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Volume 24, No. 2

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www.alaskaairlinesmagazine.com/horizonedition

Alaska Airlines | Horizon Edition (ISSN 1050-2440), the monthly inflight magazine of Horizon Air, is published by Paradigm Communications Group, at 2701 First Avenue, Suite 250, Seattle, WA 98121. Copyright @2013 by Paradigm Communications Group, all rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be reproduced without permission of the publisher. Subscriptions: \$45 in the U.S.; \$50 elsewhere. Single-copy price: \$5. Photocopy of individual articles: \$3.50. Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts or art. Printed in the U.S.A. Postmaster: Send address changes to Alaska Airlines | Horizon Edition, 2701 First Avenue, Suite 250, Seattle, WA 98121-1123.

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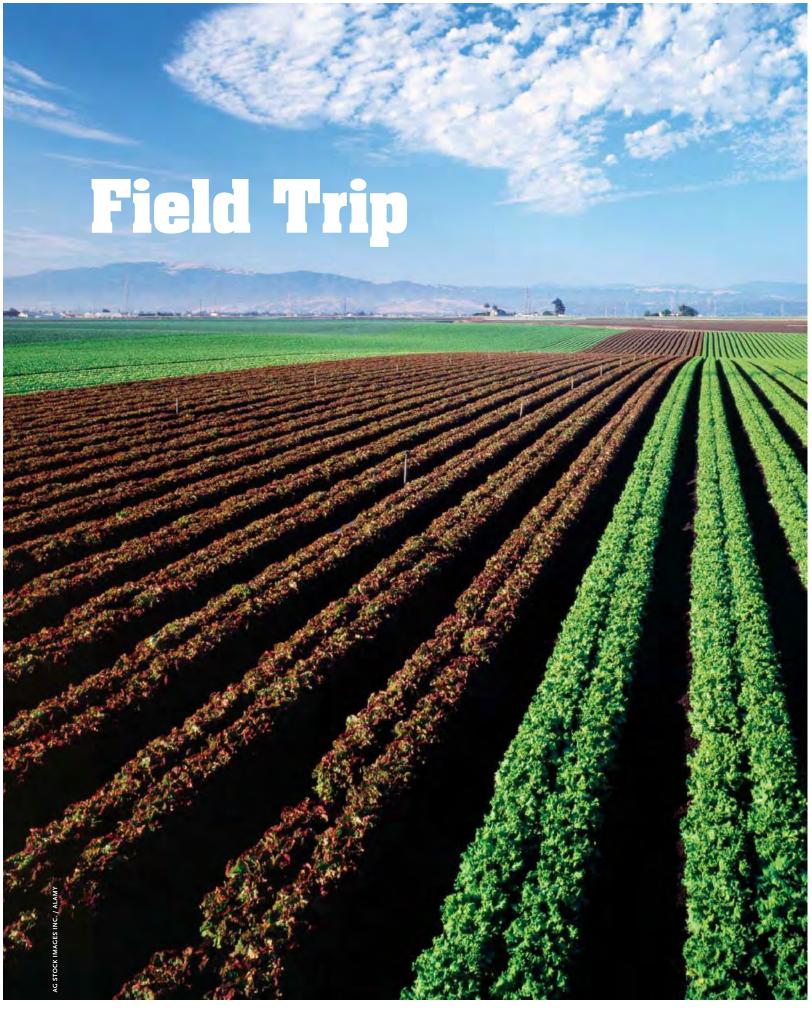
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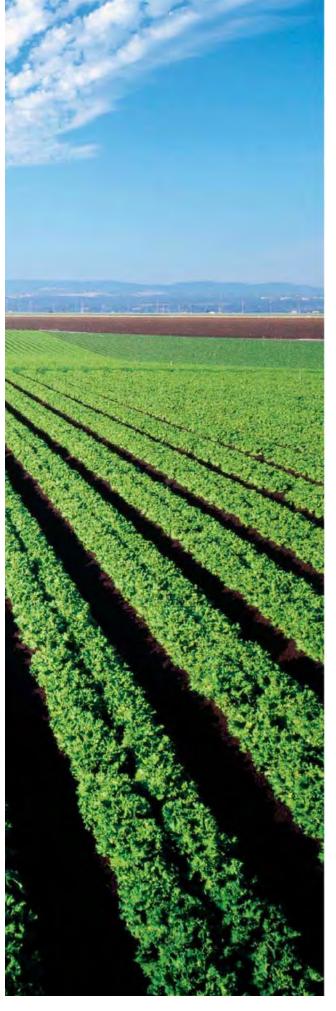
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Cover: Sunset paints the ocean along the lovely Monterey County coast. S. Borisov / Shutterstock.com.





