



## **Gourmet Getaways**

### **Ojai, California**

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Ojai (pronounced oh-hi, from a Chumash Indian word for moon) is a small town in a small southern California valley east of Santa Barbara. For thousands of years, the gentle souls there have found magic in Ojai. Some of its magic is in the light. Because the valley lies eastwest, the sun hangs longer in the sky. Much of its magic flows from surrounding mountains – silent canyons, cobbled creeks, healing springs, and waterfalls that are a surprise in the warm, dry air.

Although Ojai is just an hour and a half north of Los Angeles, it has closed its borders to change. The town's Spanish architecture, commissioned by Ohio glass manufacturer Edward Drummond Libbey, Ojai's benefactor, is serenely handsome. Libbey's finest contribution, the Ojai Valley Inn & Country Club, was built in the twenties. Over two hundred rolling acres hum with the excitement of golf, tennis, swimming, horseback riding, soccer, softball, volleyball, horseshoes, croquet, a children's playground, petting zoo, and hayrides led by Belgian Walkers.

One weekend, in need of a little of Ojai's enchantment, we drove up to the inn. For lunch we joined friends at The Ranch House, ten minutes away, known for a superb cuisine of natural foods created by the late Alan Hooker and inherited by chef Stuart Farnham. Seated beside a bower of herbs, a rivulet gurgling through the shade garden behind us, we nibbled on fresh pasta and sipped a 1985 Bouchard Meursault from Les Genevrieres, soft and gold as sunshine. In the afternoon we strolled to a stream where three canyons meet – a spot thought sacred by the Chumash.

Dinner was at L'Auberge, in an old mansion with views of the Topatopa mountains. Owner/chef Paul Franssen hasn't altered his long-standing Belgian menu, and the sautéed sweetbreads, beer-marinated rabbit, and baby vegetables were delicious.

Sunday morning, eager to see more of what the Chumash saw, we jointed a guide from the inn on a bike ride 2,500 feet down Sulphur Mountain. Looking out over layers of mountains to stands of pine, juniper, oak, sycamore, elderberry, buckeye, and toyon, we saw the landscape give way to sage, buckwheat, and other chaparral that finally opened onto an enormous sky and the ocean, not fifteen miles away. Turning our gaze down into the valley, we saw what the Chumash never saw; groves of orange, avocado, fig, walnut, and pomegranate trees; thickets of kiwis, grapes, and olives; and amid these splendors vast horse ranches, cozy cottages, and a sparkling reservoir, Lake Casitas, dotted with bobbing boats. Pure California.

The ride gave us appetites, but we weren't prepared for the inn's Sunday brunch. Lavishly presented in an imaginative yet underplayed style – lemon chicken with *ancho* pepper sauce, for example – the food was fresher and finer than any hotel buffet's I've tasted.

Of course the inn is incomparable, with thoughtful decorative touches and service. But when even its package weekends would empty the purse, I recommend an appealing B&B, Theodore Woolsey House, a stone and clapboard farmhouse built in 1887 by the scholar and Yale president. The rooms are delightful, the staff accommodating, and there's a large pool for swimming amid oaks and roses. Visitors can rent bikes in town and play tennis and golf at excellent public facilities.

That night we discovered Suzanne's Cuisine, where dining is like being the guest of a friend who's a great cook and hostess. Suzanne Roll drives to the best farmers markets within a hundred miles for the vegetables, herbs, and fruits she doesn't raise herself. Her menus are composed with an emphasis on color and wit. When she cooks, every element tastes like its own purest self. Suzanne's cuisine is made of love.

Which is what Ojai is about. Through its galleries, artists' studios, gardens, parks, bicycle paths, libraries, bookstores, meditative retreats, tennis and golf tournaments, and festivals (celebrating music, Shakespeare, Mexico, the Renaissance . . .), and of course because of its friendliness, life in Ojai seems closer to the earth – or to the Chumash moon.

By Monday morning the magic had worked, and we went home tranquil and refreshed.