

ENTREE

AN UNCOMPROMISING AND
CONFIDENTIAL TRAVELERS
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AT HOTELS, RESTAURANTS &
TRAVEL AROUND THE WORLD

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JUST WHEN WE COULDN'T FACE ANOTHER SEASIDE "GETAWAY" ASSAULTED by poolside techno music, tank-topped, baseball-capped frat boys in the dining room and screaming brats escaped from a Kid's Klub, our eyes were opened to *Costa Rica's* private paradise: *Cabo Velas*. Here, we choose the guest list ourselves. Four breezy, tropically elegant, pastel-colored ranchos can accommodate up to 16 friends, family or members of your admiring entourage. Cabo Velas is about an hour's drive on challenging roads from the Liberia International Airport. However, we prefer to arrive via private charter, thanks to the property's own airstrip. Once settled in, we spent a week swimming and playing on five private beaches of snow-white sand and galloped polite horses through 1700 acres of ranchland, filled with abundant wildlife, lagoons, mangrove estuaries and tropical fruit groves. Cabo Velas has a superb, caring staff who arranged deep sea fishing and a sunset picnic overlooking miles of coastline. They can also snag a tee time at a championship golf course nearby, visits to a great surf spot and excursions to local villages. A professional botanist is standing by to lead nature tours, while white-water rafting and hot springs are also close by. Meals are special at Cabo Velas, with fresh and healthy cuisine focused on fruits and vegetables grown on the property, fresh fish and locally farmed beef. Falling asleep to the sounds of crickets and crashing surf, we experienced that feeling we seek so often but rarely find—being in a perfect place in harmony with nature and, perhaps more importantly, with those whom we want to be there. Cabo Velas is a *Sanctuary* property, www.sanctuary.com, (866) 612-5980. Such a paradise does not come cheaply: the rate, including all meals, libations, transfers and excursions, for 16 guests for four nights, is \$47,120.



WHILE IN *TUSCANY*, THE ALERT CONCIERGE AT OUR HOTEL (*LOCANDA dell Amorosa* in *Sinalunga*, also a wonderful experience) recommended a restaurant that we want to share with you. The former executive chef of the hotel, *Walter Redaelli*, has opened his own eponymous restaurant in a nearby town, *Bettolle (Siena)*. Our dining experience was clearly one of the highlights of this trip. The restaurant is located in a boutique hotel called *La Bandita*. It has a small number of tables, very inviting and intimate. Suffice it to say that the menu is fabulous, with many local favorites such as guinea fowl and wild boar. They have a multi-course chef's menu that is paired with appropriate wines. An integral part of our experience that evening was the service provided by their maitre d', *Arianna Ranocchia*. From providing menu suggestions to recommending various wines, she was extremely knowledgeable. One of the practices that we observed was her decanting skill for wines by the glass, which is rarely seen in the U.S, a special experience that really showcases a fine wine. In our discussions with Arianna, she told us about recently participating in a competition held in Rome with numerous maitre d's from all over Italy, where she was awarded the top prize. We found it interesting that someone with her talent would be found in such a small, quaint town versus a larger city. That notwithstanding, it was clearly our good fortune to visit this restaurant and make her acquaintance. The combination of ambiance, food, wine and superior service provided by Arianna was a memorable experience. Bravo. *Restaurant Walter Redaelli, Hotel La Bandita, Bettolle, Sinalunga (Siena), www.ristoranteredaelli.it*.

THE NOW-WE'VE-HEARD-EVERYTHING DEPARTMENT: BEING HELD HOSTAGE on a plane for hours and hours is one thing, but this one takes the cake. Traveling from Dallas to Santa Barbara on *American Eagle Airlines*, we first were kept waiting for hours at the gate. Then we heard the polite fellow next to us ask the stewardess for a blanket ... he was curtly informed there were no blankets on the plane but ONE COULD BE PURCHASED FOR \$5! Where will this madness end? Next we expect to be charged for a seat cushion ... or to make the seat recline. To make matters worse, this poor fellow—who shelled out the \$5—was flying on a first-class ticket all the way from London ... the shame, the shame of it all. Miss Piggy was right when she said, "If getting there is half the fun, then you must be going to a pretty terrible place." This was an ideal time to pull out *My Angel Pillow* by *Angel Headquarters*. This couture, soft-sculpture pillow is designed to make you feel loved, emotionally supported, protected and soothed. The pillow's seamless design makes it exceptionally comfortable and soft and the angel depiction is a constant form of inspiration and peacefulness. Cuddle up to My Angel Pillow and dream away. Visit www.angelheadquarters.com, price: \$60, not much for all this love.