Sampling Monterey County's bounty By David Armstrong



RANGE-RED persimmons, gleaming in the late-afternoon sunshine, catch my attention as I stroll through the Old Monterey Farmers Market on Alvarado Street in Old Monterey. The 3.5-block alfresco market—which takes place every Tuesday starting at 4 р.м.—is filled with produce, flowers and music. I buy one of the mild, sweet persimmons and bite into it as I would an apple. A Fuyu, it's in season each fall, and tastes like a slightly spicy fresh pear, living up to its inclusion in the genus Diospyros, whose name is derived from Greek words often translated as "divine food."

Left: Red-leaf and greenleaf lettuce are among the many crops grown in Monterey County. Top: Local produce and other food items are available at the weekly Old Monterey Farmers Market.

The sheer variety of produce at this market in the heart of downtown Monterey is astonishing. I see ripe apples, brussels sprouts, brown wild mushrooms, ivory cauliflower and ruby-red strawberries. There are stacks of garlic bulbs, leafy kale and romaine lettuce; rows of purple eggplant; enormous onions; silvery-green artichokes; and crimson pomegranates with crowns that make me think of Christmas-tree bulb ornaments.

The market offers a taste of the bounty of Monterey County, a resource- and recreation-rich area on California's central coast, where more than 150 crops are grown each year. The county's fertile soil, water resources and climate—cool and foggy on



the coast, warm and sunny inland, with nights cooled by Pacific breezes—allow farmers to cultivate an extraordinary variety of foods. The region is even known as the "Salad Bowl of the World" because of extensive production of crops such as leaf lettuce, head lettuce, spring mix, spinach, broccoli and other salad items.

And the gifts of the land are complemented by the gifts of the sea, with controlled, sustainable harvests of seafood such as rockfish, sardines and abalone in Monterey Bay.

YE LONG APPRECIATED Monterey as a scenic, relaxing vacation spot, and this weekend I'm also enjoying the county's rich food-and-wine culture. I've often driven by the pastures of plenty in the Salinas Valley, east of the city of Monterey, but I've never taken time to stop for a closer look, so today I join a half-day excursion offered by Ag Venture Tours. The company is owned and operated

by Evan Oakes, a University of California, Davis, agricultural scientist who's forged a second career leading farm and winery tours.

"People want to know where their food comes from and how it is grown," he says when I meet him and the other six participants at Pezzini Farms, just outside Castroville.

We gather amid Pezzini's tall, gray-green artichokes, each plant holding up to a dozen flower buds (the part we eat before it flowers). One of Monterey County's signature products, artichokes are grown in this region year-round. In fact, close to 90 percent of America's artichokes—71.8 million pounds a year—come from the Salinas Valley, as does 70 percent of the country's lettuce—7.01 billion pounds per year.

As we cruise along two-lane roads in Oakes' van, I also see asparagus topped with delicate, 3-foot-tall ferns, and workers harvesting strawberries. The strawberry season typically runs from late March to November, with Monterey County growing half of the nation's strawberries—838 million pounds per





year. Oakes points out how plastic on the plant beds controls weeds and prevents the fruit from touching the ground, which keeps the berries clean and helps to avoid fungus problems.

Monterey County farming is decidedly high-tech, he says. Laser-directed equipment levels lettuce fields to within a fraction of an inch, creating an even expanse of soil before planting, to make the lettuce easier to farm. Harvesting machines shake wine grapes off the vine. Boxes of produce are barcoded right in the fields, to show where the items were grown, who harvested them and when.

