www.landofwineandfood.com

Culinary Itinerary: Central Valley

Because other regions of California get all the press and fame as culinary centers, most foodies have no idea that the Central Valley is really where most of the produce comes from. Boasting some of the most of the most fertile and expansive farmlands in the world, this region has often been called the nation's fruit basket. Along historic route 99 you'll find a cornucopia of historic sites, vast wildlife refuges, rustic downtown districts and small town hospitality with a charm all its own. You'll also find great winery gems dotted throughout the valley.

Day One: Davis/Lodi-Woodbridge Wine Valley/Stockton

Get up early with the farmers and start the morning right in Davis with a sugar rush that is worth the calories at **Konditorei Austrian Pastry** (www.konditoreidavis.com). Featuring simply-to-die-for Austrian pastries, this place is a local hotspot for guilty pleasures of the sugar kind. If you happen to be in town on a Wednesday (4:30–8:30 p.m. in summer) or Saturday (8 a.m.–1 p.m. year-round), don't miss the **Davis Farmer's Market** (www.davisfarmersmarket.org), one of the finest farmer's markets in the state. Here you can grab a slice of rural American life and socialize where locals have gathered for 31 years, hobnobbing with neighbors and picking through crate loads of fresh fruit, veggies, flowers and baked goods. The Saturday market gets most of the attention, but the Wednesday market also features Picnic in the Park. You buy a meal from one of the vendors—whether Indian, Thai, or Mexican; burgers, organic salads, or fish kebobs—and select a beer from a local brewery. Then sit back and listen to live music: jazz, bluegrass, country, western swing, rock, Dixie, even a cappella doo-wop. Davis is a family town, so there's entertainment for the kids, too. If they're not dancing, they can marvel to magicians and jugglers, bounce around in jolly jumpers, or try their hand at a climbing wall. Tip: Be sure to check out the cooking demonstrations and free tasting at the Tasting Table.

Afterwards, check out a Sacramento Delta winery, such **Wilson Vineyards** (www.wilsonvineyards.com). Only 15 minutes from downtown Sacramento in Clarksburg, Wilson Vineyards features beautiful gardens, lush lawns, a charming event center and award- winning wines. Wilson is a family owned winery featuring Merlot, Petite Sirah and a unique Chenin Blanc/Viognier blend. Or swing by a winery or two in **Lodi** (www.lodiwine.com), known for a variety of wines but recognized for its signature old-vine Zinfandel. A great place to go as a start or if you're short on time is the **Lodi Wine & Visitor Center** (www.lodiwine.com/visitorcenter1.shtml), which features an expansive tasting bar with a wide selection of regional wines, interactive and educational exhibits on grape growing and winemaking, and a gift shop featuring handcrafted products and Lodi giftware.

For a late lunch, head about 20 minutes south of Lodi to Stockton, where you'll find guilty pleasure at **Manny's California Fresh Café** (209-463-6415). The menu shines in calorie-packed-but-oh-so-worth-it classics like avocado cheeseburgers, fried oysters, and hot or cold artichokes (with melted butter or mayo).

But it's the chicken, roasted or fried, that keeps the outdoor patio and take-out counter hopping. Families flock to Manny's for the whole chicken dinner, while kids slurp down black cherry sodas while dipping the famous French fries in ketchup.

In the afternoon, explore historic **Stockton's new waterfront district** (www.visitstockton.org), filled with great shopping, dining and entertainment opportunities. A long-time arts city, Stockton features wonderful live theater, premier musical performances, multiple art galleries, and a world-renowned museum. Another way to spend the afternoon is to check out the **Merced National Wildlife Refuge** (www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/index.cfm?id=11652), featuring 10,258 acres of wetlands, native grasslands, vernal pools, and riparian areas. It was established in 1951 under the Lea Act to attract wintering waterfowl away from adjacent farmland where foraging ducks and geese were causing extensive damage to crops. The refuge hosts the largest wintering populations of lesser sandhill cranes and Ross' geese along the Pacific Flyway. Each fall, approximately 20,000 cranes and 60,000 arctic nesting geese terminate their annual migrations from Alaska and Canada to make the refuge home. Here they mingle with thousands of other visiting waterfowl and shorebirds to make the refuge a true winter phenomenon. The refuge provides important breeding habitat for Swainson's hawks, tri-colored blackbirds, marsh wrens, mallards, gadwall, cinnamon teal and burrowing owls. Coyotes, ground squirrels, cottontail rabbits, beaver and long-tailed weasels can also be seen year-round.

For dinner head about 30 miles southeast to Oakdale and hop on board the **Sierra Railroad Dinner Train** (www.sierrarailroad.com/dinnertrain/), providing visitors an opportunity to travel on the historic railroad while enjoying a delicious meal, beautiful countryside, and a wide range of entertainment. Every week of the year, the Dinner Train offers romantic dinners, fun murder mysteries, lunches, Sunday brunches, Wild West shows, wine tasting, and much more. Another option is the environmentally friendly **Valley Brew Family Restaurant** (www.valleybrew.com) in Stockton, featuring handcrafted brews and fresh seafood created as much as possible from local ingredients. Or check out the nearby **Alder Market and Bistro** (www.aldermarket.com), born out of a popular catering business and featuring yummy bistro foods and chic cocktails and desserts.