AS WE CHASE THE COMINGS AND GOINGS OF THE SUN WHILE IT WINDS around our globe, we rely on a special timepiece that takes its inspiration similarly from solar sources. It is difficult to find a more reliable, versatile watch than those in *Casio's Oceanus* line, which come in eight styles, including six of the world's first atomic solar chronograph watches. An adventurous lifestyle leaves no time for winding hands and synching up to the foreign soil your feet happen to land on. The Oceanus chronograph springs to life when its face is exposed to even the lowest levels of natural or artificial illumination, magically winding itself in accordance with atomic time, as kept by Colorado's atomic tower, which even NASA relies on to count down shuttle launches. Water-resistant up to 100 meters, with sapphire crystal scratch-resistant glass, a powerful light and a Tough Solar power-saving feature, and available in handsome titanium or stainless steel, the Oceanus is a work of art. More information on Casio's deluxe Oceanus Chronograph watch line is available at www.oceanus-us.com. Retail prices range from \$300-\$600.

POTPOURRI: *TARA O'LEARY* IS THE TALENTED NEW WINE STEWARD AT *London's Chesterfield Hotel (Mayfair)*; and she gives diners a very good reason to dine here. In addition to the excellent fare and comfortable club-like surroundings, Tara can seemingly pull anything you desire from the Chesterfield's vast cellar, all at reasonable prices.

RED CARPET WORTHY OF THE *SANTA BARBARA FILM FESTIVAL* SPILLED across the richly tiled threshold of the venerable *Four Seasons Biltmore* in a gala celebration for 80 years of being perched along the sun-dappled, ocean-kissed cliffs of *Montecito*, leading local celebrities and heavy social hitters to a spectacle beyond ENTREE's wildest fantasies. The hotel's recent \$240 million restoration (that's a lot of Beanie Babies sold by owner Ty Warner) was evident in upgraded details from ceiling to floor that have burnished the patina of this landmark property. The resort's multi-talented chef, *Martin Frost*, set a table straight from Pan's Labyrinth—candelabras everywhere and every nook and cranny overflowing with gourmet wonders and small plates of artistic pastries that had *Andy Granatelli* leaping from his motorized wheelchair. Four Seasons founder *Isadore Sharp*, dapper despite a tie possibly crafted from Dorothy's ruby slippers, cut a rug under the gyrations of caged go-go dancers who graced a black-lit disco. *Gayle King*, *Christopher Lloyd*, *John Cleese* and *Dennis Franz* were among those who toasted to a wild and successful night alongside the mover and shaker neighbors they usually encounter in the local post office. As Santa Barbara continues to swell in popularity, growth and appeal, the Biltmore remains a classic that we could not live without.



THE *RIVER INN HOTEL* IN *WASHINGTON, D.C.* IS NESTLED IN THE heart of “Foggy Bottom,” which got its name for the fog that arose from the Potomac River Valley. This historical and utterly charming area has the advantage of prime location, which in this area means a lot. We recently spent several very pleasant days at the River Inn on a theater and art trip. We are sure that some would consider it heretical to compare Washington, D.C., with New York City, but others would compare the former favorably with the latter, and even better in some areas. Part of what you would be missing if you were in D.C. and not N.Y.C. are the crowds, traffic gridlock and skyrocketing costs. The location of the River Inn is halfway between *Georgetown* and the center of Washington. It is a comfortable walk to the *Kennedy Center*, the Mall and all museums, or just a couple of Metro stops if you prefer riding. We were very fortunate to have stumbled on *Notti Bianche*, a superb Italian restaurant about two blocks from the Kennedy Center for pre- or post-theater dining. It is intimate, with an attentive staff and an innovative Tuscan menu. *The Roof Terrace Restaurant* at the Kennedy Center is a more traditional theater restaurant. The food is marginal and the service abominable, but the shoulder-rubbing with the elite of Washington is the best. The River Inn is a small all-suite hotel, each suite having a kitchenette. Rates vary from \$165 to \$250. Call (888) 874-0100 for reservations or check www.riverinn.com.

