Healdsburg. Tel: 707-433-6321. www.portercreekvineyards.com), a lovely small winery whose hospitality manager is an active member of the community, and **Gary Farrell Winery** (10701 Westside Rd., Healdsburg. Tel: 707-473-2909. www.gary-farrellwinery.com), whose out winemaker Theresa Heredia was one of the featured winemakers at the most recent Gay Wine Weekend.

Envolve Winery (27 E. Napa St., Sonoma. Tel: 707-939-5385. www.envolvewinery.com), supporter of many local charities and participant in Gay Wine Weekend, offers a unique **Pinot Clonal Experience**, allowing you to sample wine made from each of three pinot noir grape clones, and then experience the version that blends all three. In Kenwood, visit **Deerfield Ranch Winery** (10200 Sonoma Highway, Kenwood. Tel: 707-833-5215. www.deerfieldranch.com), where you'll walk through a long tunnel of wine barrels to do your tasting in the actual wine cave. It's small, family owned, and man is their wine good. (It's also "clean," with low sulfite and histamine levels.) Need some laughs with your vintage? Deerfield has been the resident venue for **Crushers of Comedy** (Tel: 415-350-6433. www.crushersofcomedy.com), the region's premiere standup troupe, whose slogan, not surprisingly, is "macerate in comedy."

Another great option is a Deerfield cooking demonstration, for a perfect synthesis of wine and cuisine. This is quite the trend among wineries, with many learning the value of including food in their experience. Learn about "The Magic of Wine and Mustard" at **DeLoach Vineyards** (1791 Olivet



Photo: www.sonomacounty.com

Rd., Santa Rosa. Tel: 707-526-9111. www.deloachvineyards.com), on the outskirts of Santa Rosa, where you'll gather in the stately dining room to make your own mustard from seeds, crushing them in your personal mortar and pestle, and adding wine as you choose. This is followed by a tasting of small plates, all involving mustard in their preparation. At Healdsburg's **Jordan Winery** (1474 Alexander Valley Rd., Healdsburg. Tel: 707-431-5250. www.jordanwinery.com), the Estate Tour and Tasting takes you around this 1,200-acre property in a Mercedes minibus, from gardens to lake to hilltop viewpoint, where you'll enjoy such gourmet creations as "sushi" topped with fruit rather than fish, smoked pork with Sebastopol mushrooms, local cheeses with quince paste, and spiced fruit. Needless to say, you'll sip a few of their vintages in tandem with the culinary delights at this winery that has had a resident chef since its inception.

The folks at **BR Cohn Winery** (15000 Sonoma Highway, Glen Ellen. Tel: 707-938-4585. www.brcohn.com) are well aware of the connections between food and wine, and their olive oil production has been an essential part of the developing California industry. After tasting their wines, do the same with their olive oils (the picholine is my favorite), and as your attendant comments, "this one's a little stronger on the pepper flavors" or "this is really better used with softer lettuces," you'll realize: wine might rule here, but they take olive oil just as seriously!

In Sonoma, **Corner 103** (103 W. Napa St., Sonoma. Tel: 707-931-64141. www.corner103.com) is the premiere spot to lose whatever intimidation you feel about wine, as their food and wine pairings lead you gently through the process. You'll try seven different wines, each from a different AVA in Sonoma County, as you explore flavor combinations. Sample hummus with a Chardonnay or dry jack cheese with a Cabernet. How does it change things to squeeze some lemon on the hummus or add fig jam to the cheese? The goal is to demystify the process and make wine what it should be: fun.

Speaking of fun, one of my favorite winery events is **Wine & Sunsets in Paradise**, at **Paradise Ridge Winery** (4545 Thomas Lake Harris Dr., Santa Rosa. Tel: 707-282-9020. www.prwinery.com), which is food, wine, nature, and nightlife all in one. At this gorgeous spot with sculpture scattered throughout the grounds, you'll sip their estimable wines, listen to live music, and enjoy food from a variety of purveyors. Gaze out over miles of grapevine-coated fields and hills as the sun slowly sinks over a land that you won't dispute for one second that it has earned the name "Paradise."

