



# Very Ventura

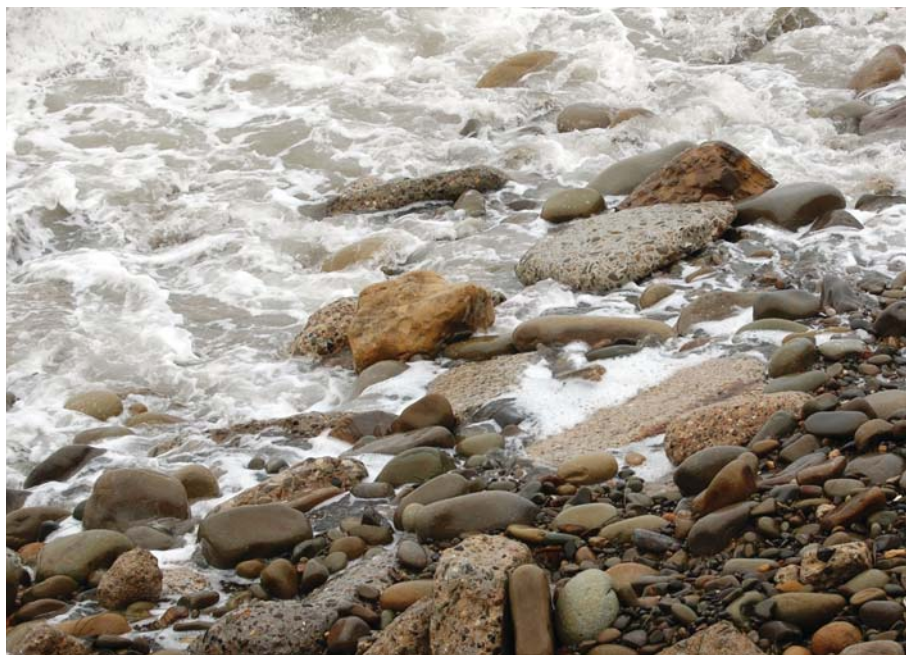
BY CLARE KLEINER

For years, Santa Barbara has been the destination of choice on California's central coast. Vacationers flock to the busy streets of this popular getaway spot for its lovely beaches, popular restaurants and brand-name shops. All the while, a lesser-known neighbor has quietly worked to preserve its own identity, one that is slowly but surely becoming a welcome respite from the hustle and bustle of the city next door.

Though Ventura also boasts beautiful beaches and a spectacular ocean view, it is the kinder, gentler option for travelers seeking honest relaxation. The streets are relatively quiet, and instead of masses of college students raging at bars, you'll likely find groups of locals discussing politics over glasses of good wine and plates of pungent cheeses. Antique shops and thrift stores line Main Street and Mom-and-Pop-owned cafés are the norm. A "Coming Soon" sign announcing the pending arrival of a popular clothing chain draws disapproving looks from passersby.



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Surfers love this beach town's laid-back vibe; Smooth rocks on the Ventura coastline; The Crowne Plaza Hotel has mountains on one side, the ocean on the other.





## Slow Vibe, Slow Food

This preservationist approach is also reflected in a new breed of restaurants popping up around Ventura. Chefs are embracing the Slow Food movement, founded on the idea of cooking with locally and sustainably produced ingredients. The basis of the movement is to encourage consumers and chefs to purchase ingredients from local growers and producers rather than getting products shipped to them from far-away places. With a growing number of artisanal food producers and farmers in the Ventura area, local chefs are taking full advantage of having access to fresh, local ingredients.

"I like being able to go to the farm and pick out what I want," says Andy Brooks, executive chef and owner of Brooks Restaurant. "And if I want something specific, often they can grow it for me. It's a win-win; we support the local farms, and the products we get from them are outstanding."

The chef orders limoncello made in Ventura, baby arugula, greens and herbs from McGrath Family Farm in nearby Camarillo, and local fish right out of the Santa Barbara waters. The freshness and care put into the ingredients are profoundly apparent in dishes like Brooks' cornmeal-fried West Coast oysters with fennel-celery root slaw, and in delectable lobster *sopes* with beautiful baby spinach and guacamole.

Watermark on Main celebrates both local ingredients and the historical culture of the city. The building that houses the restaurant was originally built in 1907 for the Ventura Power Company. Over an eighteen-month period, the hand-stenciled ceilings and murals were meticulously restored, and the result is spectacular.