PHILADELPHIA HAS LONG BEEN ONE OF OUR FAVORITE CITIES TO VISIT, and the *Park Hyatt Philadelphia* is one of our hotels of choice. It could be said that in the history of this country, Philadelphia is where it all started. Much of the early city is either preserved or restored so that you can literally walk in the footsteps of Benjamin Franklin and John Adams. It is an experience unlike any other we have had traveling in our country. Our base while we were in Philly was the Park Hyatt Philadelphia, located in the historic *Bellevue-Stratford* building. This magnificent location is perfect. You could propose, have the wedding and the reception all in its magnificent rooms. How’s that for one-stop shopping? A two-block walk up the street brings you to the *Kimmel Center*, where you can enjoy live theater or a performance of the sublime Philadelphia Orchestra. Most other sites are within walking distance, with the exception of the *Philadelphia Museum of Art*, which requires a car or a taxi, but is a must-see. The Park Hyatt Philadelphia and the Bellevue are smack in the middle of everything, including some excellent restaurants, one of which is *XIX*, right in the hotel, and easily one of the top restaurants in the city, with panoramic views that sing of Brotherly Love. *Park Hyatt Philadelphia at the Bellevue, Broad and Walnut Streets*, (215) 893-1234.

HERE IS MUCH TALK THESE DAYS ABOUT THE NATURE OF "PARADISE." We, like others, have our own view, but unlike many, we have found a form of paradise in Philadelphia. There is no strict list of rules to get into this little bit of heaven, but you might have to wait for your reservation, which is the only requirement for entry. We are talking about the magnificent *Le Bec-Fin* restaurant. Chef/owner *Georges Perrier* learned his craft at *La Pyramide* in France and began cooking in Philadelphia in the late 1960s. Food critics and foodies alike soon recognized *Le Bec-Fin* as one of the best restaurants in the U.S. All it has done is get better and better since those early days. Today, it is a true dining mecca. On our five-minute walk from the *Rittenhouse Hotel*, we passed *Striped Bass* and *Alma De Cuba*, two newcomers who have tried to make a name for themselves in the shadow of the master. They are good, but it takes more than a menu in French and silver-domed plates to make you the best. Our first three courses were pure pleasure. We both had *galette de crabe*, Perrier's signature crab cake. This was followed by a succulent veal chop cooked with simplicity and a depth of flavor that simply did not want to go away. Later, from the cheese cart, we selected five small but flavorful cheeses and a small *salade* that was perfectly dressed. After a well-paced pause, the dessert chariot, which we had been eyeing all evening, made its appearance. This legendary wagon is loaded with a fairyland of cakes, tarts and so much sugar that it would put a dentist into a coma. An evening at *Le Bec-Fin* is more than just dinner. The multi-course menu of superlative dishes and the incomparable service create a rewarding and lingering experience to be enjoyed over and over. Everything at *Le Bec-Fin* is at a level higher, maybe two, than all the other top restaurants in town. We can happily say that all of our expectations were exceeded. Thank you, Georges, for the perfect dining experience. *Le Bec-Fin*, 1523 Walnut St., (215) 567-1000 for reservations.

WHEN ONE CLASSIC CULINARY DOOR CLOSES, ANOTHER APPEARS TO open. We lamented the passing of *Lespinasse* in *New York's St. Regis* a few years ago, and then drowned our sorrows over a spectacular final meal at *Alain Ducasse* in the *Essex House* days before it shuttered last year. Our offices are buzzing with the exciting news that the French legend will again be master of his own New York kitchen inside of the *St. Regis* this month. The restaurant is promising a unique and theatrical theme, focused, of course, on Ducasse's distinguished and innovative wine and cuisine. We predict Michelin stars will rise over Fifth Avenue as these two powerhouses of distinguished service and elegant indulgence interlock their champagne flutes and toast to New York's tastes together.