Sea-related tours are equally fascinating, with outfitters offering kayaking, sailing, fishing and whale-watching trips. Gray, blue and humpback whales have seasonal migrations past the central coast, while minke whales might be spotted any time of year. Some outfitters, such as Chris' Fishing and Whale Watching, combine two popular ocean activities.

Sealife is celebrated, and the importance of ecofriendly fisheries is emphasized at the Monterey Bay Aquarium on the waterfront in historic Cannery Row in the town of Monterey. The aquarium exhibits more than 35,000 animals representing about 550 species, including sharks, turtles, sea otters, penguins, and a male weedy sea dragon that has delivered more than 50 babies after carrying them in a pouch under his tail.

The aquarium also hosts an annual Cooking for Solutions celebration in which 80 restaurants and 60 wineries and breweries present three days of gourmet food, cooking classes, wine-tasting and ocean education. In keeping with the aquarium's mission of inspiring conservation of the *To page 50*.

Above: Restaurants, shops and water views attract visitors to Fisherman's Wharf.
Below: Most of the nation's artichokes come from the Salinas Valley.



Restaurant 1833 uses many local products, such as the peas and mushrooms in this ricotta-ravioli dish.

From page 23. oceans, the event spotlights sustainable seafood. The 2013 celebration will be May 17-19.

OCALLY SOURCED FOODS from sea and land are also served at many Monterey County restaurants. Longtime favorites focusing on local, seasonal ingredients include Estéban, a tapas restaurant at the Casa Munras Hotel & Spa, built in 1824 in the city

of Monterey, and Pacific's Edge, at the Hyatt Carmel Highlands south of the town of Carmel.

The county's notable new dining destinations include Restaurant 1833, which debuted in August 2011 in a refurbished adobe building, originally a hacienda, that was built in 1833. The handsome twostory restaurant in downtown Monterey is honeycombed with cozy nooks and has a handsome onyx bar. Chef Levi Mezick dishes up his own take on heritage foods, such as perfectly cooked Monterey Bay salmon with spiced pumpkin puree, served atop a bed of seasonal vegetables such as parsnips, cabbage, carrots and chestnuts, with a side of crunchy, buttery Salinas Valley brussels sprouts.

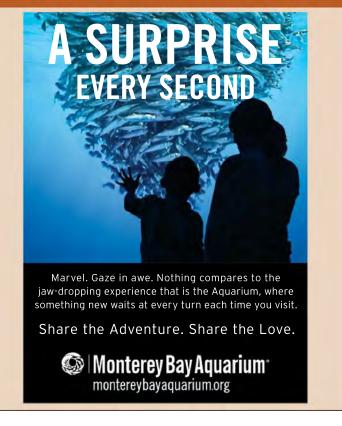
As the restaurant's general manager, Tobias Peach, explains as I finish my dinner, Monterey County chefs like to feature local foods whenever possible, forging relationships with area purveyors and often supplementing local seafood, beef, poultry, honey, olive oil and produce with the restaurants' kitchen gardens.

At L'Auberge Carmel, a 1929 inn that updated its 20 guestrooms and its restaurant, Aubergine, in December, chef Justin Cogley has installed a new glass-fronted, 15-square-foot "cheese cave" to showcase global and regional cheeses in a climatecontrolled environment. Cogley serves California and world cuisine, with an ever-changing menu of dishes ranging from Monterey Bay abalone to Japanese hamachi. I savor every dish on the restaurant's "Four-Course Menu."

не next day, I follow Carmel Valley Road inland through Carmel Valley, which is studded with resorts, vineyards and high-end purveyors of artisan food. At Carmel Valley Ranch, a lovely hillside resort, I admire chef Tim Wood's new glass-walled outdoor salthouse. Chef Wood sun-dries seawater from Monterey Bay to obtain sea salt for the ranch's restaurants, which emphasize Californiagrown or -raised foods ranging from organic-beet salad to natural beef and lamb.