— Rich Rubin

SANTA ROSA

While you expect to find such pleasures in a town like Healdsburg, which just screams “pleasure awaits,” there are many surprises throughout the county. **Santa Rosa**, about 15 minutes south of Healdsburg, is Sonoma County’s “big city” where many wonderful experiences and hidden treasures await. On the edge of town, I discover the **Charles Schulz Museum**, which tells you just about everything you’d want to know about the history of “Peanuts” and the longtime Sonoma County resident that created the strip. Also on the north side of the city is **Wells Fargo Center for the Arts**, home to music, theater, and much more. Even if you don’t see a show, wander by during the day to see their newly opened Sculpture Garden, where contemporary artists are shown in an oasis-like, alfresco setting.

Back to the city center for coffee at my favorite Santa Rosa caffeine-ery, **A’Roma Roasters**, is delicious in historic Railroad Square. Then on to **Luther Burbank Home and Gardens**, the residence of this Santa Rosa-based botanical maven. You can tour the house on a guided visit, but feel free to wander the gardens at will from dawn to dusk. They seem small at first glance, but the more you walk, the more riches you uncover: huge fields of Shasta daisies, an alluring scent garden, about a million varieties of roses, and a cactus as big as most houses. It’s a testament to Burbank’s genius and the amenable climate of Sonoma County, in which just about everything will grow.

Dinner, of course, is delicious in the ever-popular **Willi’s Wine Bar**, where a lengthy wine list is supplemented by alluring small plates like scallop dumplings, goat cheese gnocchi, mu shu bacon, and filet mignon sliders. Share them all, along with your favorite Sonoma county wine, in this low-key and sophisticated setting named after a Parisian spot. It’s been popular for ages, and it’s easy to see why.

When it comes to accommodations, **Vintners Inn** is our top choice here for LGBT travelers. Each of the 44 deluxe guest rooms provides French country décor and wonderful views of the vineyards and lush gardens. Request a room with a fireplace and Jacuzzi and prepare yourself for a sublime and sensual getaway. After a day exploring in Sonoma wine country, head to the Courtyard Spa Room for couples massages and treatments. For gourmands, the renowned John Ash & Co. restaurant is a celebration of wine-country cuisine at its best. Get ready to experience exceptional local food and produce paired with some amazing regional wines. If you’re looking for a great location for your wedding, you will find all you need at Vintners Inn. This includes a romantic outdoor Wedding Pavilion with views of the 92-acre vineyard, intimate indoor rooms, full-service banquet kitchen, dance floor, valet parking, and an array of other options to make your wedding day very special.

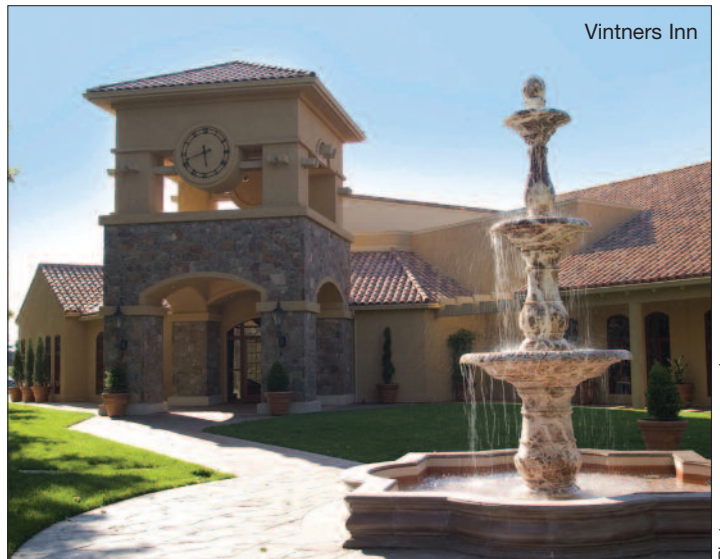
SONOMA AND SURROUNDINGS

From Santa Rosa, head southeast toward the county’s eponymous city, and you find a very different atmosphere in **Sonoma**, where history rules and the feeling is peaceful and oh-so-western. On the way, visit the tiny town of **Kenwood**, where you’ll want to stop for lunch in **Kenwood Restaurant**, which looks for all the world like a roadside diner but holds some major surprises. I’m hooked from my first taste of wild fennel soup. The feeling grows stronger digging into asparagus and local crab salad. By the time I indulge in guilty pleasures like duck-fat fries teeming with fresh rosemary, and flourless chocolate cake smothered in whipped cream, it’s true love.