WILD GAME AND OFFAL ARE THE SPECIALTIES OF *LA CANTINA Toscana*, a warm and wonderful East Side hideaway restaurant in *New York* that glows with the flicker of candles off of old brick walls. One can feast on authentic dishes here, as faithful to true Tuscan cooking as any in the U.S. This trattoria is the domain of two charming gentlemen from *Florence*, Chef *Pierluigi Sacchetti* and wine director *Massimiliano Caldini*. They are the real deal and so is their cuisine—real stuff, honest food of simplicity and great taste. One night we tried lasagne, calf liver, venison scallopine, and wild boar stew. We went back for *peposa*, made from a 16th-century recipe for boneless beef shank stew, and then indulged in rabbit alla cacciatore. The quail stuffed with sausage and potato, served with truffled mashed potatoes and another dish of garlicky eel would make a Medici sing for more. Two offbeat but deeply appreciated treats were Tuscan chitlins with pepper sauce and boiled tongue with pesto sauce. Service here is engagingly gracious and the wine list is deep in good, well-priced finds from Tuscany and beyond. *La Cantina Toscana, 1109 First Avenue, (212) 754-5454.*

A PRICELESS LEGER GLASS MURAL DOMINATES *BRASSERIE 8 1/2* IN *Manhattan*, but the real treasure is in Chef *Julian Alonzo*'s ambitious and tasty American-French cooking, with nods to Asia and Latin America. Sweep down the circular staircase and prepare for comfortable dark leather sofas, a long, curvy, friendly bar and dramatic, booth-lined dining room where everything from traditional steak frites to oxtail ravioli to cornflake-crusting crabcakes and tuna tartare is possible. All in all, perfect for a date or business meeting, this is one endearing spot with tip-top service and fairly-priced wines. *Brasserie 8 1/2, 9 W. 57th Street, (212) 829-0812.*

BOOKS: BLOOD AND THUNDER: AN EPIC OF THE AMERICAN WEST by *Hampton Sides, Doubleday, \$26.95*, a sweeping narrative about taming the West and the fierce Native struggle to retain it; THE BIG BAM, The Life and Times of Babe Ruth by *Leigh Montville, Random House Audio*, an exploration of baseball's original superstar that brings back the glory of the game; GAME OF SHADOWS by *Mark Fainaru-Wada and Lance Williams, Random House Audio*, the inside investigative story of the shocking steroids scandal and how it relates to suspicions about Barry Bonds; THE OLDWAYS TABLE, *Ten Speed Press, \$32.50.* by *K. Dunn Gifford and Sara Baer-Sinnot*, essays and recipes from the pre-eminent culinary think-tank explaining their philosophy of harmonious, traditional food patterns, sustainable agriculture and healthy eating and drinking.

FILM FESTIVALS SEEM TO BE POPPING UP EVERYWHERE THESE DAYS, EACH displaying a range of topics and talents, but if you were to narrow your choice of just one to attend, we have found it for you. *The Sonoma Valley Film Festival* will celebrate its 10th anniversary in April, and what a celebration it promises to be. Set in the heavenly rolling vineyards of picturesque Sonoma Valley, surrounded by quaint architecture, serene bed & breakfasts and a burgeoning culinary scene, filmmakers from around the world will gather to share their visions. At ENTREE, we understand that art comes in many forms, and this year the film festival introduces a truly unique concept to the overall experience that embodies Sonoma culture—the world's first and only Film Festival Sommelier. *Christopher Sawyer*, a young, passionate visionary, will create imaginative, playful and surprising pairings of gourmet fare and the finest local wines as part of the epicurean tastings presented before each film screening. Sawyer travels the globe as a wine journalist to educate and enlighten his readers about the world of wines. When he's not suggesting the perfect bottle for a meal at the *Carneros Bistro*, where he leads the wine program, you may find him adding that rare gem to the cellars of *John Lasseter* of *Pixar Animation Studios*, for whom Sawyer is his personal sommelier. On a break between screenings, we highly recommend a tour of some of the excellent area wineries including *Cline Cellars*, *Buena Vista Carneros*, *Benziger*, *Kunde* and *Moon Mountain*, where it is not unusual to run into the winemaker sharing stories in the tasting room. Accommodation choices range from luxury resorts and spas to value-priced hotels. One of the many restaurants not to be missed is *El Dorado Kitchen*, with eclectic menu choices and decadent cocktails. The film festival is the perfect excuse to escape to the beauty of Sonoma Valley and enjoy the creations of the area's best chefs with the perfect glass of wine, while mixing and mingling with stars and filmmakers. The Sonoma Valley Film Festival takes place over an extended weekend from April 11-15, 2007. For more information or to reserve festival passes, visit www.sonomafilmfest.org. If you seek a wonderful way to get around in Sonoma, *Sonoma Valley Wine Tours* is the premier operator. Just ring them up and they will send an in-the-know driver who can show you the insider's wine country, assuring the best, most reliable and stress-free transportation and experience. Visit www.californiawinetours.com.