Visit Beautiful Monterey California





My next stop is Cima Collina Hilltop Ranch and Vineyard, to preview it for a future weekend trip. The comfortably rustic, two-bedroom guesthouse has a duck pond, a waterfall, a big barn and a swimming pool. Cima Collina wines include an elegant, well-structured Hilltop Estate Pinot Noir from grapes grown right outside the guesthouse. The winery's tasting room is just three-quarters of a mile away in Carmel Valley Village.

The Hilltop Ranch Vineyard is near the Carmel Valley American Viticultural Area, one of the nine AVAs in 3,281-square-mile Monterey County. Monterey wine country's cool coastal regions produce wines such as Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Inland locations such as Carmel Valley, with their warmth and sun, afternoon ocean breezes and cool nights, are ideal for reds such as Cabernet Sauvignon, in addition to whites such as Sauvignon Blanc. All told, Monterey County viticulturists grow 42 types of wine grapes—ranging from Albariño to Zinfandel—in 175-plus vineyards, with 43,000 total acres of plantings.

Just a few miles north of the Hilltop Ranch Vineyard, I pull into Bernardus Lodge, a well-regarded hotel whose owner also runs a winery known for a Bordeaux-style red from Bernardus' Carmel Valley AVA vineyard, as well as for Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Sauvignon Blanc crafted with grapes from other Monterey County AVAs. Famed wine critic Robert Parker gave Bernardus' 2009 Pisoni Pinot Noir—featuring grapes from the Santa Lucia Highlands

AVA—a coveted 93 points. I have tasted the vintage and agree with the comment that "menthol, licorice and spices wrap around the finish" of this distinctive wine.

At the Bernardus Winery tasting room, about two miles southeast of Bernardus Lodge, you can sample eight wines, while the lodge

welcomes overnight guests with a glass of Sauvignon Blanc. The property boasts 57 expansive rooms in buildings inspired by French country houses, and also has a spa with treatments that incorporate natural ingredients from the ocean, and Bernardus' vineyards and organic gardens. The property's high-ceilinged, wood-paneled Marinus restaurant was remodeled in 2012, with chandeliers and sconces from Normandy among the new elements. Chef Cal Stamenov's award-winning cuisine includes local seafood, meats and produce, including heirloom tomatoes.

NOTHER EXCELLENT PLACE to taste local foods is the coastal town of Carmel-by-the-Sea. Just walking into The Cheese Shop and smelling the wonderfully aromatic artisan cheeses is a treat,



Wrath is one of the wineries participating in the Wine Walk by-the-Sea passport program in Carmel. Wrath produces wines from grapes grown in its estate vineyard and at other properties in the Santa Lucia Highlands AVA.



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Below are some of Monterey County's other great attractions.

17-Mile Drive: Spectacular sea and sky views are abundant on this coastal toll road that connects Pacific Grove and Pebble Beach (pebblebeach.com).

Cannery Row: Renovated former fishcanning factories on the waterfront in the city of Monterey are now home to dozens of restaurants and shops, and opportunities for water excursions (canneryrow.com).

Fisherman's Wharf: Restaurants, shops, water views and water-excursions outfitters delight visitors at this historic attraction in the city of Monterey (montereywharf.com).

Golf: Monterey County is home to more than 20 courses, including world-renowned Pebble Beach (pebblebeach.com) and respected wallet-friendly public courses such as Pacific Grove Golf Links (pggolflinks.com). The AT&T Pebble Beach National Pro-Am is taking place Feb. 4–10 this year at three Monterey County courses (attpbgolf.com).

Monterey Auto Week, Aug. 12-18: The Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance (Aug. 18) will showcase about 200 cars (pebblebeachconcours.net), and classic cars will also be displayed at other sites, including the 11-turn Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca (mazdaraceway.com).

National Steinbeck Center: This museum in Salinas has artifacts such as letters, journals and equipment that inspired books such as The Grapes of Wrath (steinbeck.org).

