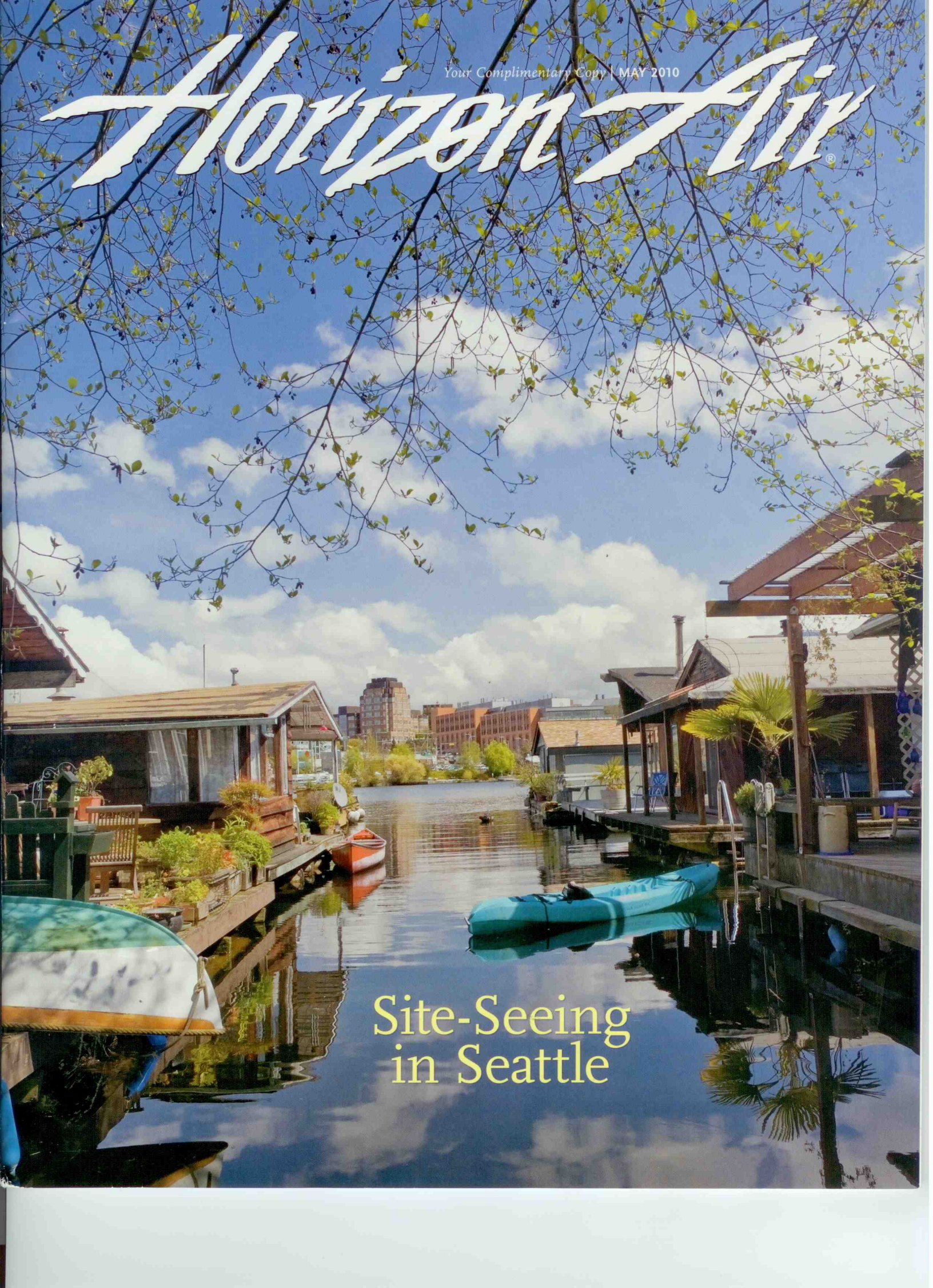
