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PHOENIX

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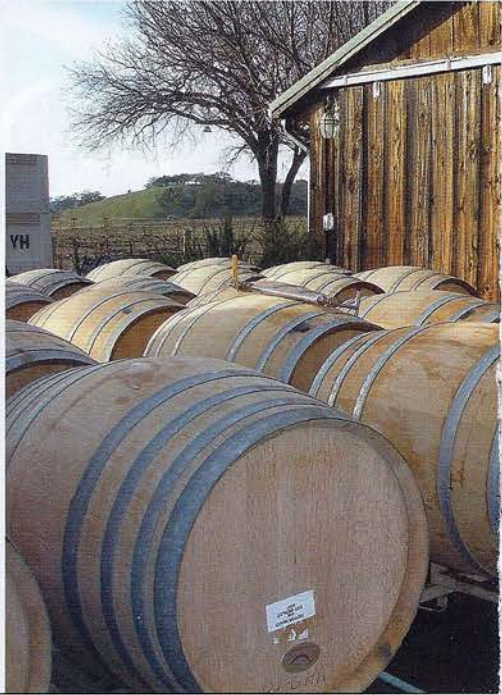
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Great Escapes



Central California Coast

Anchored by the great wine region of Paso Robles, San Luis Obispo County teems with rocky coastlines, rugged wilderness and quaint artisan villages, making for the perfect end-of-summer escape.

“THE VISCERA IS USED FOR ANTICOAGULANT IN Asia,” says Abalone Farm manager Brad Buckley, holding up one of the slippery sea creatures anchored in its iridescent shell. “What we eat is actually the foot.”

The central California coast is a prime breeding ground for the gastropod mollusk, he explains, pointing to the Pacific Ocean mere steps from where we stand on his property in Cayucos in San Luis Obispo County. And indeed, the edible portion is called the adductor muscle, which the sea snail uses to cling to rocks in the often violent ocean tides.

It’s a mystery how man decided it would be a good idea to eat the things – the classic way to catch abalone is to dive from cliffs and risk death extracting them. They must be alive, so they’re moving when you pry one loose from its shell, and to cook it, you should pound it to tenderize, then fire it for 20 to 30 seconds per side so it doesn’t turn to rubber.

Buckley offers a slice of the fresh meat, and it’s extraordinary – crisp like a vegetable with bright flavors. Buckley and his team don’t dive to get their seafood. The **Abalone Farm** has been in business since 1968, with rows of planter-like tanks stretching along a tidy inlet and producing some 100 tons of California Red abalone annually. The working plant – the mollusks are spawned and hatched here – offers tours on Thursdays in the summer months, with no reservations needed for the hour-long, \$7-per-person exploration.

It’s also an excellent introduction into what makes this section of California’s Central Coast so special. Stretching halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, the entire region spans seven counties, from Santa Barbara to Monterey, in a crazy quilt of soothing beaches, rocky coastline cliffs punctuated by thundering waves, quaint ar-

tisan villages, and rustic wilderness perfect for camping, along 350 miles of coastline. San Luis Obispo County sits nearly smack in the middle of it all, anchored most recognizably by the city of Paso Robles.

While the area has a rich history reaching back to the Spanish land grants of the 1800s, over the past several years it has matured to include trendy dining and nightlife enclaves and opulent hotels for lavish retreats. More recently, it has evolved into an increasingly important wine destination, too. Paso Robles alone boasts nearly 200 wineries, making it the third-largest wine-producing region in California, thanks to its mild Mediterranean climate.

