

{ JUST SAY } RENO }

*What's one of the hottest food and wine destinations in the United States?
Can you say Reno-Tahoe?*

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK



Okay, time for Wine and Culinary Jeopardy! The answer is: This location is one of America's up-and-coming destinations for food and wine lovers.

What is San Francisco?

BUZZ! Sorry, that's incorrect.

What is Las Vegas, Nevada?

BUZZ! No ...

What is Reno-Lake Tahoe?

Correct! And don't feel bad if you would have put your answer in the form of a question anyway. Lots of people are skeptical about the culinary charms of Reno-Tahoe, but that's all changing, as Reno-Tahoe is now at the top of the list for many gastronomic geeks.

The Reno-Tahoe area, which straddles the Nevada-California border at the base of the Sierra Nevada mountains, has recently experienced a culinary renaissance. With over 1,300 restaurants serving everything from buffet to gourmet, area menus are catering to savvy diners, and world-class chefs offer diverse cuisine alongside top-flight wine lists. Delta Air Lines' new daily nonstop flights from Atlanta to Reno are good news for southern food and wine lovers. So, with that in mind, here's what to see and do on your voyage to the brand-new version of America's old frontier.

Reno, Nevada

Downtown Reno boasts several casino hotels, each offering free airport shuttles. Most house an array of award-winning restaurants that may soften the blow of losses at the slots or tables. One of the best of these luxury gambling halls is The Atlantis Casino Resort.

The Atlantis has seven restaurants, including the Atlantis Seafood Steakhouse. Dine while gazing at a 1,100-gallon saltwater aquarium filled with colors rarely seen outside crayon boxes. Menu selections include wood-grilled steaks and bacon-wrapped scallops. A between-course surprise combines lemon sherbet and sparkling wine. If you're smart, you'll save room for dessert prepared tableside.

The Siena Hotel Spa Casino serves traditional Tuscan cuisine with flair at Lexie's on the River. "The focus is on fresh ingredients, served with classic sauces for color and texture on the plate," says manager Scott Kazel. "The idea is relaxation, to walk out the doors feeling better about life than you did when you walked in." The view of the Truckee River effectively contributes to the mood.

Downstairs from Lexie's is Enoteca (Italian for "wine cave"), a bar/lounge that's bound to give any enophile a case of cellar envy. Enoteca has an 18,000-bottle wine cellar, serves more than 35 wines by the glass and lists more than 300 by the bottle. The bulk of the wines are Californian, along with some surprises, like a Nevada Syrah. "The majority of guests are from out of town," Kazel says. "They have varied tastes, but they share a curiosity about local wines."

A downtown Reno location offers convenient access to big-time entertainment, such as comedy and music performances by both contemporary and legendary artists (recent headliners include Maroon 5, the Charlie Daniels Band, Bill Cosby and Regis Philbin). Additionally, renting a car to explore the surrounding countryside brings rewards like Lake Tahoe, a picturesque destination that's a scenic 40-mile drive from downtown Reno.



The 40-mile drive from Reno to Tahoe comes with its own scenic rewards.

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RENO NEVADA

IF YOU GO...

Atlantis Seafood Steakhouse
(800) 723-6500
www.atlantiscasino.com

Enoteca
Lexie's on the River
(877) 743-6233
www.sienareno.com

Reno-Tahoe Wine Happenings ...

Each winter, the annual Reno-Tahoe Wine & Ski Expo is held at the Atlantis Casino Resort & Spa. Sample wines, microbrews, restaurant bites and more. For details, call (888) 551-7007.

Each spring, the annual Reno-Tahoe Wine & Food Festival is held at the Reno Hilton. Sample wines, gourmet treats, microbrews and more. For details, call (800) RENOFUN (736-6386) or visit www.renohilton.com.

On the third Saturday of each month, join the Truckee River Wine Walk. Get a commemorative wine glass and map for \$10, then stroll past more than 20 galleries, specialty shops, restaurants and more. For details call (775) 348-8858 or visit www.renoriver.org.

North Lake Tahoe

Wine-loving tourists know the special joy of traipsing from winery to winery, especially when discovering something new or unavailable at home. For them, the Hyatt Regency Lake Tahoe Resort, Spa & Casino may well be a new mecca. Claiming the largest wine collection on Lake Tahoe, the Hyatt is home to seven eateries, including the Lone Eagle Grille, the top money-making restaurant of any Hyatt worldwide. Bottled wine sales at the Lone Eagle totaled \$900,000 in 2004. Because of such success, sommelier Cathie Wolf says they never have trouble getting the very best wines. There are hundreds of wines by the bottle, almost 30 in the “rare and extraordinary” category (i.e., a seven-liter bottle of Silver Oak), several magnums, about 20 wines by the glass and a recently expanded half-bottle program. The collection is domestic, with exceptions made for French offerings in the sparkling category. Most wines are current releases, but older vintages are available.