For more information on Davis and Yolo County, go to www.davisvisitor.com. Lodi information can be found at www.visitlodi.com. Check out www.visitstockton.org for more details on Stockton activities.

Day Two: Madera/Fresno/Bakersfield Areas

In the morning, get an early start and drive south to Fresno County. Spend the morning or all day enjoying a **Culinary Farm Tour** (www.squawvalleyherbgardens.com) -- all-inclusive tours for large and small groups with farm stops, recipes, tastings, lunch and dessert located along Fresno County Fruit Trail. Check out Fresno's Chaffee Zoological Gardens (www.chaffeezoo.org), a surprising gem in the heart of the Central Valley – great for both kids and adults, or take a subterranean journey of an underground oasis by scheduling a tour of the world famous Forestiere Underground Gardens (www.forestiere-historicalcenter.com). Guests will enjoy a one-of-a-kind experience touring the most unique and awe inspiring historical landmark in the region.

As Fresno County holds title to the top agricultural region in California, it only follows that the County is home to more than a dozen farmers markets. One of the best is Fresno's **Vineyard Farmer's Market** (www.vineyardfarmersmarket.com), which can be found every Wednesday afternoon and Saturday morning right in the center of town. The market offers the best seasonal produce selections in the area, all featured under a beautiful vine-covered arbor. It also offers regular features such as "Chefs at the Market,"

with cooking demonstrations by the area's best chefs, special events such as the annual "FigFest", and special exhibits by local artists and craftsmen -- providing a delicious taste of the Fresno heritage.

For lunch check out local favorites such as **George's Bar & Grill** (best Armenian food in town; 559-436-1654), or **Full Circle Brewing Company** (local brews, poetry jams and live music; www.fullcirclebrewing.com) in Fresno. Other offerings unique to Fresno can be found at the **Elbow Room** (www.elbow-room.com) in the charming Fig Garden Village shopping center. If you stay for dinner, their sister restaurant, the **Chef's Table** (www.chefstablefresno.com) specializes in gourmet cuisine with daily specials based on the best of the area's seasonal agricultural offerings. Check out their website for year-round culinary demonstrations by award-winning chef **Malachi Harland**. For family-style dining with a taste of Basque culture, check out **Santa Fe Basque Restaurant** (www.santafebasque.com), where locals and visitors have enjoyed friendly service and hearty meals for over 70 years. Head outside the city limits and get a flavor for the agricultural areas of the county by sampling local cuisine at the **Blossom Trail Café** (559-875-2500), where booths offer picture window views of the neighboring orchards in bloom every spring, and the lunch harkens back to a bygone era with a 50's diner, stick-to-your- ribs menu. The original **Sal's Mexican Restaurant** (559-896-0412) in Selma has been providing satisfied guests a serving of Valley history for over 65 years – and the locals recommend it as the best Mexican food in the area. **Uncle Harry's** (559-638-5170), the area's iconic Armenian restaurant, is located in the heart of the turn-of-the-century Reedley downtown, and is known for great Dolma and Shish Kebab. If you have a taste for Scandanavian offerings, stop in for an authentic Potato Sausage lunch at the **Dala Horse Restaurant** (559-897-7762) located in the center of Kingsburg's Swedish Village.

In the afternoon, you've got various options, such as a whirlwind tour of Sequoia National Park two hours east), or discover the **Madera Wine Trail** (www.maderavintners.com), featuring the highly acclaimed dessert wines of Quady Winery or Ficklin Winery, among others.

Check out **Fresno County Wineries** (www.fresnowines.com), featured on the Fresno County Wine Journey offered every April and October. Fresno County wines are quickly gaining in popularity, and demand for the wine produced by these small boutique wineries is growing at an astonishing pace. Fresno County and the San Joaquin Valley have long been known as the largest producers of California wine grapes, and now the region is being recognized as the home of award winning winemakers as well. Make sure to visit the **Fresno State Winery** vault (www.fresnostatewinery.com) located at the **Fresno State Farm Market** (559-278-4511) where you will find some of the best wines in the state along with a variety of award winning offerings all harvested, created or grown by Fresno State students. On weekdays, Fresno County wineries do tastings by appointment only, so it's important to call in advance.

If you want to take a break from wine and food in the afternoon, or don't want to make the trek to the national park, skip down about 90 minutes south to **Bakersfield's California Living Museum** (www.calmzoo.org), California's premier native zoo and garden. Visitors can get up close and personal with many unreleasable (cannot survive in the wild) native California animals, as well as gardens planted to represent natural life zones growing throughout California. Adrenaline junkies can visit the Bakersfield Speedway (www.bakersfieldspeedway.com) or Famoso Raceway (www.famosoraceway.com) in the summer for all kinds of speed racing.