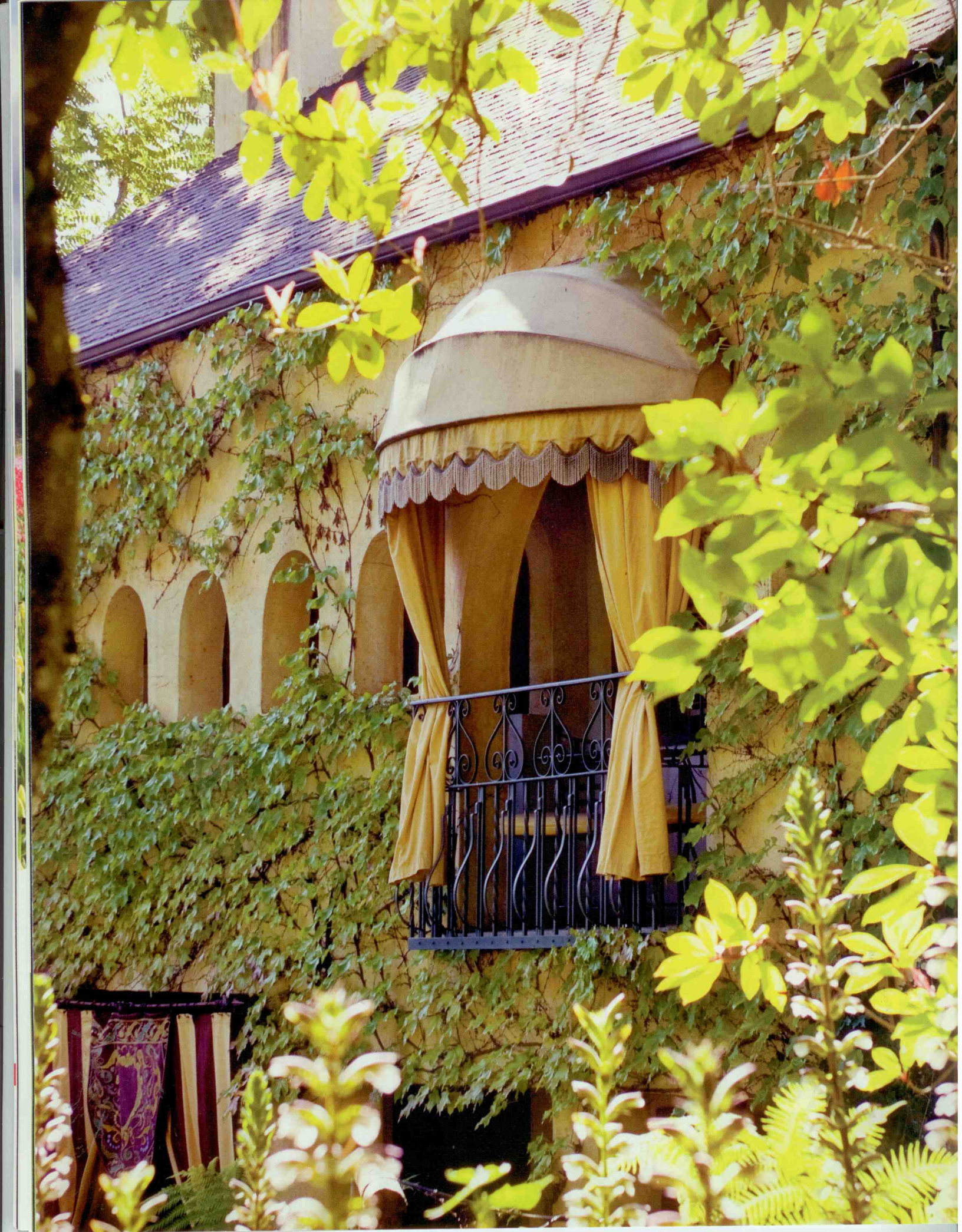


