

GOLFSTYLE

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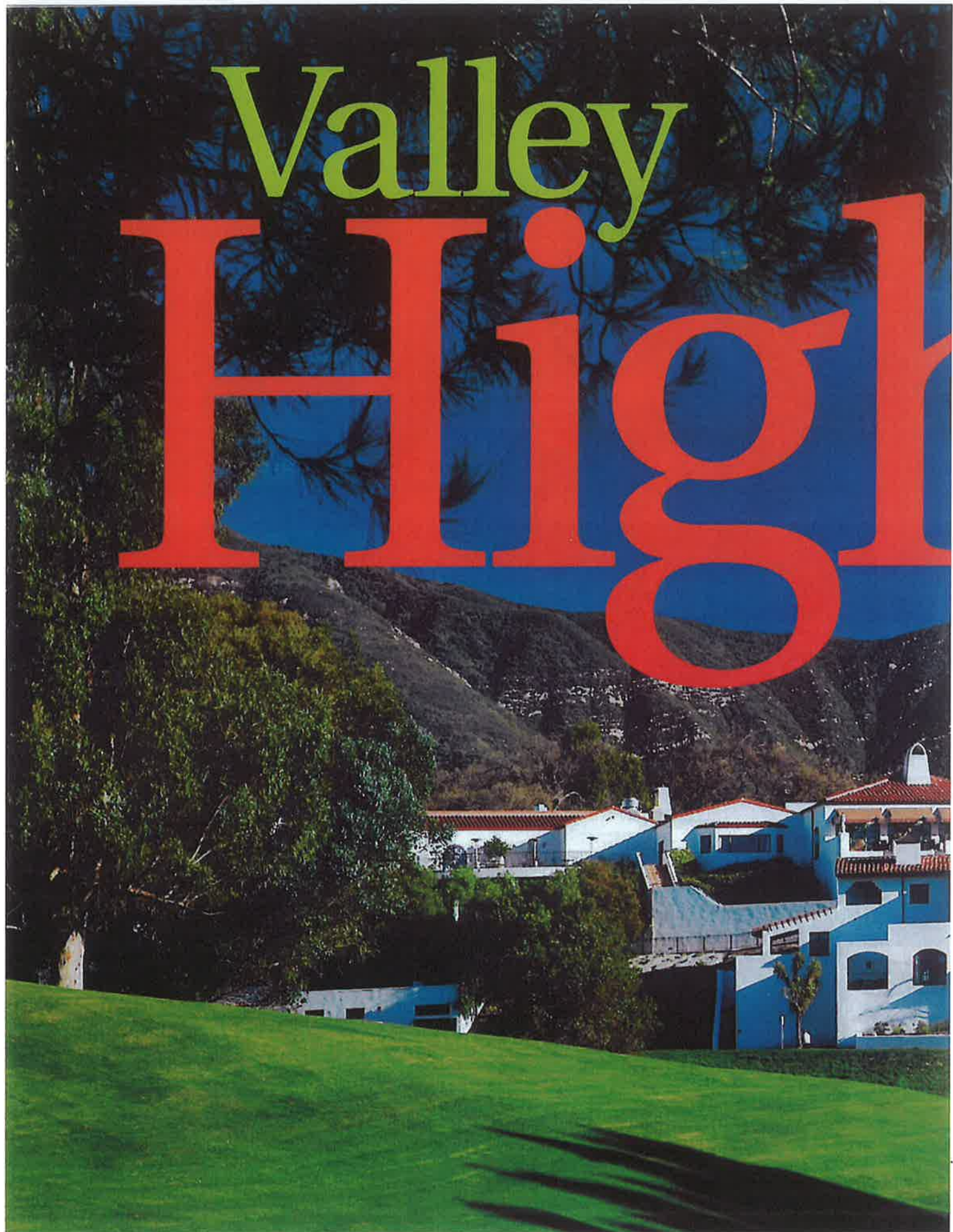
SWINGING IN THE RAIN

WEATHERING THE STORM IN STYLE



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Valley High





WHEN THE LIGHT CATCHES OJAI JUST RIGHT,
THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE IT ON EARTH

By Mary Robertson

There are moments and then there are Pink Moments. The latter is a singular pleasure at the Ojai Valley Inn & Spa in Ventura County, California, where guests tee up cocktails as the day's fading sunlight routinely bathes the east end of the Topa Topa mountain range in a remarkable veil of pink and purple before the evening's hues finally fade to black.

A product of Ojai's valley setting and the town's rare alignment with an east-west mountain range, these pink moments can last several minutes—the strawberry topping on an already idyllic setting that blends hot springs and waterfalls with the ever-present colours and scents of orange and olive groves and what seems like twenty-five hours of sunshine a day.