WINES: *SIGNORELLO VINEYARDS'* 2003 CABERNET, 2005 SETA AND 2005 Chardonnay, all excellent choices in the \$25-\$40 range. Winemaker *Ray Signorello, Jr.* knows how to extract the purest perfumes and tastes from his varietals and magically blends fruit-filled California grapes with traditional French know-how. Visit www.signorellovineyards.com. Take note of *Feudo Arancio* wines from *Sicily*, an

up-and-coming winery full of innovation. Forget Marsala wines, for which this region is known; winemaker *Lucio Matricardi* makes delicious, traditional varietals, from *Nero D'Avola* and *Grillo* to international grapes like *Syrah* and *Cabernet Sauvignon*. Best of all, they sell for less than \$10 a bottle. These are high quality wines, rich in color, fragrance and aroma, reflecting the harmony and vivacity of this generous land.

BEVERLY HILLS' SONA IS A CULINARY GARDEN OF EDEN, BRIMMING with fresh produce, gourmet standards and creative inspiration that must be divine. Chef *David Myers* understands our importance as Time's Person of Last Year, catering specifically to every diner's tastes, adjusting his phenomenal and renowned tasting menus to suit vegetarians, special dietary needs and the just plain picky. The small plates never suffer under these alterations, as we discovered while eyeing our companion's tasty vegetarian meal. We've long pooh-poohed chefs going nuts on foams and infusions, but Myers stealthily stretches our imagination with innovative ingredients and techniques, driving us crazy in anticipation of what the next dish could possibly combine, and the artistic forms it could take. ENTREE's tasting menu included unbelievable specialties such as seared diver scallop with forbidden rice (prized by Chinese royalty), kim chi vinaigrette and a coconut-lemongrass espuma; tuna poke with tofu puree, dehydrated blood orange and a hijiki cracker; Kobe-tender roasted squab with market date puree, yogurt couscous, braised kale and green curry emulsion; plus black olive mochi ice cream with a vegetable maki roll, among other splendid delights. We've had chefs throw everything into the pot before with disastrous results, but in Myers' hands, every note strikes the perfect chord, making Sona ideal for the adventurous gourmand who cannot digest weirdness. Service was exceptional in this clean, romantic minimalist setting; the second a candle snuffed or a knife dropped, they were restored like magic. From Dragonheart Sake to a New Zealand Seresin Sauvignon Blanc, California's boutique Timeless Palates 2004 Syrah and Maudite, a mighty Canadian beer, the sommelier services of *Josh Klapper* are as entertaining as he is passionate about getting you soaked on the good stuff. *Michelle Myers*, of the renowned bakery *Boule*, complements her husband's creations with astounding pastries that make finding extra room a must, such as the xocopili gingerbread tart with eggnog ice cream, passion fruit ice cream, and fresh raspberries, or the sable breton with sweet potato brown sugar ice cream we enjoyed. Sona is a spectacle of dedication, creativity and pure enjoyment, plus currently stands as our pick for one of the best restaurants in Los Angeles. *Sona, 401 N. La Cienega Blvd., (310) 659-7708.*