Steinbeck House: The 1897 Queen Anne Victorian house that Steinbeck lived in as a child has been restored and now has a restaurant, with dishes such as chickenand-artichoke crepes that highlight local ingredients. Tours are available by advance reservation for groups of six or more. Steinbeck House is about two blocks west of the Steinbeck Center (steinbeckhouse.com).

Monterey Bay Coastal Recreation Trail: This 18-mile trail for walking, running and cycling offers wonderful ocean views (monterey.org).

Public Parks: Parks such as Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park, Pinnacles National Monument and Point Lobos State Reserve offer outstanding scenery and recreation (seemonterey.com/things-to-do/parks).

Spas: Numerous spas, some internationally renowned, are available to pamper visitors (seemonterey.com/things-to-do/spas).

Monterey Jazz Festival: This is one of the world's premier jazz events; artists will be announced this spring for the 56th-annual festival, Sept. 20-22 at the Monterey Fairgrounds (montereyjazzfestival.org).

Pebble Beach Food & Wine: Every year, 250 wineries and 75 star chefs produce a four-day feast for the eyes and palate, with cooking classes and wine tasting. The 2013 festival will be April 4-7 (pebblebeachfoodandwine.com).

Artichoke Festival: This yearly celebration, with cooking demonstrations, a farmers market, music and crafts, takes place in Castroville, May 18-19 this year (artichokefestival.org).

Big Sur International Marathon: An annual competitive run, the marathon showcases gorgeous scenery; it's April 28 this year (bsim.org).

California Rodeo: California's largest rodeo includes bull riding and steer roping. The 103rd-annual event will be July 18-21 at the Salinas Sports Complex (carodeo.com).

Big Sur Food & Wine Festival: Attendees enjoy wine-and-food-themed hikes, tours, tastings, panels and dinners; November 7-10 (bigsurfoodandwine.org). — D.A.







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and friendly staffers offer samples the moment you enter. The Cheese Shop sells local and global cheeses. I especially like the cheeses from the Schoch Family Farmstead in Salinas. Schoch crafts delicious Salinas Valley Swiss and, of course, Monterey Jack.

Just three blocks from The Cheese Shop, Trio Carmel offers tastes of regional and international olive oils and balsamic vinegars. I favor the robust, herbaceous Belle Vue Extra Virgin Olive Oil from Carmel Valley. Trio Carmel, which opened in April, also pours wines crafted by small local wineries that don't have their own tasting rooms. Among them: Pelerin, Ian Brand & Family and Mesa Del Sol.

About six blocks from Trio, I acquire a \$50 wine-tasting passport at the visitor center on San Carlos between Fifth and Sixth avenues, and then take the selfguided Carmel Wine Walk by-the-Sea, choosing among seven participating tasting rooms. After swirling and sipping, I find my favorite at the Scheid Vineyards tasting room. It's Scheid's estate-grown 2008 Pinot Noir, with its notes of blackberries and spices from grapes grown in the Monterey AVA, which is known for its long growing season, leading to balanced wines.

Visitors can also taste Monterey County's bounty during chef Jason Balestrieri's cooking classes at Cantinetta Luca in Carmel, which spotlight local seafood, produce and meats.

I CONCLUDE MY Monterey County weekend with a drive to Big Sur, about 30 miles south of Carmel, on beautiful Highway 1, enjoying stunning sea, sky and cliff panoramas. At the luxurious, clifftop Post Ranch Inn in Big Sur, chef John Cox—who oversees the property's acclaimed Sierra Mar restaurant—gives me a tour of the kitchen garden. He hands me a tiny redwood strawberry: a strawberry that grows wild under redwood trees. It tastes exactly like a luscious red grape.

During my lunch at the elegant restaurant, I watch thinning clouds, trailing tendrils of rain, give way to sunlight as I tuck into a delicious salad of fennel, cucumbers, arugula and Swiss chard, all picked minutes before. You can't get more fresh or local than that. ■

David Armstrong lives in Northern California.

Alaska Airlines (800-ALASKAAIR, alaskaair.com) flies daily to Monterey from San Diego. For more information on visiting Monterey, call 877-MONTEREY or go to seemonterey.com.