The magnificent Monterey coastline is the can’t-be-ignored backdrop to some of the most delectable food you can imagine. From roadside vendors to fine dining, you’ll want to join our Tasting Tour of Carmel.

By MADELEINE GREEY
Photography by DONALD NAUSBAUM
Five stalks of thin purple asparagus are in his grip. I take one, inhale its earthiness and have a bite. Crisp yet tender, this sweet morsel has the richest asparagus flavour ever to have graced my lips, warm sun radiating through every raw mouthful.

“That, my friends, is the life force,” says farmer Mark Marino of Earthbound Farm. “Tasty, huh? Let’s see what else we can find….” Our little tour group follows in his boot-print footsteps, learning about variegated lemons with pink flesh and red torpedo onions. The earth is alive with growth, luxuriating in the 10 to 12 tons of compost nurturing every acre of this organic oasis. We pass by green seedlings of La Ratte fingerling and Purple Viking potatoes, when Marino stops and points back toward Earthbound Farm’s Farm Stand, saying, “That’s where we pile up thousands of pumpkins and squash for the harvest festival.”

Beside me, fellow foodie Anna Swartley nods her head and says, “Told you so.”

Swartley, a 49-year-old psychologist, has been telling me about Monterey County for years, ever since she traded in Toronto for California at the wise age of 19. She knew then, and continues to know now, where the good food and weather live. You could call her one of Monterey County’s finest ambassadors. And as any certified epicure is wont to do, Swartley’s constant refrain is, “Get down over here and try this!”

So I did. My Carmel tasting tour started with a toast at Marinus restaurant in Bernardus Lodge, just a few kilometres away from Earthbound Farm, snug in the Carmel Valley. Swartley and I clinked two cold glasses of Griva Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc, ready for the grassy, bright notes to awaken our palates. The wine of this region is legendary: mineral-rich Chardonnays that go down like butter, and Pinot Noirs that lull you into subservience after a single, seductive whiff of the leathery aroma. Amid all this grape-growing notoriety, Bernardus established itself first as a vineyard and winery. The boutique lodge of 57 rooms opened in 1999.

“We’d be fools not to ask for the tasting menu and wine pairing,” declared Swartley, knowing chef Cal Stamenov relies on some 80 local farmers, fishermen and livestock producers, plus a two-acre garden on the premises to create his own brand of culinary alchemy. And magic it was. Strands of Dungeness crab were entangled with tart segments of blood orange and nutty arugula, with dabs of creamy avocado purée dancing around the plate. Smoked Sonoma duck scattered with a dice of pancetta came to life draped in a tarragon-mustard jus. That’s just two dishes from a seven-course extravaganza, each a lesson in perfection, all paired with a glass of California.
We bumped into Stamenov a few days later, and again he rushed to feed us, again with Dungeness crab legs, and again our taste buds were floored. This time he teased out the briny crab flavour with fresh, crunchy green chickpeas, salt-cured Meyer lemon, cumin-spiked crème fraîche and a glowing carrot purée that tied the whole creation together like a perfect bow.

Stamenov, it turned out, was holding his own among 25 of the world’s top chefs, all primed to flaunt their finest beneath two massive tents blanketing a mall-size space for the Grand Tasting lunch event at the annual Pebble Beach Food & Wine show. A taste-all ticket showcasing the best of the best, the Grand Tasting is a three-hour orgy of decadence with 200 wineries pouring forth, and I scrambled to keep pace with Swartley, a seven-year veteran of food and wine events in Carmel. We dipped spoons into truffled flans of foie gras, bit into little buns piled high with miso-cured pork belly and kimchi, nibbled on Kobe beef satays, then checked out the white corn blinis that Jacques Pépin had topped with California pressed caviar. Each morsel was paired brilliantly with a rush of champagne, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and late harvest Riesling — until at last we slowed down and spent time with cheese.

Andrew Lamont, manager of The Cheese Shop in Carmel, beckoned us over with slices of Boschetto al Tartufo: a semi-hard sheep and cow’s milk blend laced with black truffles. With more than 250 different cheeses from around the world, this shop was a show highlight, and is one of Swartley’s favourite destinations. Lamont split open a perfectly ripe, triple-cream Gratte Paille brie from the Île-de-France region of France, declaring it a “religious experience,” and I swear, the earth shook beneath my tongue.