There’s a real getaway feeling to these blink-and-you-miss-them towns here in the Valley of the Moon, not far from the bor-



Santa Rosa Prince Gateway Park



Vintners Inn

Photos: www.sonomacounty.com

der with Napa, a seclusion that you don’t feel as much in the Western part of Sonoma County. If that appeals to you, settle into the quiet in style at **Casa Bella Inn**, a pretty and LGBT-friendly property set on two luscious acres and given a bright contemporary look in a 2014 renovation.

Be sure to stop in **Glen Ellen Star**, the area’s hippest new restaurant, for locally sourced and farm-fresh food in a burg that makes Kenwood look like a metropolis. Then there’s **Sonoma** itself, where the huge plaza (California’s largest) holds manifold delights. I love wandering through the old mission, the Sonoma Barracks, and other historic buildings (I could sit all day in the evocative courtyard of the barracks). It was in Sonoma that the famous Bear Flag flew for a month, marking the quixotic and short-lived California Republic.

Did you think I’d temper my history with some gourmandizing? You’re right. As every visitor to Sonoma knows, **the girl & the fig** is a must for fine food in a casually gorgeous ambience. I stop in for brunch, and the airy, saffron-hued dining room is packed to the gills with diners enjoying such enchantments as fabulous cheese and charcuterie platters, duck confit polenta, and, of course, some chocolate-dipped fig “kisses.” French flair meets Sonoma county goodness. Go there.

Around the corner lies a new discovery for me: **The Epicurean**

Rivers End in Jenner



Photos: www.sonomacounty.com

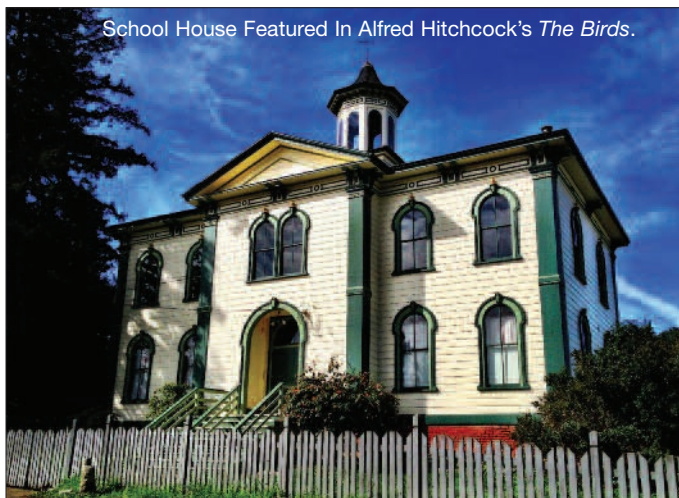
Connection, a café, cheese shop, and local music venue all in one. Proprietor Sheana Davis is a major LGBT ally, having founded the local AIDS organization almost thirty years ago and now involved in events like a Gay Farmers' dinner, with proceeds benefiting the local LGBT youth group. Most enticingly, Sheana offers cheese making classes. Regularly-scheduled classes are held in the newly-renovated General's Daughter conference center, but if you want something more private, she has all the gear, down to the cheesecloth and ladle, to do a private class at your hotel. Under Sheana's expert guidance, you'll create your own wonders that might just rival her own *Delice de la Vallee*, a luscious triple cream cow/goat milk cheese.

