



PHOTOS BY JULIE L. KESSLER / SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER

A ride in a hot-air balloon offers visitors to Temecula Wine Country a bird's-eye view of vineyards, citrus groves and nearby mountains.

A taste of Tuscany awaits, beyond L.A.

Temecula's vineyards produce wines to rival any in Napa, and the food is fresh and flavorful

By Julie L. Kessler
Special to the Star-Advertiser

IN MID-JANUARY, recovering from the holiday insanity, my husband and I needed a getaway. We decided to try Temecula wine country, only a two-hour drive from Los Angeles, and we fell deeply in love. With Temecula. A love so intense that I decided it necessary to return. Soon. So return I did when March Madness hit and my husband and our flat-screen TV renewed their sacred vows.

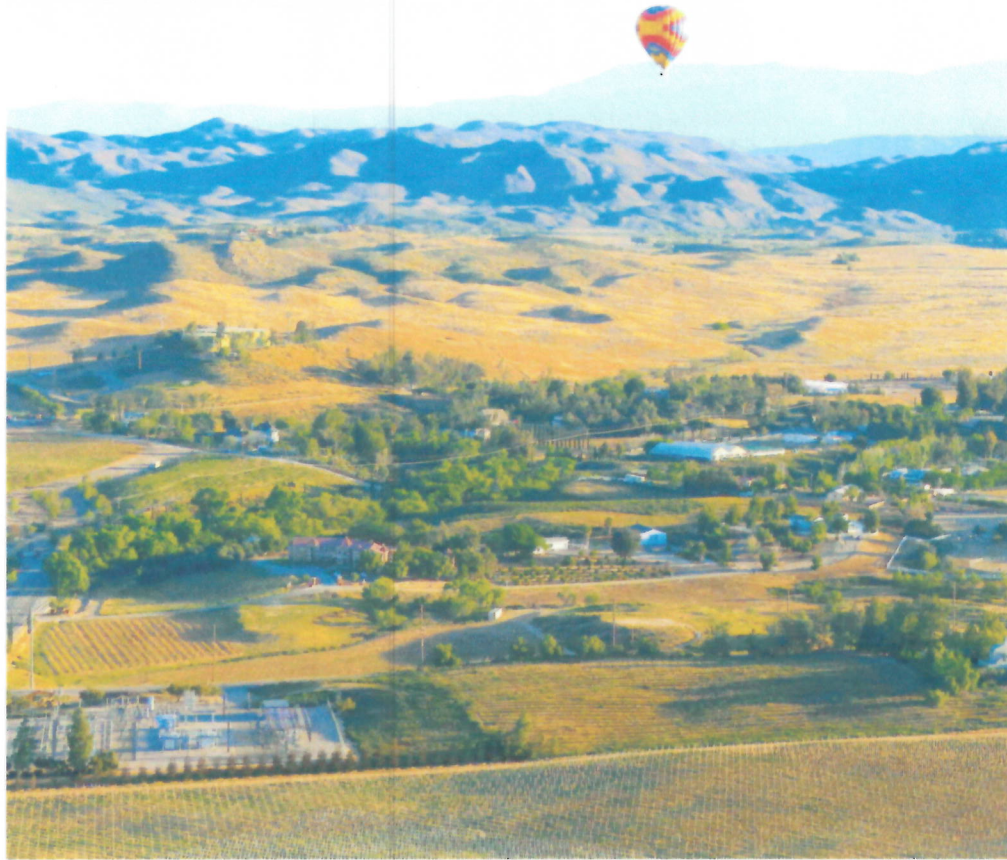
Checking into the Ponte Vineyard Inn, a family-owned vineyard and 60-room boutique luxury hotel, I was transported to Tuscany, but without the pond-crossing jet lag. The vineyard boasts 180 planted acres that each year produces 25,000 cases of wine whose quality now rivals those found in Napa and other wine-producing regions. In 2012 the inn was ranked among the top 10 small vineyard hotels in the world by Departures magazine.

At Ponte's winery tasting room, I sampled several. The white standouts were both 2012 vintages, a Vermentino and their signature Angry Wife, with an amusing back story: One of the owner's friends had risked angering his wife to join in a grape harvest years ago. She apparently got so mad when he left that weekend, they divorced. And no one, it seems, has missed her since. Ponte's 2011 Malbec and 2011 Doppia (50 percent each of Cabernet and Syrah) rounded out their memorable reds.



The Ponte Family Estate Winery is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Please see TEMECULA, G4



TEMECULA: Balloons, wildlife and plenty of fine wine and food await

Continued from G1

Following a late-afternoon walk through the vineyards, it was time for alfresco dining at Bougnat Restaurant headed by chef Riccardo Cuccaro.

