

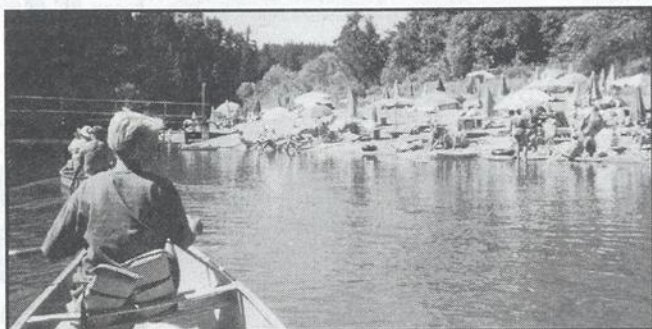
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G R E A T E S C A P E S

RENDEZVOUS IN THE RUSSIAN VALLEY Where the Berkshires meet Burgundy



Canoeing is one of the favorite pastimes along Russian River.

My friend Joanne spent her childhood summers in the Russian River Valley. Her entire extended family rented cabins there overlooking Hacienda bridge. Joanne remembers as if it were yesterday her cousins jumping off cliffs into the shallow water. When this forbidden activity did not, time and again, yield the "broken necks" the adults had prophesied, Joanne came to believe that the river was protective, and that the valley itself was a magical place.

Even when seen for the first time through the eyes of a grown-up, the Russian River Valley is captivating. The weekend Joanne and I visited, the sun and wind joined forces so that it was just the right kind of warm—in the 80s, but not uncomfortable—and the Sonoma county roads (the region is just an hour and twenty minutes from the City) wound playfully to enchanting destinations.

Russian River offers summer activities for all age groups—canoeing, kayaking, golf, horseback riding, fishing, biking, berry-picking, hiking—all in a flower-filled hillside setting, plus—and here's the real bonus—over sixty vineyards within 25 miles offering some of the best wines in the world, as well as unlimited free tastings for you and me.

Joanne and I began our weekend with a gourmet dinner at Applewood Inn & Restaurant. Built in the 1920s, the luxury hideaway is perhaps best known for its cuisine. Thanks to executive chef David Frakes, the menu, which changes monthly, is 100% dad-free. Seated in the solarium dining room with a view of the setting sun, the first course, which was a saffron & chive quinoa appetizer, awakened my taste buds to new levels of sophistication. Also extraordinary was the pan-seared California halibut, served with sun-dried tomato beurre blanc, roasted carrot and leek ragout and crispy kennebeck strands. With its crispy top, the fish could not have hoped for better accompaniment. "If you want to get kids to eat their vegetables," Joanne said between forkfuls, "you should serve them like this." The feast was completed by the aptly named "chocolate decadence" dessert. Served with house-made French vanilla ice cream, warm fudge sauce and amaretto caramel, it was outrageously sinful, offering the kind of pleasure you only dream about.

There was nothing left to be desired. We were ready

for the special kind of sleep that is engendered by a satisfying meal. Many choose to stay at Applewood where elegant rooms (ask for #13 or #14) surround a courtyard full of flowers and a large, soothing fountain. We, however, elected to spend the weekend at the nearby Creekside Inn & Resort.

We were glad we did. Owner Lynn Crescione (who we came to call "Auntie Lynn") greeted us as if we were her long lost nieces, and saw to it that our stay at Creekside was the best part of our trip. Lynn helped us to fine tune our itinerary so that we could get the most out of our weekend—providing us with directions, phone numbers and when necessary, solutions. For example, when she heard that I was planning to go canoeing alone (a difficult task—but Joanne wanted to remain poolside), Lynn volunteered her son Mark to go with me. (Luckily Mark was not averse to the plan.) It felt like we were one big happy family.

Which is not to say it was too close for comfort. Joanne and I were given a great deal of privacy. Upon our arrival we toured the rooms and cottages—all of



Gala lilies in bloom at Creekside Inn & Resort

MORE INFO.

GETTING THERE:

Take 101 north 60 miles to the River Road exit and proceed west.

LODGING/DINING:

Applewood Inn & Restaurant, 707-869-9093, applewoodinn.com, \$125-\$250.

Creekside Inn & Resort: 800-776-6586, creeksideinn.com/inntrip, \$60-\$200.

Ridenhour Ranch House Inn: 707-887-1033, ridenhourranchhouse.com, \$95-\$145.

The Farmhouse Inn & Restaurant: 800-464-6642, \$105-\$195.

