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CULINARY ITINERARY: HIGH SIERRA

California's High Sierra country is where the world comes to play, whether it be hiking, biking, swimming, camping, skiing, snowshoeing, fishing, sight-seeing, water-skiing, gambling or spa-going. Surrounded by some of the most awe-inspiring, snow-capped mountains in the U.S., areas such as Lake Tahoe, Yosemite National Park, Mammoth Lakes and Kings Canyon National Park are among the most sought-after international playgrounds. But these days the High Sierra's siren call is also about wine and food. Foodies are finding the wine country of the Sierra Foothills a true hidden gem, with great varietals coming out of relatively undiscovered places like Amador, El Dorado and Calaveras counties. Most vineyards are located at 1,500 to 3,000 feet, producing distinctive Zinfandels, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Chardonnay. Great wines, coupled with crisp mountain air and great chefs committed to the freshest gourmet ingredients – you've got an appetite waiting to happen.

Day One: North Lake Tahoe

If you're on a diet, you're going to find your willpower waning in Lake Tahoe. There's something about the mountain air, lake breezes and wildlife eyeballing interlopers from pine, fir and aspen trees that awakens a desire for hearty comfort food.

A must for breakfast is the **Fire Sign Café** (530-583-0871) in Tahoe City. Get there early because there's usually a line of folks waiting for pastries made from scratch, salmon smoked in-house, hand-cut salsa and real maple syrup for the many flavors of pancakes and waffles. Locals like this place for lunch as well, plus other favorites such as large stuffed cheese shells at **Lanza's** in Kings Beach (www.lanzstahoe.com), an old-fashioned Italian joint, "down to the red and white tablecloths," that's family friendly. Try the sour cream burger and waffle fries at **Bridge Tender** (530-583-3342) in Tahoe City, overlooking the Truckee River, or the fresh ham and cheese croissant with soy lattes at **Tahoe House Bakery and Gourmet Store** in Tahoe City (www.tahoe-house.com). Lunch lines are often out the door for shrimp burritos at **Sancho's** in Tahoe Vista (530-546-7744), a construction-worker haunt.

Or check out Truckee favorites for lunch, such as **Moody's Bistro and Lounge** (www.moodysbistro.com), where **Executive Chef Mark Estee** utilizes locally grown and seasonal products in his Contemporary American dishes. In addition to outstanding food, Moody's features live entertainment, and music legend **Sir Paul McCartney** has been known to drop by for an impromptu performance. **Pianeta Ristorante** (530-587-4694) in downtown Truckee serves memorable Italian cuisine and an extensive wine list in a elegantly rustic atmosphere. Other great hotspots are **Drunken Monkey Sushi** (drunkenmonkeysushi.com) and the always-interesting **Jerky Junction** (jerkyjunction.com), where they sell vegetarian jerky, venison, elk, buffalo, soy, salmon and ahi. For the ultimate foodie adventure, try the **Ritz-Carlton Highlands, Lake Tahoe's Manzanita restaurant** (set to open Fall 2009 - www.ritzcarlton.com/laketahoe). Here acclaimed chef Traci Des Jardins features her signature French inspired California cuisine, with a regional mountain resort influence, sourcing organic, sustainable and locally grown meat and produce when possible.

After an afternoon of outdoor recreation near the lake, enjoy a close encounter of the food kind indoors for dinner, such as two-for-one fish tacos every Wednesday night at lakeside **Sunnyside Resort** (www.sunnysideresort.com), a romantic and rustic resort that's great to hang out après ski. If you're looking for fine dining at a cozy destination resort, try the **Six Peaks Grille** at the **Resort at Squaw Creek** (www.squawcreek.com), where all the food and drinks are made from scratch using the freshest seasonal fruits and vegetables, and are free of trans fats. All of their sumptuous breads and pastries are baked from start to finish in the resort's pastry kitchen as well. Celebrate special occasions at **Wolfdale's** (www.wolfdales.com), where the chef blends the flavors of the West and the Far East to create his "Cuisine Unique." The menu at this award-winning restaurant changes frequently, reflecting the seasons, and featuring a creative variety of seafood, meats, game, exotic produce and desserts. Voted "Most Romantic Restaurant" by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, **Christy Hill** (www.christyhill.com) in Tahoe City uses the freshest and finest seasonal ingredients for its "Seasonal California" cuisine with French-influenced sauces. Diners enjoy a great lake view and the chance to explore fine wines from around the world with an extensive list that has received a Wine Spectator "Award of Excellence" since 1982.

If beer is your beverage of choice, trek on over to Truckee's **FiftyFifty Brewing Company** (www.fiftyfiftybrewing.com), a gastropub which hosts Brewmaster dinners every first Tuesday of the month, featuring a four-course meal with beer pairings hosted by the chef and brewmaster.