Guests frequently request California wines, and there is indeed a Golden State focus, with an effort to represent various appellations — not just California’s most popular wine regions. “It’s nothing against Napa and Sonoma,” says sommelier Patty Ruhl; “it’s just that others are also worthy of our notice.”

“The wine list is a work in progress,” says Wolf. The goal is to offer great wines in each category, she says.

The Lone Eagle may be the major player at the Hyatt, but the Sierra Café is no slouch. Last year the café offered wines from all 50 states, an idea born while brainstorming ways to add excitement to the wine program. Though that particular promotion has ended, wines from several states remain, with adventurous non-grape creations like honey or pineapple offered. It’s a unique thrill to sneak into the cellar and hold a Hawaiian bottle in one hand and a North Dakota offering in the other, then pick up bottles from Nebraska and Mississippi, Minnesota and Alabama.

Just over the California border in the North Lake Tahoe area, foodies are raving about

NORTH LAKE TAHOE

IF YOU GO...

Lone Eagle Grille
(775) 832-1234
www.laketahoehyatt.com

Wild Goose
(530) 546-3640
www.wildgoosetahoe.com



The dock at the Lake Tahoe Hyatt Regency gives visitors the peace and quiet needed to contemplate their next meal.

Wild Goose, a restaurant where environment meets presentation for a memorable, distinctly Californian dining experience. Go with a group to maximize the potential of passing plates, as each new bite evokes a different culinary landscape.

This “green” restaurant was built using sustainable construction practices like recycled-denim insulation and water-conserving fixtures. True to the theme, executive chef Dale Ray uses environmentally friendly and organically grown ingredients whenever possible.



The Lone Eagle Grille at the Lake Tahoe Hyatt Regency offers serenity, scenery and a wine list that’s hard to beat.

Assemble a perfect plate from the menu’s protein, vegetable and/or starch choices. Proteins come with a complementary sauce and condiment, such as the olive-orange relish with rack of lamb or basil crème fraîche with wild king salmon. Side options include white bean purée, pan-roasted baby shiitake mushrooms and braised artichoke.

Wines representing the United States, France, Italy, Spain, Austria and Germany are available by the glass, in flights and in half- and full bottles.

Truckee, California

A quick jaunt from North Lake Tahoe is Truckee, Calif., a historic town serving up modern fare at various venues. Cottonwood is a locals’ hangout with nostalgic décor. There’s a sense of being welcome, without feeling as if anyone’s trying too hard to impress — like visiting a friend’s home.

Cottonwood’s deck overlooking Truckee’s historic downtown is a popular summer spot. Live music (generally local bluegrass, acoustic or jazz bands) plays year-round on Thursday and Friday nights. The menu features comfortable, hearty fresh food entrées like pork chops with apple-jalapeño chutney and curried prawns. There are also more than 12 wines by the glass and more than 40 by the bottle.

Another popular Truckee eatery is the Pacific Crest, serving cuisine that co-owner Ed Coleman describes as “primarily Mediterranean with an Asian influence and a California focus on freshness.”

Familiar ingredients get a creative spin, like Argentine sausage wood-fired pizza or ahi tuna with roasted pineapple, shallot and cilantro slaw. The menu mixes old favorites and pleasant surprises, focusing on seafood in warm months and shifting to heartier offerings like venison, duck and pheasant in cool seasons.

Pacific Crest’s current wine list debuted in February. “I’ve been cellaring [wines] for close to 10 years,” explains Coleman. “I believe in having some [wines] that have some age on them.” He’s collected over 350 food-friendly wines from California, Oregon, the Rhône, Burgundy and Bordeaux, as well as from small, high-quality, terroir-driven producers from Australia, New Zealand and Spain.

Coleman and partner Robyn Sills also own Pianeta Ristorante, which serves authentic Italian food. They make fresh pasta and sausage on-site daily. Their Ravioli della Casa is filled with fresh spinach, basil, ricotta and parmesan cheese. It is served with a sauté of shiitake and crimini mushrooms, red onion, Roma tomatoes and spices. It doesn’t get much more Italian than that. Pianeta Ristorante’s wines are an eclectic mix from small California producers as well as some distinctive Italian producers like Sassicaia, Solia and Pio Cesare.

