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Crown jewel of Carmel Valley

BOUNTIFUL BERNARDUS

By K.C. Hamblin

With its equestrian roots and heady mix of vineyards and lavender fields, Carmel Valley is like France's Loire Valley with a friendlier lineup of chateaus.

Shouldered by Big Sur and Carmel-by-the-Sea, this inland vortex of perfect weather and prime wines is also home to one of California's crown jewels — Bernardus Lodge & Winery.

A secluded hideaway, this intimate inn of 57 guest rooms has the ability to shift one's gears. Maybe that's what Ben Pon, a former race-car driver, intended when he created the award-winning lodge to complement his nearby winery in 1999.

I shift into low gear as I pass Ingrid's Vineyard and curve around to catch a view of the sweeping **Santa Lucia Mountains**. The scent of lavender drifts through the windows — some 1,000 plants surrounding my every move. This is my refuge for recharging, my private European-style estate with a voluptuous food and wine program, indulgent spa, and 26 pristine acres encased in Italian cypress.

The setting is sexy and serene: A lodge tinged with terra-cotta, two restaurants, and a spa share meandering pathways corseted with rosemary, lemongrass, lavender, and bubbling fountains. Guest rooms are top-drawer and tech-driven, with spacious patios, couples' tubs, limestone fireplaces, French doors, and fluffy feather beds draped in luxurious Italian linens. A chef's treat awaits, as does a complimentary selection of wines from **Bernardus Winery**.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BERNARDUS LODGE



THIS IS MY PRIVATE REFUGE FOR RECHARGING, MY EUROPEAN-STYLE ESTATE WITH A VOLUPTUOUS FOOD AND WINE PROGRAM.

After an alfresco lunch at Wickets Bistro, it's time to indulge at the 5,300-square-foot **Spa at Bernardus Lodge**, a *Forbes* Four Star award recipient. The signature *Mélange* experience delivers a trio of treatments using organic ingredients culled from the nearby ocean, vineyard, and abundant on-site gardens. I choose a relaxing aromatherapy massage and tuning fork ritual, then sink into the private outdoor whirlpool infused with rose petals and lavender under a garland of bougainvillea.

Decanting a Dream

Should I visit the nearby village for a round of wine tasting at more than 15 venues or hit the **Buckeye Nature Trail** at Garland Ranch Regional Park? The wine wins. Pinot noir is my guilty pleasure, although Bernardus Winery is known for its stellar sauvignon blancs. I follow the cuvee concierge's lead and head to the tasting room.

This low-key venue belies the high-powered prowess of winemaker Dean De Korth and his lineup of award-winning labels. The estate vineyards, a 46-acre spread in nearby **Cachagua Valley**, produces an enviable cache of grapes that De Korth has handcrafted into a Burgundian-style chardonnay and a rich Marinus Estate Bordeaux-style red. I slide into a flawless Griva Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc. With 90+ ratings, it's a consistent bell-ringer of wine critics.

But true vino nirvana ensues when we get to a selection of pinot noirs from **Santa Lucia Highlands AVA**, the rock star of Monterey County appellations. The 2008 Pisoni Vineyards Pinot Noir, a favorite of critic Robert Parker Jr., exhi-

bits "grand cru nobility" (93 points), thanks to De Korth's seamless style.

Pure Cal-Regional

Few chefs can rival Cal Stamenov's repertoire. Think six organic acres of produce and spices, 250 kinds of fruit trees, myriad local foragers and fishermen, and an A-list of mentors including Alain Ducasse, Pierre Gagnaire, and Masa Koboashi.

Stamenov's stage, **Marinus Restaurant**, was recently retooled with a vibrant, stylish setting and a stunning 35,000-bottle cellar (a *Wine Spectator* Grand Award recipient since 2001). Blending classical techniques with an eye to sustainability, his new menu focuses on purity of ingredients in three distinct themes — Farmed & Foraged, Seasonal, and Traditional. I tuck into a farm-to-fork salad, followed by a Black Chanterelle Risotto and Caramelized Onion and Swiss Chard Tortellini. Typically I can't resist the luscious California Rib Eye of Lamb, but the pasta proves just as decadent.

Speaking of which, don't miss pastry chef

Ben Spungin's new dessert menu, which includes a **Chocolate Terrarium**. It's a sinful mix of chocolate mousse, hazelnut cake, chocolate streusel, and strawberry sorbet encased in glass — a new spin on "sweet dreams" at my private estate in the valley of the wine gods. bernardus.com

Great Escapes

Break Free From It All



Left to right: Bernardus Winery Vineyards, Warming Pool at the Spa at Bernardus Lodge, Black Chanterelle Risotto, and Marinus Restaurant

