

Best of the Road[®] 2006



A sunset at the Russian River estuary near Jenner creates a color spectrum of its own.

The names of the country roads in Sonoma County whisper of romance: Old River Road, Sweetwater Springs, the Bohemian Highway. These back roads link coastal villages with more sophisticated towns found inland along the expressway. They pass sprawling olive groves and ancient forests and curve through vineyards cooled by fog in the morning, then warmed by the California sun in the afternoon. Meandering through the heart of the county is the bucolic Russian River.



Barbara Gonnella, baker and owner of the Union Hotel Bakery Café in Occidental, and her daughter, Gienna Michael, show off a tray of fresh pastries.

The jaunt through Sonoma begins at Occidental, once a lumber camp. Near one end of the main street, a third generation of the Gonnella family operates the historic Union Hotel property as a restaurant. In 1989, the family added the **Union Hotel Bakery Café**. Cyclists, hikers, and backpackers crave the nutritional kick of the bakery's "power pies," made with locally grown organic fruit and thickened with polenta. Another specialty is saucer-sized chocolate-chip-chocolate-oatmeal cookies. Parents love the \$1 price tag as much as kids love the taste. So do wine devotees, as this cookie is paired with area reds for wine tastings in the hotel's saloon.



Waiting areas at Osmosis Day Spa Sanctuary in Freestone are private and include views of the spa's tea garden.

Down the road in Freestone, Osmosis Day Spa Sanctuary offers guests an opportunity to bathe without benefit of water. Osmosis is the only spa this side of Japan that offers a plunge into a tub filled with ground evergreens fermented with rice bran. The fragrant vapor reputedly soothes the body, improves mobility, and creates a sense of relaxation. An enzyme bath costs \$80 on weekdays, \$85 weekends and holidays. Be sure to visit the Meditation Garden, where guests can follow the path of a mythical ox herder, represented in rock formations, as he pursues, finds, and realizes his dreams.

As the Bohemian Highway leaves Occidental it curves toward the coast and Bodega Bay. Alfred Hitchcock chose this picturesque village as the location for his thriller *The Birds*.



At the Bodega Bay dock, catches of the day are sold to passersby as well as restaurants throughout the county.

Other than the self-guided tours listing sites used in the film, only The Tides Wharf & Restaurant offers any permanent display of the town's brush with fame. With seagulls perched on pilings just outside the restaurant's windows, not much else is required. The wharf provides a great place to watch fishing boats unload their catch and the restaurant, an excellent place to enjoy it. In addition to dining, Tides Wharf has a fresh fish market, a retail store, and a gift store.

The Children's Bell Tower stands in a clearing at the north end of Bodega Bay. The tower commemorates the life of a seven-year-old local boy who was shot and killed while vacationing in Italy. By donating his organs, his parents saved the lives of seven Italians. The centerpiece is a bell made by the Marinelli Foundry of Italy, which has served the papacy for more than one thousand years. Families,

schools, and churches from all over the world donated bells to be hung on the tower designed by sculptor Bruce Hasson of San Francisco. While the weight of the Marinelli bell keeps it from freely tolling, the sound of the smaller ones is often carried by the wind along the coast.

The town of Jenner-by-the-Sea is about 20 minutes north. It is at Jenner where the Russian River empties into the Pacific Ocean. **River's End Restaurant** overlooks the estuary and offers a menu to satisfy the most discriminating foodie with selections like grilled wild king salmon served with smoked corn, rice, and watermelon salsa. The deck at River's End fills each evening with passersby who drive to the restaurant just to watch the sunset. From this vantage point, diners view the sun hesitating over the out islands before it melts into the Pacific.

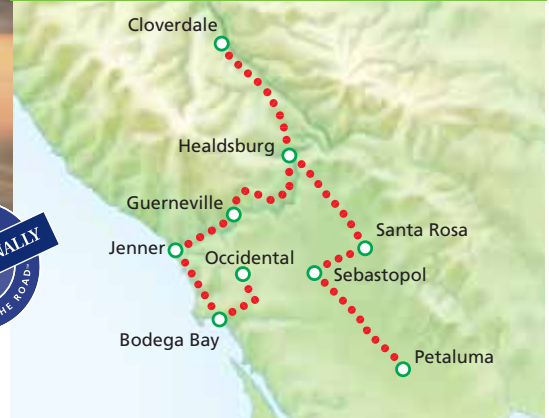


Desserts at River's End Restaurant in Jenner are elegantly served.

The estuary also washes ashore at Goat Rock State Beach, which is home to one of the largest colonies of harbor seals in California. Visitors are warned to keep their distance, especially during pupping season, March through August, as seals are protective of their young and will be aggressive.

On the drive inland from Jenner, River Road follows the curve of the Russian River. Turning on Cazadero Highway, the road cuts into a redwood forest that is so dense only streams of sunlight make it through the canopy. Elim Grove lies about 10 minutes into the woods.