My microgreen salad was so fresh, it was certainly picked from the ground that morning. It was graced with pistachios, roasted beets, black figs and blue cheese panna cotta. And since the hotel is committed to the community, all produce comes from within a 50-mile radius. My truffle-laced filet mignon was so flavorful and so tender, my knife wasn't necessary, and the mascarpone and kale polenta side made me swoon. The decadent chocolate pot dessert ended a perfect meal.

ALTHOUGH I rack up 50,000 air miles a year, I'm not fond of flying and even less fond of heights. Nevertheless, I decided to take a hot-air balloon ride the next morning for a better vantage point of the mature vineyards, acres of citrus groves and nearby mountains.

Ballooning is man's oldest form of flight, and its first successful, untethered attempt was in Paris in 1783, with Francois Pilatre de Rozier and Marquis Francois d'Arlandes as pilots. The first manned balloon flight in the U.S., piloted by Jean-Pierre Blanchard, occurred in 1793 and ascended from a prison yard to 5,800 feet. It successfully landed in New Jersey where George Washington was on hand for the historic event.

Pickup time for my hour-long balloon ride was at the ungodly hour of 6 a.m., but once we were up — gliding along in a mammoth-size wicker basket with 13 of my newest best friends at 4,000 feet above solid ground — it was a breathtakingly unforgettable experience. It combined an impossibly beautiful riot of color and silence, a silence so profound, I could easily count the racing beats of my heart.

Being suspended high atop the vineyards and citrus groves allows you to forget about time altogether and focus instead on having a great time.

With our feet on terra firma, neighboring vintners Gail and David Bradley, who operate the balloon service, offered mimosas with a lovely European breakfast and shared stories of the past 30 years in Temecula Valley. It would be hard to imagine a better way to start the day.

Happily on land, I was picked up at noon from Ponte's portecochere by Marika Matson and her enormous spotted draft horse



Suzie, who pulled a velvet-lined covered carriage. The overhang was welcome as temperatures that day reached 92 degrees. Hopping in for a ride through the Ponte vineyards, I found a "real" picnic basket of goodies prepared by Ponte's kitchen, highlighted by a chilled bottle of Ponte's 2014 Arneis.

Meandering through the vineyards, we observed hawks perched overhead and several bunnies scampering below. The intensely sweet scent of the blooming citrus groves was nature's perfume. While heading back toward the inn, we happened upon the owner, Claudio Ponte, driving through his vineyards. Dutifully he observed my glass was empty — an unacceptable sight, given the surroundings.

After all this good food and wine, it was time for a nap, which was made even more inviting by my room's luxurious bed, one of the best in which I've ever slept.

IT WAS unimaginable but I was hungry again. The Restaurant at Ponte serves dinner in a lovely alfresco dining area amid the vines, and where on weekends, local musicians provide a relaxing backdrop.

After an amuse-bouche mélange of walnuts and blue cheese, drizzled with raspberry sauce on a granny apple sliver, I started with a trio of raw fish: hamachi with basil vinaigrette and lemon zest, salmon with blood orange gastrique, radish and fenel, and ahi with miso glaze, wasabi and creme fraiche. It was a silky, exploding trifecta of fresh, aromatic flavors. My main course, seafood paella with sausage, was large enough to satisfy three hungry people. Fortunately for me, no one asked to share. When all my senses had been satiated by



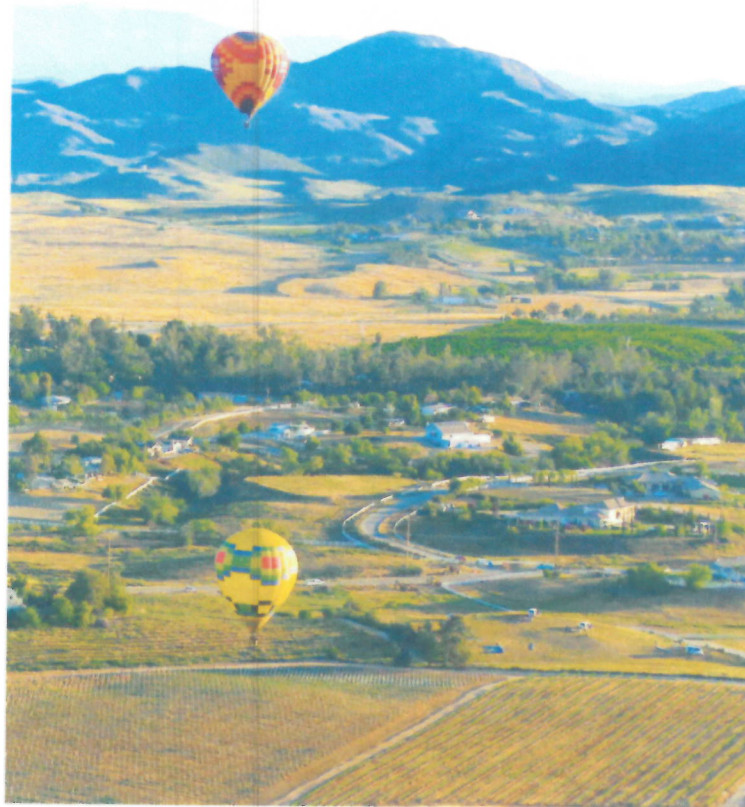
The Ponte Vineyard Inn, top, is just 10 minutes away from Lake Skinner, above, where biking, hiking, boating, fishing, horseback riding and camping are popular activities.