If you prefer the more traditional nectar of the gods, North Lake Tahoe offers several wine bars to indulge in. **Uncorked** (www.uncorkedatsquaw.com) in the Village at Squaw in Olympic Valley is a wine bar and shop where guests can simply taste or relax and enjoy a glass of wine with appetizers in a sophisticated and hip atmosphere. There's also weekly winemaker events and live music. **Trio** (530-582-2323) is Truckee's latest stylish watering hole, where the emphasis is on "socializing over wine" rather than merely tasting. A menu of light appetizers and desserts is available to accompany the 3- and 6-ounce pours of wine. Live music in the evenings is garnering Trio a reputation as a happening nightspot. In addition to the latest openings, wine connoisseurs can head to the **Pour House** (www.thepourhousetruckee.com) in Truckee or **Time for Wine** (www.timeforwine.com) in Tahoe City to sample and pick up a bottle to go. At **Northstar-at-Tahoe** (www.northstarattahoe.com/), the gourmet delicatessen Earthly Delights recently added a wine bar to meet the needs of its patrons, and Grapes and Grounds also offers a tasting bar.

Day Two: South Lake Tahoe

In the morning, take a leisurely drive along Highway 89 south, often touted as one of the most beautiful drives in the nation. If you do this drive right, which means stopping at scenic overlooks such as D.L. Bliss and Emerald Bay state parks, it should take you well over an hour to reach South Lake Tahoe, which has plenty of places to satisfy foodies. A local "hole-in-the-wall" breakfast favorite is **Blue Angel Café** (www.blueangeltahoe.com/), where patrons fill the half dozen wooden tables, ordering everything from frittatas, Benedicts and house-made granola. Blue Angel is a popular place for lunch as well, as is **Freshies** (530-542-3630), where you can devour healthful meals at a low price. Specialties include seafood and vegetarian dishes, but good grilled meats are always available, such as Hawaiian spare ribs and free-range rib-eye steaks. Arrive early, as this place may have lots of people waiting for tables, and you'll want to grab a table on the lake-view deck. Another great local hangout is the **Cantina Bar & Grill** (www.cantinatahoe.com), which serves the best Mexican food in South Lake.

Spend the afternoon taking advantage of world-renowned outdoor recreation, such as hiking and boating in the summer and fall or skiing and snowshoeing in the winter and spring. Or if you prefer your outdoor adventure with a bit more vino, head over to **El Dorado** (www.eldoradowines.org) or **Amador** (www.amadorwine.com) **Wine Country** for the afternoon. These areas are known for amazing Zinfandels, which you can check out on the Fair Play Wine Trail (www.winecountrygetaways.com).

Leave the kids at home and enjoy one of the most romantic spots in downtown for dinner, **Café Fiore** (www.cafeiore.com). This northern Italian restaurant has seven tables with candles in a tiny window-lined cottage, with a menu offering a variety of pastas, meat dishes and daily fish specials; sautéed veal dishes are the house specialty. Save room for the homemade white-chocolate ice cream. One of South Tahoe's most acclaimed restaurants is **Evan's American Gourmet Café** (www.evanstahoe.com). This hotspot features imaginative cuisine with influences from all over the world, highly personalized service and an outstanding wine list, all housed in a vintage Tahoe cottage. With only 11 tables, reservations are highly recommended. In a small marina at the foot of Tahoe Keys Boulevard, **Fresh Ketch** (www.thefreshketch.com) has long been regarded as South Lake's premier seafood restaurant, complete with spectacular views. If you prefer your seafood sushi style, the local favorite is **The Naked Fish** (www.thenakedfish.com).

After dinner, push your luck a bit more by playing at one of the south shore's cornucopia of casinos and nightclubs.

For more information on South Lake Tahoe, visit www.ltva.org.

Day Three: Yosemite National Park and Oakhurst

Drive two-and-a-half hours through **Calaveras wine country** (www.calaveraswines.org), perhaps making a stop or two, and visit the historic town of Mariposa near Yosemite National Park. Eat with the locals at **Castillo's Mexican Food** (209-742-4413), a cheerful and cozy cantina built in 1955. Enjoy grande portions of house specialties such as the *tostada compuesta*, and fire-hot *camarones a la diablo*. Enjoy Mexican flavors in the pretty outdoor garden area.

After lunch, head about 45 minutes northeast to enchanting Yosemite National Park, arguably the rock climbing capital of the world. Hiking in the summer and skiing in the winter are big pastimes here, which are enough to help you work up an appetite for more than trail mix. Luckily, **Yosemite restaurants** (www.yosemitepark.com/Dining.aspx) offer surprising options for epicures who want to relax in a wilderness setting but pamper their palette. The **Mountain Room Restaurant at Yosemite Lodge at The Falls** boasts striking views of the 1,430-foot-high Upper Yosemite Fall. Executive **Chef Michael Gover's** menu is equally impressive, featuring sizzling steaks, fresh seafood and tasty pastas. The chef's specialties include Jerk Chicken Salad, Herb-Crusted Ruby Trout, and Western Flat Iron Steak, , The Mountain Room is open year-round for dinner only. Their wine list boasts a good selection of California wines, as well as some organic choices. The **Wawona Dining Room at the Wawona Hotel** is well known for its culinary delights. **Chef de Cuisine Robert Stritzinger** delivers an incredible array of specialties, including the melt-in-your mouth Flat Iron steak and savory Clarence Washburn's trout. The room itself is traditional Victorian but with a rustic flare, and the wine list is extensive, including international labels and several organic or sustainable selections. On warm summer nights, the Veranda adjacent to the dining room is a classic spot to enjoy your meal. Classic western-style outdoor barbecues take place in summer on Saturday evenings, and a hearty Sunday brunch is served from Mother's Day through mid-September and during the winter holidays. The crown jewel of Yosemite dining is at the **Ahwahnee Dining Room at The Ahwahnee**. Reservations are a must at this sought-after spot, which features award-winning cuisine and service. The room is magnificent, with a 34-foot-high beamed ceiling featuring large sugar pine trestles that complement the room's granite pillars, floor-to-ceiling windows, chandeliers, linen tablecloths and beautiful china. **Executive Chef Percy Whatley** serves up California cuisine, featuring both organic and sustainably-harvested, locally grown ingredients. You'll also enjoy an outstanding selection of domestic and imported wines to complement the menu. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are served daily, as well as an unforgettable Sunday Brunch. Proper attire is requested at this fine-dining restaurant.