FREESTONE AND ONTO THE COAST

Is my trip totally about food? You might think so, since I tend to start the day at my favorite bakery in the entire world: **Wild Flour Bread**, located in the tiny village of Freestone in West Sonoma, on the Bohemian Highway (I'm not kidding!). Sit at the long wood table and indulge in huge, sticky cinnamon rolls or scones in such flavors as Meyer lemon/white chocolate or pear/cardamom, prepared with organic ingredients, baked in their wood-fired brick oven. I have to admit that when I think of coming to Sonoma County, one of the things I look forward to is Wild Flour.

Right across the street lies **Osmosis Day Spa**, where I indulge in a remarkable cedar enzyme treatment. First a cup of tea in the Japanese-style garden. Then my attendant leads me into the cedar tub room. I take off my robe and climb into the pile of moistened cedar shavings that cover me from neck to feet. I remain that way for 20 minutes, soaking up the heat and the healthful cedar oils. Every time I move, the mixture produces more heat, until I'm enveloped in a blanket of aromatic warmth. A nice warm shower, a half hour of lying back in a hammock under the trees listening to soft music, and lunch in the garden, catered by nearby Fork Roadhouse, completes the process of relaxation.

Then, I'm off to complete the blissing-out process. In other words, I'm driving up Highway 1. I head up Bodega Highway to **Bodega Bay** (if you don't recognize it as the setting for Hitchcock's *The Birds*, the many Hitchcock-themed establishments will remind you). As I continue on Highway 1 to **Jenner**, I drive through the most startlingly beautiful scenery, rolling farmland on one side and that amazing coastline on the other. I never tire of the Sonoma County coast, from Bodega Bay to Jenner, up to Fort Ross and beyond to Sea Ranch. There are frequent turnoffs/viewpoints where

School House Featured In Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*.

I admire burgeoning wild flowers, deeply rutted cliffs, and huge rock formations jutting straight upward from the water. The Pacific crashes across the rocks, dramatic, a little foreboding, and oh-so-beautiful. Tiny beaches line the coast, and whichever one you choose, there isn't likely to be more than a scattering of people.

If there's a better way to end this day of bliss than Jenner's **River's End**, I don't know what it is. Perched on a cliff overlooking the spot where the Russian River flows into the Pacific, it's a place of so much beauty that it's hard to describe. If you want to enter a totally new world of relaxation and splendor, check into one of their cabins, facing directly out onto that view. Or have a meal in their restaurant, which is my favorite restaurant in Sonoma County (and possibly the world). I dig into a "technicolor beet salad" just as the sun begins its descent into the sea with a similarly colorful display. My "duck three ways" is about fifty ways toward heaven. An English trifle is a perfectly light finish, just sweet enough to please. In some ways this spot is symbolic of the many aspects of Sonoma County I love: the vineyards, farms, river, and incredible coast.

This is wine country, of course, but it's also dairy country, red-wood country, orchard country, vegetable country, coastal country. It's the land of river kayaking, the land of beaches and cliffs so stunning you'll literally gasp upon seeing them. It's the land of rolling hills covered in neat rows of grapevines, of black-and-white cows calmly grazing by the side of the highways, of curving roads that lead from one version of paradise to another. Winning towns including some I haven't even mentioned—it's about 100 paradises rolled into one.

As I sip the last of a local Merlot, the sun making its final plunge, I think back to a magical moment in Healdsburg that sums it all up for me. I've just finished my green tea treatment, and as I sit in the plaza afterwards, nothing bothers me—not the children shrieking through the plaza, not the car in need of a tune-up that chugs noisily by. I'm in my own fairly silent and solitary world of relaxation, and it feels great. Listen, life's too short not to have these little treats, you know? That's what Sonoma County makes me realize, and as much as anything, that's the reason I love it. Just sitting here in this beautiful, leafy square, my world is just fine, an interesting and mellow kind of fine. A Sonoma County kind of fine. Birds sing in the oak trees, lovers walk hand in hand down the diagonal paths, and people smile at me as they pass. I'd say this is all too storybook perfect to be real, except that I'm experiencing it. At this exact moment, I really don't want to leave Sonoma County. Ever. ■

ACCOMMODATIONS

Casa Bella, 8790 Highway 12, Kenwood. Tel: 707-833-6996. Doubles \$199-300. Charming small inn in Kenwood with great breakfasts. www.casabellainnsonoma.com