Watermark executive chef Daniel Muller and co-executive chef Malachi Harland, determined to make their food as impressive as the interiors, are big proponents of locally-grown products. The menu changes depending on what's avail-

able, as the chefs work with smaller growers and sustainable farms.

Possibly the most significant sign of the Slow Food movement in Ventura is the monthly Farmer's Dinners hosted by Chef Tim Kilcoyne of the SideCar Restaurant. Each dinner has a featured local farmer who is on hand to discuss the sustainable farming techniques and specialties of the farm. Kilcoyne then prepares dishes using ingredients from the featured farm. There are four courses, and wine pairings are available. From common produce to specialties like heirloom tomatoes and cocktail grapefruit, the dinners feature the best of locally-grown ingredients and have become wildly popular with local foodies.

The result of all of this is a renaissance of sorts. Stylish cafes and wine bars are opening up all over the downtown area, but most are locally owned and careful to preserve the laid-back vibe of the town. The Wine Rack, a wine and gourmet shop with a bar for tasting, is rustic and cozy. The patrons are casual; it's not unusual to see customers enjoying a newspaper with their Pinot Noir. Very Ventura.

## Memory Lane

For antique lovers (or those just looking for unusual finds), a stroll down Main Street can turn into a half-day affair. Ventura's downtown area is peppered with dozens of thrift stores, each with its own unique personality. Many of the shops are as they were decades ago, as the oddly-named Child Abuse and Neglect Thrift Store will show.

Even the stores carrying new goods and products take a page from the golden ages. Luxe Emporium, a women's clothing and accessories boutique, sells styles that would be suitable for Marilyn Monroe or Jayne Mansfield. The store is decorated like a woman's dream closet: beautiful hanging lanterns, frilly curtains and pink walls. The Tiki Lounge, also on Main Street, sells kitschy t-shirts and baubles that are hard to find anywhere else.

The city's most notable antique is at the end of Main Street and is the area's best-known landmark. The Ventura Mission, known as the San Buenaventura Mission, was founded in 1782 and is still a working church today. The building, which has been restored several times over the decades, showcases in its museum the original wooden church bells and beautiful tile work on the courtyard fountain. A popular attraction for visitors, the mission is where Father Junipero Serra and the Chumash Indians established and developed much of the area's agriculture during the late 1780s.

A walk around the side streets of downtown Ventura reveals a wealth of distinctive Victorian and Craftsman style architecture. Beautifully restored homes dot the area and give the seaside community a delightfully aged feel.

Ventura is a flashback to a different era, but with all the modern amenities and benefits. It's a city that seems to emphasize all that was good from the past, and moves toward the future in a way that won't diminish its rich history. It's a great place to cozy up to for a long weekend.

### IF YOU GO

**WHERE TO STAY**  
Crowne Plaza  
[www.cpventura.com](http://www.cpventura.com)

Pierpont Inn  
[www.pierpontinn.com](http://www.pierpontinn.com)

**WHERE TO EAT/DRINK**  
Brooks Restaurant  
[www.restaurantbrooks.com](http://www.restaurantbrooks.com)

Watermark on Main  
[www.watermarkonmain.com](http://www.watermarkonmain.com)

The SideCar Restaurant  
[www.thesidecarrestaurant.com](http://www.thesidecarrestaurant.com)

The Wine Rack  
[www.weaverwines.com](http://www.weaverwines.com)

**SHOPPING**  
Luxe Emporium  
[www.lux-emporium.com](http://www.lux-emporium.com)

Tiki Lounge  
805-641-0515



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Main Street is packed with antique shops, like Times Remembered, a local favorite; A classic patio set celebrates an American favorite; Chef Tom Kilcoyne of the SideCar Restaurant uses fresh, local ingredients.





From Chef Tom Kilcoyne, *the SideCar Restaurant*

## HEIRLOOM TOMATO SALAD

SERVES 2

For balsamic vinaigrette

- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

For salad

- 2 heirloom tomatoes, cut into wedges
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinaigrette
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt, or to taste
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper, or to taste
- 2 tablespoons Point Reyes Blue Cheese, crumbled, or other good blue cheese
- 1 tablespoon thinly sliced fresh basil

1. In a small mixing bowl, whisk together mustard and vinegar. While continuously whisking, drizzle in olive oil.
2. Lightly toss vinaigrette and tomatoes together with salt and pepper. Arrange on a serving dish and top with blue cheese and basil.