yond measure. I took my espresso to the fire pit to star gaze and contemplate my continental contentment.

Donning my running shoes the next morning, I headed for the citrus groves. Looking up, I saw my first Temecula-style "traffic jam," counting 14 hot-air balloons overhead. Jogging in such beautiful natural

surroundings with nary a soul in sight put me squarely in touch with my inner Umbrian. Viva Italia!

A mimosa with homemade cheddar biscuits and creamy lemon curd topped off breakfast as the sun was sliding overhead. Driving east for 10 minutes, I reached a wildlife conservation area and the entrance to the 6,000-acre Lake Skinner recreational park. Operated by the Metropolitan Water District, the lake is supplied by the Colorado River and provides water to the region. There's a campground, store, deli, RV park, hiking and biking trails, horseback riding, boating, fishing (bass, carp, bluegill, catfish in summer, trout in winter) and swimming



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Gliding above Temecula wine country in a wicker basket, above, can be an unforgettable experience, full of color and silence. At left, for a change of pace, visitors can try their luck at the casino at Pechanga Resort. The Ponte Vineyard Inn, below, was ranked among the world's top small vineyard hotels by Departures magazine.

Meandering the casino floor — which stretches nearly a quarter-mile end to end — it felt like Vegas, with 130 table games, 3,400 slots, a 43-table poker room and a 700-seat bingo facility. The weekend was in full gambling swing, and it was packed.

My usual travel partner, George, arrived just in time for dinner. Wanting Asian food, we went to Uni Sushi & Oyster Bar. The hamachi and ahi sashimi were swimmingly fresh, and the Chilean sea bass with miso marmade and hint of papapeno was outstanding. A sweet end to the meal was a mochi ice cream platter.

Since George loves a good bargain, after an excellent Sunday brunch of perfectly cooked eggs Benedict at Journey's End, satiated amid rolling hills on Pechanga's golf course, we drove 15 minutes to Lake Elsinore's Outlet Shops. The 45 stores satisfied his seemingly never-ending retail therapy requirements.

Our final dinner was at Pechanga's Paisano's where braised Kobe beef cheeks, roasted lamb and quail with lemon reminded me why I will likely never be a vegetarian.

AS MY five days in Temecula came to a close, I realized that my mission had been accomplished. I sat down and enjoyed a glass of Ponte's 2014 Amers and thought about the two great discoveries of this trip: Good wine and food tastes just as good in March as in January. And it's just as sad to leave Temecula in spring as in winter. Took solace, though, in the proverbial traveler's credo: However far away you go, you never leave entirely.

in nonreservoir areas. Wildlife in the area surrounding the lake are Osprey hawks, eagles and plenty of ducks. The day I visited happened to be the annual Temecula Family Fair, with rides, food and several craft vendors. However, the area is so large that near the lake, trails and campground, all you hear is nature's silent symphony.

NOT TO BE missed is Temecula's Old Town, just off Rancho California Road. It's main street, Front Street, could easily be taken from a Wild West scene of a Hollywood set with its Spanish mission architecture as a backdrop. There are quaint shops selling wine-enthusiast knickknacks ("Don't whine, drink wine"), cafes, restaurants, wine-tasting rooms, antique shops and perhaps one of the best Saturday farmers markets in Southern California.

For a change of pace, I headed to Pechanga Resort & Casino, just 10 minutes away.

On land owned by the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians is a 517-room hotel com-

taining 11 restaurants, an enormous casino, a golf course, a gym and a spa. Gambling is good business, and Pechanga will soon break ground on another 550-room tower.