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# Liquid Refreshment

## Savoring Sonoma wine-country getaways

BY MATT VILLANO

STANDING IN A CAVE that's been tunneled into a hill crowned by a copse of gnarled oak trees, I'm nose-deep into a bold yet fruity glass of Super T-Rex Tuscan-style red wine, when it hits me: Batman might have been on to something. There's a pleasant echo. The air, at 57 degrees, is cool but not chilly. The rounded walls, painted a pleasing sand color, create a sense of intimacy.

This is the Deerfield Ranch Winery tasting room, where knowledgeable employees serve samples of handcrafted, certified-organic wines. The room is at the center of a 23,000-square-foot, horizontal-wine-glass-shaped cave that allows the winery to age barrels of wine at a consistent temperature year-round. Super T-Rex—a blend of Sangiovese, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Dolcetto—is named for the winery's owners, the Rex family, and honors their Italian heritage and the great "Super Tuscan" Italian wines.

My wife, Nikki, and I have driven past Deer-

field hundreds of times, without really noticing it, on our way from our home in Healdsburg, north of here, to the city of Sonoma. We're delighted finally to become acquainted with the winery's charms.

We had help deciding to pay the winery a visit. Deerfield is a stop on a three-day winery tour arranged by Kenwood Inn and Spa as part of its two-night "Wine Country Splendor" package. Over the course of an unforgettable day, Nikki and I are being chauffeured through

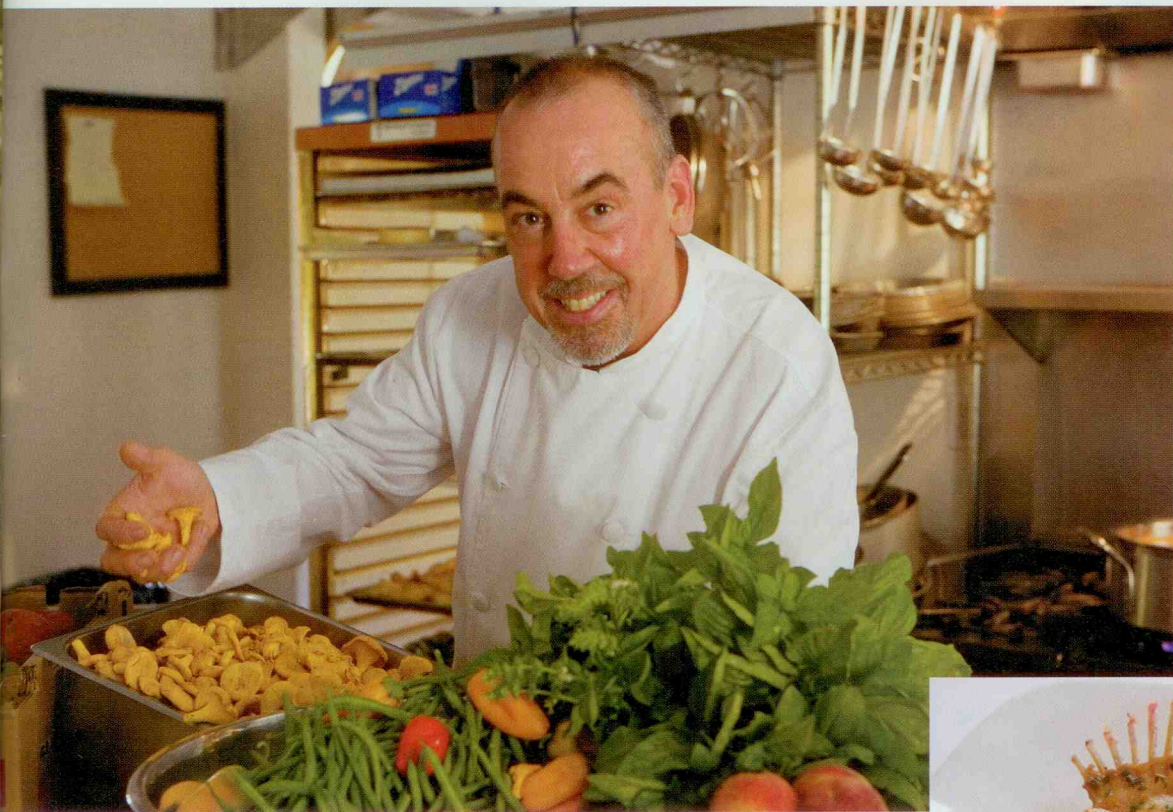
the Sonoma Valley in a black Cadillac Escalade. Thanks to our swanky ride from tasting room to tasting room, we feel like VIPs. It's a great way to experience the valley in style.