Simply Sonoma



For full maps of California, see pp.11-18 of the Rand McNally 2006 Road Atlas.



Elim Grove was once the location of a Northwest Pacific Railroad depot. Mark Weiss and his wife Elizabeth Johnson transformed the property into a bakery and named it after his father, Raymond. The aroma of hearth-baked bread wafts into the parking lot, filled with pickup trucks, SUVs from the volunteer fire department, and rental cars. Fresh fruit pastries, rustic baguettes and focaccia top the list of favorites. An apricot pastry at Raymond's Bakery costs about \$3.50.



An early evening stillness settles on the Russian River in Sonoma County.

More redwoods await at **Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve** in nearby Guerneville. There is plenty of free parking by the visitors' center, and trail maps are available from a rack on the porch. Signage throughout the park is in English and Spanish. All trails pass the Col. James Armstrong redwood, which is believed to be more than 1,400 years old. It was Armstrong, a lumberman and investor in the late 1800s, who started the reserve by setting aside a few of his acres as parkland. Today the park is 805 acres of awe-inspiring forest. The Discovery Trail provides an accessible path plus interpretative panels in Braille. An excellent trail for children, it encourages touching the trees, even hugging them from specially built platforms.



Tended trails meander through ancient trees at Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve in Guerneville.

Guerneville has been a favorite resort area for San Franciscans since the turn of the 20th century. Its reputation as a tolerant community is well known, and its proximity on the Russian River between the vineyards and the coast is an advantage for vacationers. Area outfitters can arrange canoe or kayak trips from Guerneville to the estuary or points in between. A favorite trip leaves early enough in the morning to view wildlife along the river's edge and perhaps catch sight of hawks in the sky. If luck prevails, a seal or two will be at play in the estuary.

Not far from Guerneville's historic pin-truss bridge, Creekside Inn & Resort sits on the riverbank. The Tree House, a popular cottage for families, stands a full story off the ground. In homage to the redwoods that surround the property, buildings at this pet-friendly, family resort are painted red. Fun fact: All bathrooms have skylights.

A popular swimming hole is Johnson's Beach, which has been owned and operated by the same family for four generations. The concession stand serves standard fare and plays

songs by Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin over the loudspeakers. Rentals include just about anything related to a day at the beach, from paddleboats and canoes to lounge chairs



Johnson's Beach has been the number one swimming hole in Guerneville for more than 50 years.

and toys. In the summer Johnson's Beach rocks. It is the site for the area's Fourth of July celebration, Russian River Blues Festival, and the popular Jazz on the River concert.

Westside Road wends from Guerneville to upscale Healdsburg, which is nestled in the middle of the Russian River wine appellation. Healdsburg boasts a vibrant town square lined by one chi-chi shop, tasting center, and tablecloth restaurant after another. Not three blocks away, the historic Camellia Inn shows off its 50 varieties of camellias all year long. The inn was built in 1869.

The atmosphere is more boisterous at Lake Sonoma, about 20 minutes north of Healdsburg on Dry Creek Road.



Within walking distance of the town square, the Camellia Inn B&B has more than 50 varieties of camellias on the property.

Lake Sonoma is a haven for power boating, water skiing, and boat camping. It is also a stone's throw from Cloverdale, where a recharged downtown includes a square for public art, mostly from local artists.

Alexander Valley Road leads out to the **Jimtown Store**, where good food, great coffee, and locally grown produce have been available since 1893. *The New York Times* describes its popular chopped olive spread as "hard for olive lovers to put down." Customers who dine on the patio are encouraged to pick a few grapes from the arbor that shelters them. In addition to foodstuffs, the Jimtown Store stocks groceries, antiques, books, old-fashioned candies, and toys. Adding to the ambience, there's usually an antique truck or car parked out front.



One way to spot the Jimtown Store near Healdsburg is to look for an antique vehicle parked out front.

From Healdsburg, Old Redwood Highway parallels US 101 toward cosmopolitan and cultural Santa Rosa, the county seat. There's lots of shopping in Santa Rosa, from Santa Rosa Plaza and Coddington Center to the hip boutiques near Railroad Square. A four-foot bronze sculpture of two Peanuts cartoon characters — Charlie Brown and his dog, Snoopy — are displayed at the square. Peanuts creator Charles Schulz lived in Santa Rosa for some time. One of his last projects was the construction of the Charles M. Schulz Museum. Look for holograms in the museum's sculpture garden and by the drinking water fountains in the garden.

Santa Rosa's most popular park is Luther Burbank Gardens, home of the inventor and famous botanist. If you enjoy the flavor of an Idaho baking potato or the sweetness of a Santa Rosa plum, you can thank Mr. Burbank. These plants, his famous Shasta daisy, and other hybridized varieties are still grown at the park.