H2 Hotel, 219 Healdsburg Ave., Healdsburg. Tel: 707-922-5251. Doubles \$199-\$499. Friendly, hip, and certified-green hotel makes a great base in Healdsburg. www.h2hotel.com

Highlands Resort, 14000 Woodland Dr., Guerneville. Tel: 707-869-0333. Doubles \$90-\$210. Clothing-optional resort, LGBT but "straight-friendly," with cabins set among the woods. www.highlandsresort.com

River's End, 11048 Highway 1, Jenner. Tel: 707-865-2484. Doubles \$239-\$279. Cottages perched above a perfect ocean view make for relaxed splendor. www.ilovesunsets.com

Russian River Getaways, 14070 Mill St., Guerneville. Tel: 707-394-0601. Houses from 2-6 bedrooms \$199-\$829 nightly (discounts for longer stays). Privacy and major amenities await in your temporary home in the Russian River area. www.russianrivergetaways.com

Vintners Inn, 4350 Barnes Rd., Santa Rosa. Tel: 707-575-7350. Expect elegant accommodations, great food, wonderful spa services, and 92-acres of bliss for your romantic getaway, wedding, or honeymoon in Sonoma wine country. www.vintnersinn.com

RESTAURANTS

Boon Eat + Drink, 16248 Main St., Guerneville. Tel: 707-869-0780. Fresh local ingredients make Boon's cuisine—the best in Guerneville—worth a visit. www.eatatboon.com

Backyard Forestville, 6566 Front St., Forestville. Tel: 707-820-8445. Casual country feel and wonderful comfort food with a talented kick. www.backyardforestville.com

Glen Ellen Star, 13648 Arnold Rd., Glen Ellen. Tel: 707-343-1384. Always-packed little spot in out-of-the-way Glen Ellen is one of the hottest new restaurants in the county. www.glenellenstar.com

Graffiti, 101 2nd St., Petaluma. Tel: 707-765-4567. Riverside dining in this chic contemporary eatery is a Petaluma pleasure. www.graffitipetaluma.com

Kenwood Restaurant, 9900 Sonoma Highway, Kenwood. Tel: 707-833-6326. It might look roadside diner-y from the outside, but inside the food is creative and delicious. www.kenwoodrestaurant.com

River's End, 11048 Highway 1, Jenner. Tel: 707-865-2484. Perfect ocean view combines with perfect food to make this one of my favorite spots on earth. www.ilovesunsets.com

the girl & the fig, 110 West Spain St., Sonoma. Tel: 707-938-3634. A longtime favorite at brunch and evenings, combining French-inspired style with Sonoma's bounty. www.thegirlandthefig.com

Valette, 344 Center St., Healdsburg. Tel: 707-473-0946. Chef Dustin Valette has created a sophisticated, welcoming spot to enjoy some of Healdsburg's finest cuisine. www.valettehealdsburg.com

Vignette, 6750 McKinley St., Sebastopol. Tel: 707-861-3897. "Pizzeria" doesn't begin to describe the sublime



Wine & Cheese at Vintners Inn

level of Chef Mark Hopper's cuisine (I insist you try that dried chili appetizer!). www.vignettepizzeria.com

Willi's Wine Bar, 4404 Old Redwood Highway, Santa Rosa. Tel: 707-526-3096. Great wine list and astonishing variety of small plates make this perennial favorite a winner for wining and dining. www.starkrestaurants.com/willis_winebar.html

zazu kitchen + farm, 6770 McKinley St., Sebastopol. Tel: 707-523-4814. Chef Duskie Estes scores a win with her stylish new location and great food (particularly for bacon lovers!). www.zazukitchen.com

COFFEE/BAKED GOODS

Acre Coffee, 21 4th St., Petaluma. Tel: 707-772-5117. Pleasant staff, great coffee, and unbeatable cinnamon rolls! www.acrecoffee.com

A'Roma Roasters, 95 5th St., Santa Rosa. Tel: 707-576-7765. Nice coffeehouse with their own roastery at the heart of Santa Rosa. www.aromaroasters.com

