

Bacara

By Suzanne Wright

One of the best reasons to visit California is the produce. Plan your getaway just right and you can attend a garlic, artichoke, lemon, strawberry or zucchini festival, to name just a few. When I was invited to Bacara in October for their annual avocado festival, I knew I was in for a treat.

The resort, famous for hosting Oprah's "Legends" weekend, boasts 1,000 acres of terrain that backs onto the Los Padres National Forest; 450 of those acres have been cultivated to produce lemons and hass avocados (a 10-acre garden grows a selection of organic vegetables and fruits for the resort). Located less than 20 minutes from downtown Santa Barbara, Bacara is nestled between the Pacific Ocean and the Santa Ynez mountains on a dramatic stretch of the Gaviota coast. Designed like an intimate Mediterranean village, its white villas with terracotta tiled roofs are clustered amid lush gardens. Two weddings occurred the weekend I was there to celebrate the annual harvest—a staggering 2 million pounds of the nubby green fruit. A series of themed events bring lots of folks to the property in late October.

In the lobby, cheery white Gerber daisies are tucked into a massive pot and a big bowl of guacamole and chips serves as a greeting to the festivities. The bellman says my room is one of his two favorites because it offers a view of the ocean from my bed, the sun glinting off the steely gray waters. I throw open the French doors to hear the crashing waves. There's also a gas fireplace, a DVD player, Spanish tiled floors, Frette linens and yummy-smelling Fresh amenities.

A cooking demonstration is taking place on a patio overlooking the ocean and a guest chef from San Francisco whipping up dishes featuring the almighty (it's good for you and it tastes good, too!) avocado. The sun gently warming us, perhaps 35 attendees sip wine and tuck into a four-course al fresco luncheon.

Next I check out the 42,000 square foot spa, in a soaring, light-filled, circular-shaped building. Initially, my appointment time was bungled, but the staff quickly and pleasantly sorted it out and soon Scott is administering my 80-minute treatment, the Bacara melt, which starts out with a gentle exfoliation, proceeds to a shower and followed by a fragrant massage. Later, I sample a citrus avocado body polish by the pool. I loll away the rest of the day alternately at the poolside cabanas and my seaside room.

As the sun sets, there's a reception by the pool with chefs from the resort's three restaurants and some of Santa Barbara's finest eateries. Under giant heat lamps to ward off the evening's chill, a well-dressed crowd nibbles on avocado and duck tostadas, avocado-enhanced sushi and other delicacies I didn't retain. Many of the wines are from the nearby Central Coast.

The next day, the hotel has arranged a half day of wine touring inspired by the movie *Sideways*. One of our stops, Kalyra Winery, is the where Stephanie, played with spunk

by actress Sandra Oh, poured wine and flirted with the soon-to-be-married Jack. Unlike many other wineries I've visited, this has a casual surfer-type vibe (it's run by an Aussie). They make a surprisingly good port. Sunstone Winery is a more traditional-looking vineyard with a twist: it is farmed free of chemical pesticides, herbicides and fungicides and is the only organic winery in the area. I fell hard for the 2002 Rapsodie du Soleil, a soft, Cotes du Rhone-style blend of syrah, mourvedre and viognier.

After all the tippling, I walk off my buzz in charming downtown Santa Barbara for a couple of hours, marveling at the pretty, vine-covered outdoor mall off one street. Back at the resort, dinner is in the wine cellar of Miró, named after the acclaimed Spanish artist. The five-course meal with wine pairings is another culinary triumph to the unassuming avocado.

My flight home is delayed. Seated next to me are wife and husband headed back home to Tallahassee, the latter buried in a book. She inquired about where I had been. When I replied, he looked up, a kind of reverie spreading across his face.

"We stayed there three years ago, shortly after it opened," he said.

She nodded, smiling.

With or without avocados, Bacara nourishes palate—and soul.

### **If You Go**

The weather in this part of California is superb year-round, but Fall is when you want to go to sample the avocado harvest. Delta offers connecting flights through Los Angeles or you can drive two hours from LA to Bacara.

Bacara: log onto [www.bacaresort.com](http://www.bacaresort.com) or call 877-422-4245 for reservations. Kalyra Winery: [www.kalyrawinery.com](http://www.kalyrawinery.com) or 805-693-8864; Sunstone Winery: [www.sunstonewinery.com](http://www.sunstonewinery.com) or 805-686-1881. The Convention and Visitors Bureau for Santa Barbara is at [www.santabarbaraca.com](http://www.santabarbaraca.com).