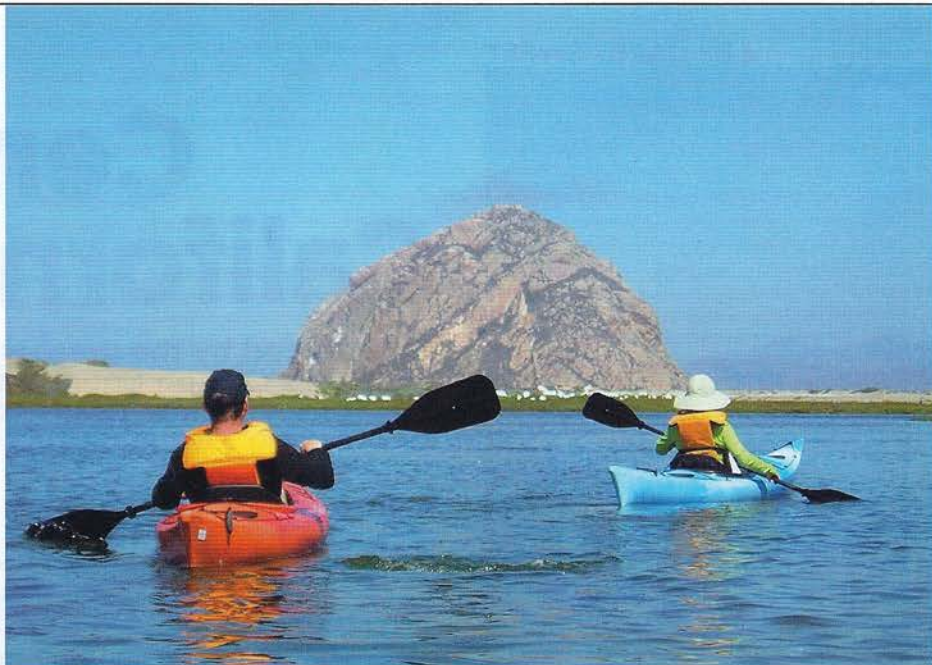
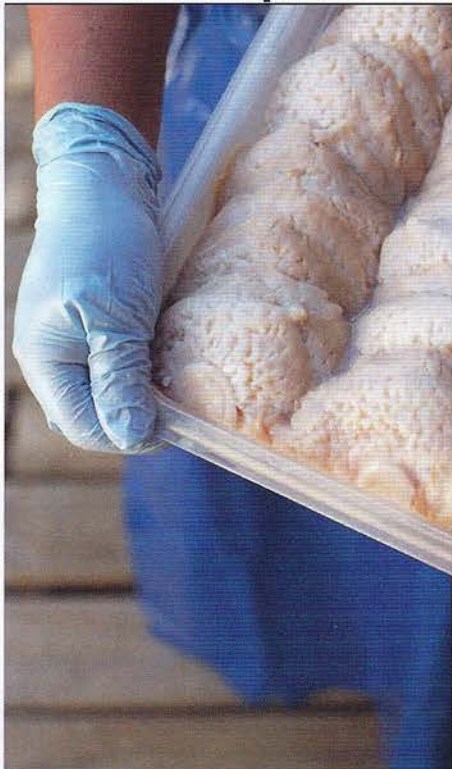
Planning a summer escape here from the Valley is easy, with nonstop flights from Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport to San Luis Obispo County Regional Airport introduced last year on US Airways. And whether a trip is inspired by nature or an extravagant vacation, there’s a lot to explore throughout the county’s cozy towns.

Outdoor Delights

A casual, nature-oriented visitor will find solace in an oceanside cottage such as **Beach Bungalow Inn & Suites** in Morro Bay, designed like a chic 1940s motor court with just 12 rooms, 11 of which have fireplaces. Rates start at \$115 per night in the summer, including full breakfast, and there are value pack-

Clockwise from top: Hotel Cheval in Paso Robles; Victor Hugo Winery; Farmstand 46

Great Escapes



Fresh shelled abalone from Abalone Farm (left); kayaking in Morro Bay with Central Coast Outdoors



Sleep & Stay

Beach Bungalow Inn & Suites
1050 Morro Ave., Morro Bay
805-772-9700,
morrobaybeachbungalow.com