## RIB-EYE STEAK WITH RED WINE ROASTED CHANTERELLE MUSHROOMS AND WATERCRESS SAUCE

SERVES 2 TO 4

For steak

- 2 12-ounce rib-eye steaks
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- 2 tablespoons freshly ground black pepper

For watercress sauce

- 3 cups watercress leaves
- 1/2 cup spinach leaves
- 1 cup heavy cream
- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

For roasted chanterelles

- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 pound fresh chanterelle mushrooms, brushed clean
- 5 ounces bacon, cut into small pieces
- 4 whole shallots, peeled and cut in half
- 6 sprigs fresh thyme
- Salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

1/2 cup full-bodied red wine, such as Cabernet or Bordeaux

1. Preheat oven to 375°F.
2. Season steaks with salt and pepper. Rest at room temperature for at least 10 minutes.
3. Bring a pot of salted water to a boil. Plunge watercress in water for about 1 minute and add spinach during last 30 seconds. Remove from water and drain as much liquid out as possible, either by pressing greens against a strainer or squeezing by hand.
4. Place greens in food processor and purée for 1 minute, then slowly add heavy cream until mixture reaches a saucy consistency. Season with salt and pepper.
5. Heat a large ovenproof sauté pan over medium heat and add butter, chanterelle mushrooms, bacon, shallots and thyme sprigs. Season lightly with salt and pepper and cook for 3 minutes. Deglaze pan with red wine and place pan in oven for about 10 minutes.
6. While mushrooms are in oven, grill or pan-sear steaks to desired doneness, approximately 5 minutes per side for medium rare, depending on thickness of steaks. Let rest for about 5 minutes.
7. Arrange mushrooms on plate and spoon watercress sauce around. Slice steaks (or leave whole) and place on top of mushroom mixture.

From Chef Andy Brooks, *Brooks Restaurant*

## LIMONCELLO MUSSELS

SERVES 2

- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- 1 teaspoon minced shallots
- 1 pound Prince Edward Island mussels
- 3 oven-dried or sun-dried tomatoes, chopped
- 3 sprigs of lemon thyme
- Salt
- 1/4 cup limoncello liqueur
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 baguette or small loaf of French bread

1. In a large pot with a lid, heat olive oil over medium heat. Add garlic and shallots and cook until shallots are wilted, about 5 minutes. Do not burn garlic.
2. Add mussels, tomatoes and lemon thyme and season to taste with salt. Stir to coat mussels with hot mixture.

3. Add limoncello and heavy cream. Cover and simmer 3 to 5 minutes, until all mussels open. Discard any that do not open. Uncover and taste for seasoning.
4. Pour into serving bowls and serve with toasted baguette or French bread.

## BLACKBERRY PEACH COBBLER

MAKES ONE 9 X 13-INCH COBBLER

For fruit filling

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 8 to 10 peaches, chopped into bite-sized pieces
- 2 pints blackberries
- 1/2 cup brandy
- 1 cup orange juice
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 3/4 cup brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/2 teaspoon nutmeg

For topping

- 3 cups flour
- 1/2 cup sugar, plus extra for sprinkling
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 sticks cold unsalted butter, chopped into chunks
- 3/4 cup buttermilk
- 1/4 cup water
- 1 teaspoon vanilla

1. Preheat oven to 350°F.
2. In a large skillet over medium heat, melt butter. Add peaches and blackberries and sauté until beginning to soften.
3. Add brandy and cook, stirring, until most of brandy is cooked off and reduced.
4. Stir in remaining ingredients. Simmer 10 minutes or until fruit is fairly soft and juicy. Remove from heat before fruit becomes mushy. Pour into a 9 x 13-inch casserole dish and set aside.
5. In a large bowl combine all dry ingredients.
6. Add butter and mix with your fingers until mixture is crumbly. Slowly add liquids, mixing by hand to combine.
7. Top fruit with spoonfuls of batter; sprinkle with sugar. Bake until topping is golden brown, about 20 to 30 minutes. Serve warm.



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Fresh pan-roasted trout in a hearty lobster sauce at Brooks Restaurant; Vintage clothing and accessories at Luxe Emporium; Chef Andy Brooks.