ACTIVITIES:

Antiquing: Head southeast on Hwy. 116 and you'll find Antique Row—20 shops offering the largest collective between SF and Oregon.

Canoeing: Burke's Canoe Trips, 707-887-1222. \$30 per canoe.

Horseback Riding: Ayers' Armstrong Woods Pack Station, 707-887-2939, www.metro.net/ayers, \$40-\$450.

Wine Tasting: Grapes have been growing here since the late 1800's and today there are 63 wineries in the area. Call 800-723-6336 or 707-546-3276 for more info.

which have recently been redone. If you are traveling in a big group or with children, I'd recommend Tree House, Acorn or Berry. Tucked lovingly in the trees, these and other cottages offer full kitchens and beautiful views. And if you like to travel with your dog, try the Quail and Deck House cottages built with your furry friend in mind.

I slept in the main inn's Victorian Room which, with its four post bed and separate sitting room, was absolutely lovely. Joanne took the similarly charming Wicker Room and we shared an adjoining deck out back. Unlike other B&B's in the area, Creekside's main house is air-conditioned. That night we slept like queens.

Nine hours later we awoke to the smells of coffee and butter heating on the grill. Little did I know that Mark, my future canoe companion, was also an accomplished cook. We dined on his homemade waffles (made from a light, pastry dough) with fresh strawberries and whipped cream and a side dish of chicken apple sausage. After breakfast, Lynn chatted with us about Russian River in days gone by... "In the '30s and '40s you could pay for your lodging with postage stamps," she said. As recently as the '70s, the Russian River Valley was where middle class women and children came to spend their summers. Husbands and fathers would join their families on the weekends. My friend Joanne remembers awaiting her own father's Friday night arrivals. Once re-

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turned, he would take her family hiking or camping at Armstrong Redwoods State Reserve, a 6000-acre forest where old growth trees reached toward the heavens. Today, a retreat into this pristine wilderness is the next best thing to a trip down the Russian River.

In the morning Mark and I paddled the ten miles from Forestville to Rio Nido. As we glided along the foamy river, he would point out blue heron, vultures, mud swallows, stellar jay and American coots. At one point I saw a small dog on the side of the river that turned out to be a fox! We paddled upstream and got another quick look at the fella before he took cover in the brush. It was a real treat.

Occasionally we passed by children swimming, dogs fetching balls from the water and families picnicking along the shore. Most often, however, it was quiet but for our paddling and the sounds of birds chirping to their mates. Two-thirds of the way downstream (or two hours later) we parked the canoe and I took a swim that due to the water temperature, was exhilarating. I still have a tan left from that day. And also a little bit of serenity.

Later that afternoon, Joanne and I devoured a light lunch on the patio at Korbel Champagne Cellars before joining their hour-long guided history tour. Did

you know that the Korbel brothers requisitioned mail-order brides to California in 1879? We also learned how the champagne-making process has improved since the 19th century. We tasted various bubblys and then strolled, a bit light-headedly, to a quaint ranch house next door called Ridenhour Inn. Only residents at Ridenhour (the 1906 summerhouse has seven rooms in the main house plus a few cottages) and their illustrious guests are given the opportunity to experience owner Fritz Rechberger's culinary mastery. His food is said to be the best in the county. When he described one of his signature breakfasts—an English muffin with sautéed mushrooms, Swiss cheese and smoked duck with a slice of tomato—Joanne and I pledged to return.

Suddenly it was time for dinner at the Farmhouse Inn & Restaurant. We were lucky to catch executive chef Jeff Young on one of his final nights at the inn. Both his grilled day boat scallops in three sauces and his wild salmon bisque were incredible, but his New Zealand rack of lamb marinated in soy brown sugar, garlic and sherry was the masterpiece of the night. Farmhouse serves dinner Thursday through Sunday only. Because they had the wisdom to hire Jeff, I'm sure his re-

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Escapes...continued

placement will also be topnotch.

The next morning, after a prolonged good-bye to our friends at Creekside, we set off to explore the wine country. Porter Creek, Davis Bynum, Hop Kiln and Rochioli vineyards are all within a stones throw of each other. We tasted, we bought, we tasted, we bought—and then finally, before hitting the road back to San Francisco, we paused on Rochioli's new deck, overlooking acres and acres of California grape vines. We'd heard that fog was due in that afternoon but there was still no sign of it. The day was bright and peaceful. It was the kind of day that invites lingering. We stayed a little longer than planned.

**Amy Shafrón is a
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