"Wine Country Splendor" is one of the many sit-back-and-enjoy wine-related packages offered by resorts in Sonoma County, which is home to more than 300 wineries. Some packages include transportation. Others include food. Still others include activities such as hot-air ballooning, bike riding, cooking lessons and horseback riding. What the packages all have in common is that they call upon local knowledge to enable visitors to experience and appre-



Facing page: Kenwood Inn and Spa, a European-style oasis, offers a "Wine Country Splendor" package that includes tours of several notable wineries. Above and left: Guests can enjoy a "Blissful Escape" at Vintners Inn and sample Ferrari-Carano wines.





COURTESY: THE FARMHOUSE INN AND RESTAURANT



ciate the region's exceptional wines and wineries.

"The best way to explore the wine country is to let the local experts share their secrets," says Dave Cortez, our driver on the Kenwood trip, and a local tour operator for more than 20 years. "Most of us know the people and places that even the very best guidebooks don't."

### Wine Country Splendor

The Kenwood Inn and Spa (707-833-1293, [www.kenwoodinn.com](http://www.kenwoodinn.com)), located in Kenwood, southeast of Santa Rosa, is a "find" in and of itself. The unassuming but posh resort is tucked behind an ivy-covered wall alongside the Sonoma Highway, the main thoroughfare from our neck of the woods to the rest of Sonoma and Napa wine country.

Inside the rock wall lies a Europeanlike oasis. Six Mediterranean-style buildings surround three quiet courtyards and two tranquil swimming pools. Each of the 29 guestrooms has a gas fireplace, antique furniture and a cavernous bathroom. Numerous rooms have jetted tubs, and one has a steam shower. There's also a private 10-table Italian restaurant and a full-service spa with five treatment rooms.

Nikki and I have come to Kenwood for a mini-escape. Since welcoming our first child in May of 2009, time alone with each other has been rare. We started to unwind the minute we entered Kenwood's grounds the night before, and we had a wonderful conversation over a quiet "three-tastes seasonal wine-and-food flight" that was included in our package. The fare changes with the seasons and includes ingredients from local purveyors such as creameries, olive-oil producers, ranches and wineries. In

May, for instance, one of the three "tastes" is braised pork belly from a California ranch, over creamy Parmigiano Reggiano polenta with a late-harvest-Zinfandel agrodolce reduction. It's paired with a 2008 HKG Russian River Valley Estate Pinot Noir that won a gold medal in this year's *San Francisco Chronicle* Wine Competition. The bright, classic-style Pinot, from Healdsburg's Hop Kiln Winery, is lush and rich, with strawberry, cola and even violet floral flavors.

The first stop on today's "Splendor" excursion was Chateau St. Jean, a winery just up the road from the inn. Here, Philippe Thibault, hospitality operations manager, gave us a quick tour of the winery's picnic area and glorious gardens, then led us into a circa-1920 chateau, the building that hosts tastings of the winery's reserve wines. From a small table in the chateau's original dining room—a spot with spectacular views (through original leaded-glass windows) of the Cabernet Franc vineyard—Nikki and I tasted numerous wines over the course of an hour. Our favorite: the 2005 Cinq Cépages, a rich, deep Bordeaux-style blend with black raspberry, mocha and blueberry nuances.

Next on the tour was the Benziger Family Winery in Glen Ellen, south of Kenwood, where visitors can take a 45-minute tram tour of the 85-acre vineyard or experience it on foot via designated trails. The Benziger family has been cultivating grapes

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The Farmhouse Inn and Restaurant's "Gourmet Getaway" includes dinner at two top restaurants. Farmhouse Restaurant Chef Steve Litke, above left, emphasizes local ingredients, and innovative dishes such as "Rabbit, Rabbit, Rabbit," shown above.