The restaurant’s two-story brick-and-stone building, built circa 1890, has a varied past, having served as various saloons, a laundromat, a post office and a suspected opium den. The drug of choice nowadays, however, is tiramisu. “Everyone coming from the San Francisco region says it’s the best they’ve ever had,” says manager Nicole Hizser. The airy treat boasts strong espresso flavors with just enough chocolate to satisfy a craving.

Moody’s Bistro & Lounge is the place to be if you hope to glimpse Paul McCartney, who is known to stop by and even sing for his supper, though his visits aren’t advertised in advance.

Even without any celebrities in attendance, there’s plenty to justify staying, though. Styled after French bistros of the 1950s, Moody’s is set inside the historic Truckee Hotel (a landmark since 1873) with comfortable booths, an open-air patio, a bar and a stage for live music (including the occasional unscheduled ex-Beatle).

Menu selections change daily and feature fresh, seasonal, local and simple ingredients. Recent lunch offerings included a blackened ahi tuna sandwich with spicy slaw and wasabi

TRUCKEE CALIFORNIA

IF YOU GO...

Cottonwood
(530) 587-5711
www.cottonwoodrestaurant.com

Moody's Bistro & Lounge
(530) 587-8688
www.moodysbistro.com

Pacific Crest restaurant
(530) 587-2626

Pianeta Ristorante
(530) 587-4694

Reno-Tahoe Wine Happenings ...

As part of the Autumn Food & Wine Festival, the Second Annual Truckee Wine, Walk & Shop is set for Saturday, Oct. 1, 2005. Spend the day tasting wines paired with culinary specialties from local chefs along the eclectic boutique shops of historic Commercial Row. For details, call (530) 550-2252 or visit www.winewalkshoptruckee.com.

By appointment, visit the Truckee River Winery, where winemaker Russ Jones pursues his stated goal to "make the best possible Pinot Noir." Call (530) 587-4626 or visit www.truckeeriverwinery.com.



Downtown Truckee — unspoiled, unpretentious, but full of fun throughout the year.

cream and a Kobe beef burger with aged Gruyère and mushrooms.

The wine list features wines from California and the Pacific Northwest, along with offerings from far-away places like South Africa, Switzerland and Australia.

Outdoor enthusiasts adore Reno-Tahoe, finding the area to be ideal for sports of all seasons, from sailing to ice skating, mountain biking to skiing. A vacation there gives foodies and enophiles a choice: Burn some calories or just belly up to the table and indulge. Either way, in Reno-Tahoe, culinary boredom is a thing of the past.

Hope S. Philbrick is a freelance writer because she doesn't think work and fun should be mutually exclusive.

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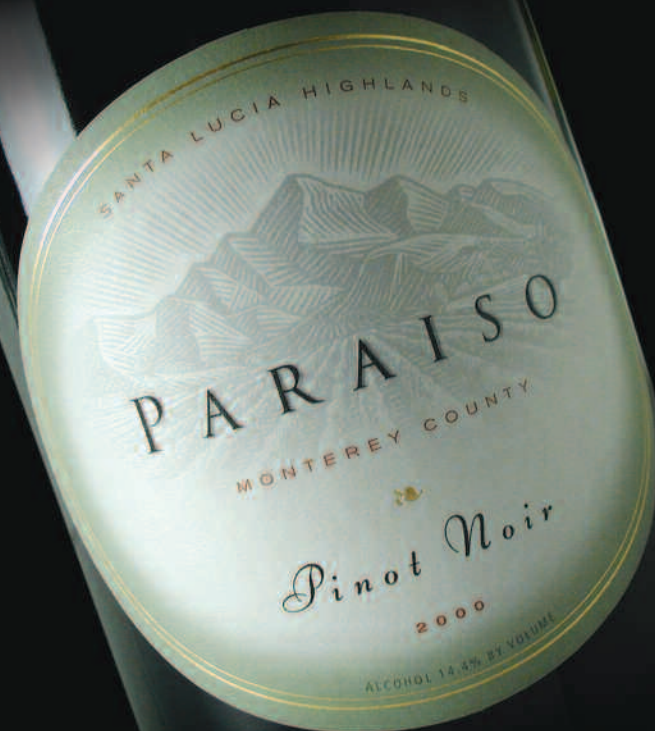
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