Hotel Cheval
1021 Pine St., Paso Robles
805-226-9995, hotelcheval.com



Eat & Drink

Artisan: 1401 Park St., Paso Robles, 805-237-8084, artisanpasorobles.com

Farmstand 46: 3750 Hwy. 46, Templeton, 805-239-3661, farmstand46.com

Hoppe's Old Cayucos Bakery & Deli: 84 N. Ocean Ave., Cayucos, 805-995-0800

Old Cayucos Tavern & Card Room: 130 N. Ocean Ave., Cayucos, 805-995-3209

Schooners Wharf: 171 N. Ocean Ave., Cayucos, 805-995-3883, schoonerswharf.com

Steamers of Pismo: 1601 Price St., Pismo Beach, 805-773-4711, steamerspismo.com

ages available that include activities such as fishing at nearby **Virg's Landing** or farm tours of **Morro Bay Oyster Company**.

At breakfast, load up on carbs with a hearty "surfer mama" plate of fettuccine, eggs, cheese, sausage and plenty of garlic at **Hoppe's Old Cayucos Bakery & Deli**. The calories provide ample energy for trekking the nearly two-mile beachfront/wildlife sanctuary boardwalk in the artsy town of Cambria about 20 minutes north up Highway 1. For lunch, it's hard to resist heading back south to Pismo Beach (yes, the same sandy community made famous by Bugs Bunny) for the touristy but tasty "miles of clams" at **Steamers of Pismo** restaurant, which sits on an ocean-washed bluff.

Need even more activity? Plan a day around the spectacular hiking and bird watching at the nearby **Oso Flaco Lake** and **Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes Preserve**, or kayak Morro Bay with the help of guides from **Central Coast Outdoors**. You'll paddle alongside harbor seals, sea lions and sea otters, which playfully slip beneath the waves then reappear here, there and everywhere.

Wine Lovers Rejoice

Paso Robles has built its wine history on its relaxed, small-batch style, and one of the best examples is **Victor Hugo Winery**, nestled in a bucolic pocket of the Templeton Gap in the southern part of town about 30 minutes northeast of Cayucos. Tastings are

held personally with owner and winemaker Victor Hugo Roberts by 24-hour advance appointment in a weathered, 100-year-old barn that doubles as a barrel room. It also serves as an ironic backdrop for sipping the loftily named Estate Opulence 2006, a lush blend of merlot, malbec, petit verdot, cabernet franc and cabernet sauvignon, with just 652 cases produced. The fee is a reasonable \$5, credited to whatever wine you buy.

At dinner, **Schooners Wharf** in Cayucos is a delightful surprise, looking touristy with its wharf-weathered nautical theme, yet populated by locals who converge for a spicy-fresh Bloody Mary, juicy burgers made with beef from nearby San Simeon's Hearst Ranch, and grilled halibut in a bright mango-chile sauce with Thai peanut slaw. Finish with a nightcap at nearby **Old Cayucos Tavern & Card Room**, a friendly saloon with dollar bills hung from the ceiling.

On the other hand, there's no lack of luxury in the county, especially in Paso Robles proper, which focuses its newly gentrified, high-end energy around a town square ringed with boutique shops and fine-dining restaurants.

The equestrian-themed **Hotel Cheval** makes a posh place to retire, opened in 2007 and catering to travelers demanding amenities such as fresh-baked welcome cookies, down comforters, fireplaces, sun decks, private beds for pets and even a signature Cheval jewelry boutique in the entry salon. There are just 16 rooms with rates starting at \$300 per night in the summer.

