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## SUMMER FUN GUIDE

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JENNIFER JOHNSON

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style MEDIAGROUP

## escape

by Darren Elms



**D**riving up and down the coast so many times over the years, I don't know how I missed Paso Robles. I had heard quite a buzz about this Central California town (pronounced as "row-bulls" by the locals), especially their burgeoning wine industry. This I had to see,



or drink, for myself. What I found on my adventure was a charming, naturally pristine, incredible friendly place. And those rumors about the wine? All true. In fact, after visiting a few local wineries (the area boasts over 300 in all), if our guide had told us we were in Sonoma or Napa, my mildly tipsy self might have just believed him.

### WHERE TO STAY

Despite its growing popularity in the wine world, the accommodations in Paso Robles haven't quite caught up to the growth experienced on the winery front. That doesn't mean there aren't some great options at which you can hang your hat. One of the nicer hotels is La Bellasera, located one exit south of the Downtown area. Dressed up in Italian villa elegance, the nicely-appointed



property offers plenty of first-class amenities and modern touches. One of the best restaurants around is located right in the lobby, Enoteca, serving up fine Italian dishes for both locals and visitors. If you're really looking to splurge, then head west and stop at Justin, one of the more famous wineries in the region. The beautiful grounds also host an intimate, gorgeous B&B and access to the winery and tasting room.

### WHERE TO DINE

Paso Robles may be getting a reputation for their "grape juice," but they also hit it out of the park with their food. I was lucky enough to tour the Thomas Hill Farms before sitting down at their restaurant in town for dinner. Visiting in early spring, little was growing other than hearty greens, citrus and the early blossoms of the fruit trees. But come summer, Joe Thomas, owner of the organic farm, promised a variety of fruits and vegetables ripe for the picking. My palate aroused, we ventured down to the bistro and wine bar where his wife, Debbie, greeted us. The menu is seasonal, incorporating what's currently producing at the farm and taking as many other ingre-

dients as possible from local vendors. The result? Delicious! We especially enjoyed our thin crust pizza with caramelized onions, smoked grapes, Pink Lady apples, cambozola blue cheese and red wine reduction. The next night we stopped by Artisan, for an equally flavor-filled meal. I was fortunate enough to be facing the kitchen, and from a distance enjoyed the skill and care put into each plate. We delighted in short ribs and an excellent halibut paired with a white wine flight, then finished things off with fresh warm cookies and trio of sorbets.

### WHERE TO WINE

Finally, the main attraction...the wine. The region is known for their Zinfandel grapes, among others, but we were eager to sample all the wares. We got help from the Wine Wrangler - a small tour bus that journeys out to at least four or five wineries and includes lunch. Our driver and guide was a joy and helped us load and organize our growing collection of bottles during the few-hour trip. With 300 wineries to choose from, the task certainly seemed daunting, but our group of 11 got a taste (literally) from all kinds, from the posh and elaborate, to the small and pleasing. Standouts on the trip included the aforementioned Justin, Tolo, Whalebone, Robert Hall and Hearstone. A little wine weary, but pleased with our purchases, we made it back home, happy to have discovered Paso Robles and eager for a speedy return. •

La Bellasera Hotel & Suites

# paso robles

The Other Wine Country

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