GETTING THERE:

Delta, United, American, Hawaiian, US Air and Alaska Airlines all offer round-trip, nonstop service from Honolulu to Los Angeles, starting at \$531. From LAX it is approximately a two-hour drive. Another option is to fly to San Diego, with both Alaska and Hawaiian offering non-stop service from Honolulu, starting at \$531. From San Diego it's about a one-hour drive.

GETTING AROUND:

To get to Temecula from either L.A. or San Diego, and to enjoy the sites while there, a car is necessary. There are several options to enjoy wine tastings at Temecula's various wineries without driving: limos, trolleys and carriage rides; the hotel front desk can provide options and reservations.

WHERE TO STAY:

Ponte Vineyard Inn, 35001 Rancho California Road, Temecula. AAA rates start at \$198 for two midweek, \$297 weekends. Check for special packages: girlfriends' getaway, romantic, wine club, etc. 951-581-6688, pontevineyardinn.com.

Pechanga Resort and Casino, 450000 Pechanga Parkway, Temecula. Rates start at \$139 for two midweek, \$199 weekends. There are also several additional packages from which to choose (golf, spa, winery tours, etc.). Weekend bookings are difficult and must be done well in advance. 888-PECHANGA (7324-2641), pechanga.com.

WHERE TO EAT:

>> **Bouquet Restaurant** at Ponte Vineyard Inn. Dinner for one, including wine: \$75. Gourmet breakfast (so large it will certainly preclude lunch), including a mimosa made with fresh-squeezed orange juice, for one: \$23.

>> **The Restaurant at Ponte**, Dinner for one, including wine: \$70.

>> **EAT Marketplace**, 28410 Old Town Front St., 112, Temecula. 951-694-3663, www.eatmarketplace.com. Delicious vegetarian food with a variety sure to impress even the most die-hard carnivores, as well as organic chickens, braised meats and market fish. Flatbread sandwiches, salads, soups, savory plates, bowls, coffee bar and bakery. Lunch for two: \$20. EAT also holds various cooking classes on-site.

>> **1909 Fluid & Fare**, 28656 Front St., Temecula. 951-619-1909, www.1909Temecula.com. Trendy spot in the heart of Old Town with outdoor seating and full bar. Known for farm-to-table chicken sandwich and BBQ pork belly macaroni and cheese. Lunch for two: \$30.

>> **Uni Sushi & Oyster Bar**, Pechanga Resort. Dinner for two, including signature cocktails: \$140.

>> **Paisano's Italian Restaurant**, Pechanga Resort. Dinner for two, including a bottle of South Coast Winery Merlot: \$150.

>> **Journey's End**, Pechanga Resort Golf Clubhouse. Breakfast for two: \$30.

WHAT TO DO:

>> **Hot-air ballooning**, California Dreamin', 33133 Vista Del Monte Road, Temecula. 800-373-3359, www.californiadreamin.com. Monday through Friday, \$148 per person; weekends, \$158 per person includes pickup from wine-country hotels, breakfast and drop-off.

>> **Horse-and-carriage ride** through the Ponte Vineyard, Temecula Carriage Co. 858-205-9161, www.temeculacarriageco.com. Twenty-five-minute rides are \$45; one-hour rides are \$120 and include a bottle of wine.

>> **Wine tasting**: Ponte Family Estate Winery, 951-694-8855, www.pontewinery.com; open daily from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. South Coast Winery Tasting Room (right next door to Ponte), 951-587-9463, www.southcoastwinery.com; open daily 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Weins Family Cellars, 951-694-9892, www.weinscellars.com; open 10:30 a.m.-6 p.m. Other nearby wineries include Palumbo Family Vineyards & Winery, 951-676-7900, palumbowines.com, open daily 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; and Callaway Vineyard & Winery, 951-676-4001, www.callawaywinery.com, open daily 10 a.m.-5 p.m. There are more than 30 wineries in the area open to the public. For a comprehensive list, see temeculawines.org.

>> **Hiking**: Dripping Springs, about 10 minutes southeast in the Cleveland National Forest. Another hiking area in the same forest is Santa Rosa Plateau.

>> **Biking, hiking, fishing, boating, horseback riding and camping** at Lake Skinner, about 10 minutes from Ponte Vineyard Inn. 37707 Warren Road, Winchester (right off Rancho California Road); 951-926-1541, www.rivcoparks.org. For campsite reservations: 800-234-7275 or www.rivcoparksreservations.org.

>> **Shopping**: Front Street, Old Town Temecula about 15 minutes from the Temecula wine region (right off Rancho California Road). Outlets at Lake Elsinore. 17600 Collier Ave., Lake Elsinore; 951-245-0087, www.outletsatlakeelsinore.com. About a 15-minute drive from Pechanga.