Traditionally, the Paso Robles area has focused on cabernet sauvignon and zinfandel, but these days, French Rhône varietals



Artisan restaurant owners Michael (left) and Chris Kobayashi; Pasolivo olive oil

are in the spotlight. For an educational (and lavish) immersion into why, **Tablas Creek Vineyard** offers in-depth guided tours of the organic estate vineyard, grapevine nursery and cellars, high on a hillside in the Adelaida community in the northern part of town. The founders, the Perrin family of France and partner Robert Haas, updated their 120-acre, circa-1989 property this spring with a gleaming new tasting room that features floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the cellars and a glossy bamboo wood bar showcasing their Châteauneuf-du-Pape-style wines. The vines were imported from France, including red varieties such as mourvèdre, grenache noir, syrah and counoise, and white varieties roussanne, viognier, marsanne and grenache blanc. Some of Tablas Creek's most striking wines are blends, such as the *Esprit de Beaucastel*, which layers all four red grapes for a licorice-blackberry tapestry.

Just down the hill is another modern jewel, the new **Farmstand 46** café and deli. It looks like a shabby-chic barn with rusted corrugated steel, but step inside – past the wood-burning brick pizza oven and organic herb and vegetable gardens outside – and you'll find a showcase of Central Coast products, such as fancy deli salads, made-to-order panini and sandwiches.

Directly behind it is **Cypher**, a sparkling new tasting room that's hidden like a speakeasy but rocks like an art gallery, with striking black and white harlequin pattern floors, original art glass chandeliers, and another hidden tasting area that you access by pushing a secret wall panel. Owners Christian Tietje and Susan Mahler offer chardonnay, grenache blanc, zinfandel, syrah, petite sirah, tempranillo, grenache and barbera.

Like wine, local ingredients are celebrated more and more, and few restaurants do it

better than **Artisan**, where owners Michael and Chris Kobayashi send out California cuisine in a chic, bistro setting anchored by a bustling expo kitchen and towering wine cabinets. Chef Chris Kobayashi bases his often-changing menus on his personal visits to the county's largest farmers' market, in Templeton, plus the area's organic farms. One evening's menu featured Cayucos red abalone fanned with asparagus drizzled in creamy sauce *gribiche*; cavatelli pasta with local farm-raised rabbit sausage in *pioppini* mushroom ragù; and chocolate *struccolo* (strudel) gussied with sweet cherries and almonds and a dollop of raw milk gelato.

The county's climate also blesses olives. The area's premium producer, **Pasolivo**, sits on the edge of a sun-dappled, 55-acre olive orchard on a gently sloping hill along the aptly named Vineyard Drive of west Paso Robles, producing Tuscan-style extra virgin olive oil from an authentic Italian press in the back of the gift shop. Free public tours are available through the press room, and I visited during production, when the grassy perfume of handpicked olives permeated the air. I sat and savored while owner Jolei Yaguda shared summer recipes, such as wickedly refreshing tangerine slices sprinkled with sugar, her own tangerine citrus oil-olive oil blend, and a few twists of fresh ground pepper. It was heaven, a delicious bit of San Luis Obispo County, and a whole lot less work than that abalone.

— Carey Sweet can be reached at phxmag@citieswestpub.com.

PM



Activities

Abalone Farm: Cayucos
877-367-2271, abalonefarm.com

Central Coast Outdoors:
888-873-5610,
centralcoastoutdoors.com

Oso Flaco Lake-The Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes Center:
dunescenter.org

Templeton Farmers' Market:
Sixth & Crocker streets,
Templeton, 9 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Sa,
northcountyfarmersmarkets.com

Virg's Landing (fishing):
1169 Market St., Morro Bay,
805-772-1222, virgs.com

Morro Bay Oyster Company:
805-234-7102,
morrobayoysters.com

Cypher Tasting Room: 3750
Hwy. 46 West, Templeton, 805-
237-0055, cypherwinery.com

Pasolivo Olive Oil: 8530
Vineyard Drive, Paso Robles,
805-227-0186, pasolivo.com

Tablas Creek Vineyard: 9339
Adelaida Road, Paso Robles,
805-237-1231, tablascreek.com

Victor Hugo Winery: 2850 El
Pomar Drive, Templeton, 805-
434-1128, victorhugowinery.com



Information

Central Coast Tourism Council
centralcoast-tourism.com