For dinner, dive into Bakersfield's history of transplanted Basque sheepherders by exploring their unexpected Basque restaurants in the California desert. Though there are plenty to choose from, you can't go wrong with the century-old **Noriega Hotel** (661/322-8419). Sit at long communal tables beneath blessedly cooling ceiling fans and revel in the nonstop parade of heaping dishes. A multi-course feast might include pickled tongue (quite good if you can get around the appearance), cabbage soup, spaghetti, and blue cheese

washed down with jugs of wine or perhaps Picon punch, a potent local specialty made from brandy, maraschino syrup, and liqueur. Very important tip: There's one dinner seating at 7 p.m. each evening. Make reservations and be prompt or you'll likely be out of luck. If you're a country music fan, check out the late **Buck Owen's Crystal Palace** (www.buckowens.com) in Bakersfield, which still brings in country acts large and small, and includes pizzas, burgers, salads, soups, fresh-baked desserts and a full bar.

The above itinerary was created based on feedback from various destination marketing organizations, so we apologize if there are any minor inaccuracies. Dates and hours may vary so we suggest you confirm dates and hours in advance of visit. Updated June 2009.

MORE RESTAURANT RECOMMENDATIONS

Davis Area

Sophia's Thai Kitchen
www.sophiasthaikitchen.com
Great food in a cozy and elegant atmosphere. The bar also attracts a big college crowd on Thursday evenings.

Sudwerk Restaurant and Brewery
www.sudwerk.com
Microbrewery with full restaurant featuring upscale pub-faire. Tours available.

Redrum Burger
530-756-2142
Legendary burger stop, made famous by students and travelers. Formerly called "Murder Burger."

Seasons Restaurant
www.seasonsdavis.com
Lives up to its name with California cuisine prepared with local and seasonal ingredients.

Fresno Area

Max's Bistro and Café
www.maxsbistro.com
Enjoy fabulous sweet potato fries with aioli, and other tasty surprises.

Trelio Restaurant & Wine Bar (Clovis, near Fresno; dinner only)
www.treliorestaurant.com
Whether you're a wine aficionado or want to learn more, pull up a seat at Trelio Restaurant & Wine Bar and let sommelier Chris Shackelford share his encyclopedic knowledge. This casually chic Clovis newcomer specializes in rare wines from around the world, available by the flight, half glass, or full glass. Menu selections are equally impressive, with dishes like lobster bisque and crawfish pie, spiced *chimichurri* tri-tip, and coffee-roasted duck breast earning a fast following. The restaurant doesn't have a liquor license, but boasts a great list of international beers for non-grape lovers.

Basque Hotel
559-233-2286
Wonderful Basque food in a former boarding house for shepherds.

Stockton Area

Dave Wong's
209-951-4152
Locals can't contain their praises of this newly expanded Chinese food stop.

Modesto Area A&W Root beer Drive-In
209-522-7700
Hamburger joint complete with waitresses on skates and decor that pays tribute to the film American Graffiti. Host of "crusin" nights.

Claytons Coffee and Tea
209-522-7811
Featuring coffees and teas, and a small café.

La Parilla
209-572-2420
Traditional Mexican food, even at breakfast time!

Merced Area

The Branding Iron
209-722-1822
Cowboy-themed steak restaurant which lives up to its name with decor that features hundreds of cattle brands.

La Nitas Mexican Food
209-723-7890
True, no-frills Mexican food that will leave you wanting more!

Cool Hand Luke's
209-383-3038
Features ribs and cocktail; the new "spot" for UC Merced students.

Turlock Area

Latif's Restaurant
209-634-5351
Long-time favorite diner of residents and visitors alike.

Lodi Area

Old Arch Brewing Company & Restaurant
www.archbrew.com
Serving homegrown beer brewed on site, contemporary New-American cuisine, and an international wine list, including wines from the Lodi Appellation wineries.

Cottage Bakery and Rotisserie
www.cottagebakery.com
Family-owned and operated since 1954, it's noted for fine sit-down dining, brick oven pizza, fresh European-style bread, rotisserie-cooked meats and mouth-watering entrees.

Rosewood
www.rosewoodbarandgrill.com
This gem is known for Classic American cuisine, particularly its Fuji apple salad, pan roasted chicken stuffed with prosciutto, and brie and bacon-wrapped meatloaf.

Lodi Beer Company
www.lodibeercompany.com
The Old-World atmosphere and the friendly, fun personalities of the people give the wood, stone and steel architecture the warmth of a bygone era. Here you'll find everything from basic pub grub to finer fare, including their famous halibut fish and chips.

Wine and Roses Hotel & Restaurant
www.winerose.com
Historic gem features fresh, seasonal ingredients in an elegant atmosphere. For those staying at this charming B&B don't miss the gourmet continental breakfasts.

Woodbridge Crossing Fine Dining And Spirits
www.woodbridgecrossing.net
Listen to live dinner music with your libations at Woodbridge Crossing Fine Dining and Spirits, specializing in fresh steaks and seafood.

For more information visit www.landofwineandfood.com.

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