Coffee Bazaar, 14045 Armstrong Wood Rd., Guerneville. Tel: 707-869-9706. Longtime favorite for coffee just off Guerneville's Main Street. www.coffeebazaar.com

Moustache Baked Goods, 381 Healdsburg Ave., Healdsburg. Tel: 707-395-4111. The best cupcakes in creation, made with farm-fresh ingredients in intriguing combinations. www.moustachebakedgoods.com

Noble Folk, 116 Mattheson St., Healdsburg. Tel: 707-395-4426. Pie and ice cream on the plaza, with the same creative flair that Christian/Ozzy bring to Moustache. www.thenoblefolk.com

Petaluma Pie Company, 125 Petaluma Blvd. N., Petaluma. Tel: 707-766-6743. Whether sweet or savory, if it comes in pie form, you can get it here. www.petalumapiecompany.com

Taylor Maid, 6790 McKinley St., Sebastopol. Tel: 707-824-9110. Two stories of freshly roasted caffeinated pleasure at this friendly coffeehouse. www.taylormaidfarms.com

Taste of Tea, 109 North St., Healdsburg. Tel: 707-431-1995. Not only great tea concoctions and Japanese fast food, but amazing treatments using the tea's healing qualities. www.thetasteoftea.com

Wild Flour Bread, 140 Bohemian Highway, Free-stone. Tel: 707-874-2938. Their wood-fired brick oven produces the best baked goods in creation. www.wildflourbread.com

ACTIVITIES

Armstrong Woods State Natural Reserve, 17000 Armstrong Woods Rd., Guerneville. Tel: 707-869-2015. Acres of majestic redwoods are a must-visit in the Russian River area. www.parks.ca.gov

Charles Schulz Museum, 2301 Hardies Ln., Santa Rosa. Tel: 707-579-4452. Everything you wanted to know about "Peanuts" and its Sonoma County-based creator. www.schulzmuseum.org

Epicurean Connection, 122 W. Napa St., Sonoma. Tel: 707-935-7960. Café and cheese shop whose owner, Sheana Davis, runs GLBT-popular cheesemaking classes. www.theepicureanconnection.com

Luther Burbank Home and Gardens, 100 Santa Rosa Ave., Santa Rosa. Tel: 707-524-5445. Beautiful gardens surround the house (by tour only) of the famed botanist and Santa Rosa resident. www.lutherburbank.org

Osmosis Day Spa, 209 Bohemian Highway, Free-stone. Tel: 707-823-8231. Whether it's a massage or their famed cedar treatment, you're bound to leave feeling good. www.osmosis.com

Tibetan Gallery and Studio, 6770 McKinley St., Sebastopol. Tel: 707-509-3777. Watch thangka master Tashi Dhargyal create traditional Tibetan art in this stunning gallery. www.preservetibetanart.org

Wells Fargo Center Sculpture Garden, 50 Mark West Springs Rd., Santa Rosa. Tel: 707-546-3600. An extensive array of performing arts, and a brand-new sculpture garden. www.wellsfargocenterarts.org

NIGHTLIFE

El Barrio, 16230 Main St., Guerneville. Tel: 707-604-7601. Fun tequila bar opened by the out chef at Boon, with Southwestern flair and friendly mixed crowd. www.elbarriobar.com

Rainbow Cattle Company, 16220 Main St., Guerneville. Tel: 707-869-0206. Russian River's down-to-earth "gay playground" since it opened in 1979, attracting a mainly male crowd tilting over 40. www.queerster.com

R3, 16390 4th St., Guerneville. Tel: 707-869-8399. With everything from a piano bar to karaoke and a pool bar, it's Russian River's party central for guests and non-alike. www.ther3hotel.com

Spoon Bar, 210 Healdsburg Ave., Healdsburg. Tel: 707-433-7222. Winning bar in H2 Hotel, with creative cocktails devised by a master. www.spoonbar.com

INFORMATION

Sonoma County Tourism is the best place for information about the county and all its attractions (there's an LGBT section there, too). www.visitsonomacounty.com