It must be difficult for Swartley to resist the lure of this temple of taste, situated a kilometre or so from her home in Carmel. Yet deliciousness surrounds her. She lives on Scenic Road, where sea spray settles on her windowpanes and waves lap at the rocky coast that fills the view from her patio. The town of Carmel-by-the-Sea is a 20-minute walk from her doorstep, preferably done barefoot along the soft, white expanse of Carmel Beach. It’s one of the world’s greatest beaches, surrounded not by high-rise hotels...
and touristy riff-raff, but quiet, treed stone cottages, simple bungalows and, okay, an exceptionally nice seaside villa designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. From the beach issues Ocean Avenue — the main drag, so to speak. The first few blocks of this upward climb are lined with private homes, but eventually it gives way to all things posh, housing a bevy of high-class galleries and stores.

When Swartley treks this vertical ascent, she likes to stop and catch her breath at Il Fornai. Lunch calls out for her favourite Pizza Cristina, baked in a wood-fired brick oven. Thin-crusted with a bubbly edge, the base is smattered with mozzarella and mushrooms, then blanketed with a frenzy of arugula, shaved Parmesan and prosciutto, and a whisper of truffle oil. Just two blocks away is The Carmel Coffee House, where Swartley escorts latte-craving friends like me. Triple berry bars and chocolate chip brownie chunk cake are just some of the drool-inducing goodies lining the shelves.

“GET READY for something spectacular,” chipped Swartley from behind her menu as we readied to dine at the intimate, 12-table Aubergine restaurant at L’Auberge Carmel, where French-born chef Christophe Grosjean took us on a culinary odyssey celebrating the bounty of the sea. We feasted on rich slabs of caramelized red abalone and scallops poised on a delicate volute of white asparagus. But it was the Monterey spot prawns that caused a sensation. Uncommonly juicy and sweet, they were served with leeks, fresh dates and gooey, flaky baklava; “The Berry Lady,” with her pints full of boysenberries, golden raspberries and olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil. She’d thrown in a California olive oil.

The guy behind the counter at Sea Harvest Fish Market & Restaurant was happy to oblige, promising to set aside two pounds of Monterey spot prawns for Swartley to pick up the next afternoon. But before that, we had more food shopping to do.

Nearby Salinas Valley produces more than 80 per cent of the lettuce consumed in the U.S. Castroville grows 85 per cent of the nation’s artichokes, and Watsonville is strawberry central. When it comes to walnuts, persimmons, kiwis, figs, prunes or dates, Monterey County is the place to indulge. They don’t get any fresher.

The cities of Monterey and Pacific Grove both offer weekly organic farmers’ markets year-round, and Swartley is on a first-name basis with many of the vendors. Or so she says. They include “The Berry Lady,” with her pints full of boysenberries, golden raspberries and olive oil; “The Arabian Guy,” who touts flatbreads, clams, mussels and smoked Alaskan salmon. Without them, Swartley says her cooking would be lost.

It was in Big Sur — less than an hour’s drive away from her home — where Swartley honed her kitchen skills. In 1984, she joined the work scholarship program at Esalen Institute, a holistic retreat centre. When she wasn’t interning in psychotherapy, she found herself standing over a Hobart mixer, whipping up meals for 300 at one of the kitchen’s main cooks. She baked countless loaves of multi-grain bread studded with apricots and nuts, dreamt up tomorrow’s soup using today’s leftovers and figured out how a bummer crop of cauliflower could fill a day’s menu. It didn’t hurt that she was living in one of the most beautiful destinations in the world along a rocky, pristine coast framed by majestic redwood forests.

WHERE TO STAY

**AFFORDABLE LUXURY IN THE HEART OF CARMEL-By-the-Sea**

Tally Ho Inn, Carmel (tallyho-inn.com)

**A PAMPERED ESCAPE IN BIG SUR**

Ventana Inn & Spa, Big Sur (ventanainn.com)

**WINE AND FOOD DECADENCE IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST**

Bernardus Lodge, Carmel Valley (bernardus.com)

Earthbound Farm’s Farm Stand is open daily, year-round, at 7250 Carmel Valley Rd.

**HERE Comes the Sun**

**GET READY**