Four exciting **culinary events** take place annually at The Ahwahnee, with special lodging packages offered at both The Ahwahnee and Yosemite Lodge at the Falls. Choose from a festival of fine wines during the Vintners'

Holidays,[®] world-class epicurean delights during Chefs' Holidays,[®] Heritage Holidays that pay tribute to the wonderful art deco era, and the hotel's renowned Bracebridge Dinner,[®] a grand tradition since 1927 that transforms The Ahwahnee Dining Room into a Renaissance recreation of an Olde English Christmas feast. For more information on these events visit www.yosemitepark.com/Dining_DiningEvents.aspx.

If you can tear yourself away from the beauty of this park for dinner, head down 20 minutes from the south entrance of the park to Oakhurst's **Erna's Elderberry house** (www.elderberryhouse.com/eehmain.html) – featuring high dining in the High Sierra. Named for the elderberry bushes covering the surrounding grounds, the house was part of proprietress Erna Kubin-Clanin's dream of having a place that catered, to customers who, in the words of Oscar Wilde, have the “simplest of tastes” and “only want the best.” These words sum up the exquisite experience of dining at Erna's Elderberry House and the adjacent Château, where the vast culinary talents of **Executive Chef Karsten Hart** now reigns supreme. The restaurant, with its European country-estate atmosphere, is divided into three lovely dining areas, each adorned with antique French provincial furnishings, magnificent tapestries and original oil paintings. A stately terrace with a commanding view of the Sierra Nevada Mountains adds to the fabulous ambiance.

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 INTERESTING OPTIONS

OTHER INTERESTING GOURMET ATTRACTIONS

North Lake Tahoe

The **Lake Tahoe Autumn Food and Wine Festival** every September at the new Village at Northstar™ takes advantage of the venue's outdoor setting and ambiance. The Festival is designed for all ages and features popular, long-standing events, such as cooking and outdoor grilling classes with celebrity chefs, Blazing Pans Mountain Chef Cook-Off (*Iron Chef* style), Grand Tasting and Culinary Competition, reserve wine and spirits tastings, a grape stomp, winery dinners and special restaurant presentations, as well as new favorites Kids' Cooking Camp, Gourmet Marketplace and the Village Taste, Shop and Rock Wine Walk and Art Show. For more information on this and other events, visit www.gotahoenorth.com or call 530-581-6900.

MORE RESTAURANT RECOMMENDATIONS

North Lake Tahoe

PlumpJack Café at Squaw Valley Inn

www.plumpjack.com

PlumpJack Cafe Squaw Valley features modern American cuisine with influences of Asia, Europe and North Africa. The menu is centered around fresh seasonal ingredients, focusing on local and organic produce. Enjoy the contemporary elegance, unrivaled service, innovative cuisine and exceptional wine.

South Lake Tahoe

Kalani's

www.kalanis.com/

Kalani's Hawaiian Fusion cuisine blends the fresh ingredients of Hawaiian regional cooking, integrating it with the flavors of Asian and European cuisines, spices and sauces. *Fodors* describes Kalani's as "Heavenly Village's sexiest (and priciest) restaurant. The sleek, industrial-chic, white-tablecloth dining room is decked out with carved bamboo, sweeping banquettes, a burnt-orange color palette, and modern-glass sculpture, which perfectly complements contemporary Pacific Rim specialties such as the melt-from-the-bone baby-back pork ribs with sesame-garlic soy sauce."

Red Hut Café

www.redhutcafe.com

This vintage Tahoe diner, built in 1959, is a local "hole in the wall" for traditional breakfast favorites like huge omelets and banana, pecan and coconut waffles.

Scusa!

www.scusalaketahoe.com

Straightforward Italian-American cuisines, featuring big plates of linguine with clam sauce, veal Marsala and chicken piccata. The bread pudding is a local favorite.

Yosemite Area

Oka Japanese Restaurant

559-642-4850

Often touted as the best Japanese restaurant in the Yosemite area, featuring outstanding sushi.

For more information on wine and food activities, check out www.landofwineandfood.com.

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