Nearby Sebastopol offers more plants to see, but none of them are common garden varieties. **California Carnivores**, an 11,000 square foot plant nursery, specializes in carnivorous plants. The greenhouse is filled with exotic plants, many propagated in wading pools. There are Venus flytraps, the American pitcher plant, sundews, butterwort, and other varieties. Peter d'Amato owns the nursery; he wrote a best-selling book, *The Savage Garden*, about his passion for carnivorous plants. At the nursery every day, d'Amato is usually found working at the potting table in the middle of the greenhouse.



Sarracenia purpurea x flava is a hybrid carnivorous plant that can be found in the wild and at California Carnivores in Sebastopol.

From Sebastopol, Freestone Road travels through rolling countryside to reach Petaluma, one of the few towns near San Francisco that was not affected by either of its historic earthquakes. Its downtown business district looks much the same as it did in the early 1900s, making Petaluma a popular spot for filmmakers. It is also well regarded as an antique center and shopping hot spot, with a factory outlet mall just on the outskirts of town. A navigable canal runs through Petaluma, and antique shops, boutiques, and restaurants line its banks. Dempsey's Restaurant & Brewery is a favorite spot for locals and tourists. Its beers are gold-medal winners, and the seasonal menu centers on organic fruits and vegetables grown at Dempsey's Red Rooster Ranch.

Stopping atop a hill called Scenic Knoll near Petaluma, there is a light breeze and the air is sweet and warm. Beyond, the back roads of Sonoma County dart in and out of view, weaving memories of a driving tour that will last a lifetime.

For additional information:**Applewood Inn & Restaurant**

13555 Highway 116, Guerneville, CA 95446
(707) 869-9093 or 800-555-8509
www.applewoodinn.com

Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve

17000 Armstrong Woods Road,
Guerneville, CA 95446
(707) 869-2958
www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=450

Luther Burbank Home & Gardens

Santa Rosa Ave. at Sonoma Ave.,
Santa Rosa, CA 95404
(707) 524-5445
www.lutherburbank.org

Camellia Inn

211 North St., Healdsburg, CA 95448
(707) 433-8182 or 800-727-8182
www.camelliainn.com

California Carnivores

2833 Old Gravenstein Hwy. South,
Sebastopol, CA 95472
(707) 824-0433
www.californiacarnivores.com

Children's Bell Tower

Route 1, north of Bodega Bay about 1 H miles
north of the Visitor's Center, behind Bodega
Bay Community Center, Bodega Bay, CA
www.nicholasgreen.org/bell_memorial.html

Creekside Inn

16180 Neeley Rd., P.O. Box 2185,
Guerneville, CA 95446
(707) 869-3623
www.creeksideinn.com

Dempsey's Restaurant & Brewery

50 E. Washington St., Petaluma, CA 94952
(707) 765-9694
www.dempseys.com

Jimtown Store

6706 State Hwy. 128, Healdsburg, CA 95448
(707) 433-1212
www.jimtown.com

Johnson's Beach (& Resort)

16241 First St., Guerneville, CA 95446
(707) 869-2022
www.johnsonsbeach.com

Osmosis Day Spa Sanctuary

209 Bohemian Hwy., Freestone, CA 95472
(707) 823-8231
www.osmosis.com

Raymond's Bakery at Elim Grove

5400 Cazadero Hwy., Cazadero, CA 95421
(707) 632-5335
www.raymonds-bakery.com

River's End Inn and Restaurant

11048 Hwy. 1, Jenner, CA 95450
(707) 865-2484
www.ilovesunsets.com

Charles M. Schulz Museum

2301 Hardies Lane, Santa Rosa, CA 95403
(707) 579-4452
www.schulzmuseum.org

The Tides Wharf & Restaurant

835 Highway 1, P.O. Box 518,
Bodega Bay, CA 94923
(707) 875-3652
www.innatthetides.com

Union Hotel Café & Bakery

3731 Main St., P.O. Box 1,
Occidental, CA 95465
(707) 874-3555
www.unionhotel.com

Plus:**Bodega Bay Area Chamber of Commerce**

www.bodegabay.com

Healdsburg Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Bureau

(707) 433-6935, www.healdsburg.com

Cloverdale Chamber of Commerce

(707) 894-4470, www.cloverdale.net

Petaluma Visitors Center

(877) 273-8258, www.visitpetaluma.com

Russian River Chamber of Commerce & Visitor Center

(707) 869-9000 or (877) 644-9001
www.russianriver.com

Santa Rosa Convention & Visitors Bureau

(707) 577-8674 or (800) 404-7673
www.visitsantarosa.com

Sebastopol Area Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Center

(707) 823-3032, www.sebastopol.org

Sonoma County Farm Trails

(707) 571-8288 or (800) 207-9464
www.farmtrails.org

Sonoma County Tourism Bureau

(800) 576-6662,
www.sonomacounty.com