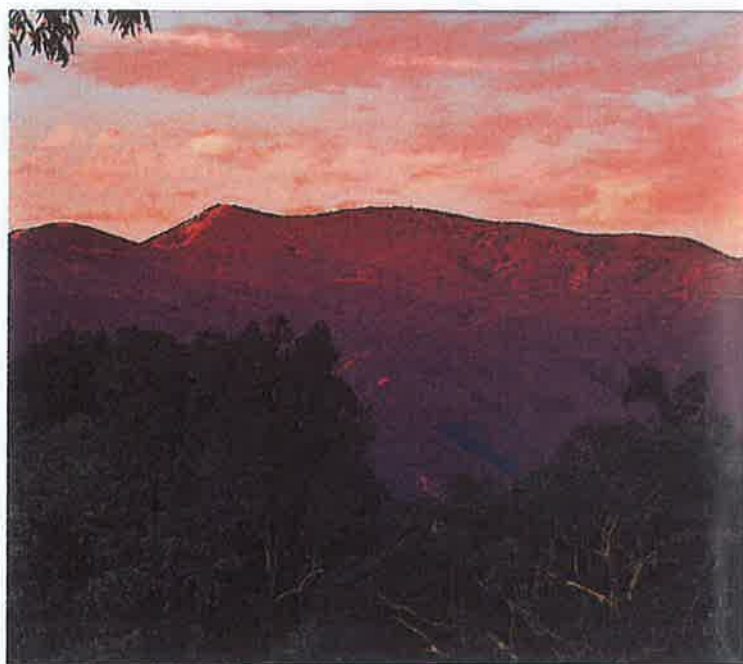
The Chumash Indians, the region's early inhabitants, considered the Topa Topa a spiritual place, referring to it as "A' hwai," (Valley of the Moon). My girlfriend Diane and I weren't about to dispute the point. Our pursuits, however, were rather more indulgent than metaphysical. We were lured to the Spanish colonial-styled Ojai Valley Inn, perched amid rolling hills near the shores of Lake Casistas a scenic hundred kilometres north of LAX, by the highly addictive combination of epicure and golf. It came in the form of the resort's first annual Celebrity Chef Classic, a heady three days of multiple tee times, spa treatments, fine wines and succulent items prepared by five renowned culinary artists—all in support of Ojai's Share the Strength and Help program, which benefits children at risk of hunger.

Our in-flight entertainment of *Julie and Julia* was a wonderful happenstance, as the tournament host was to be Jamie West, the award-winning executive chef at Ojai (pronounced "Oh High") and a longtime companion of the late Julia Childs. Diane, I noticed from her carry-on, had brought her big lens to capture the experience, knowing we had all the makings for, as Childs would say, "much fun."

The fun started early. After being greeted by a phalanx of staff, we entered the five-diamond OVI & Spa (its locally known contraction) through a stunning arch of paned glass to a high-ceilinged lobby with black wrought iron balconies leading into guest suites. A thick, dark wooden table in the centre of the foyer featured a sprawling flowered centrepiece that filled the room with a natural perfume, while a rustic rug beneath was set against the Spanish tiled floor. Above, carved wooden beams crossed a vaulted ceiling, from which hung a vintage wooden chandelier. Along the walls were arresting portraits and other local artwork.

That mesh of California charm, Spanish furnishings and Moroccan accents extends everywhere, including the resort's 308 deluxe guest rooms, many of which sport fireplaces and private balconies or patios overlooking the golf course and nearby mountains, and all of are appointed with spa amenities and feature resort privileges, from complimentary valet parking to access to fitness classes and the driving range. And if those accommodations don't meet your spatial requirements, there are seventy-five more upscale suites, not including the Spa and Hacienda penthouses.

The Ojai Valley Inn's spa courtyard by night.



The paws that refreshes

Even four-legged guests have plush surroundings, with Ojai's doggie room service five-diamond as well, with your dog's name on a bone-shaped sign outside the room, plenty of dog-friendly areas to be exercised, a turn-down service every evening and even a pet menu.

Whether it's little extras like that, the region's ideal weather or the resort's commitment to a healthy mind and body, it's no shock to learn that Hollywood celebrities are drawn to these 220 acres of recently renovated Shangri-La.

And, again, there's the scenery. Making our way past our two king-size beds with their fine, fresh linens—the nightstands intriguingly adorned with chronographic clocks—we opened the curtains to find the most spectacular view overlooking the first tee of the golf course and nearby mountains that stretched for miles. We suddenly realized the sun was setting and grabbed our cameras before bolting for the balcony—wine glasses in hand—and started snapping away, but noticed nothing unusual. We were evidently too late. Fortunately, there were still four more sunsets to go.

We made our way down to the Oak Grill, one of the four restaurants at the resort. Both the wine list and staff were impeccable. Our waiter helped us choose a local Ojai Syrah—peppery, robust with a light finish—which we followed with a shared Martini Lobster appetizer, a specialty of Chef West. Playing no favourites, we also took advantage of the pastry chef on staff, who makes an amazing gelato.

With Ojai's noted golf course beckoning outside our window, and well aware that such names as Crosby, Hope and Palmer had strode its fairways, we awoke with the appropriate anticipation. Just under 6,300 yards from the blue tees, the par-seventy was one of the first great golf courses in California. Designed and built in 1923 under the direction of Billy Bell and George C. Thomas—the latter of whom also crafted such esteemed layouts as Riviera, Bel-Air and Los Angeles country clubs—the elegant course was hailed as "a marvel of golfing architecture" upon its opening. Thomas had two initial considerations for the design: "that the average golfer could enjoy his round without too great a penalty, and that a test must be afforded, requiring the low-handicap man to play fine golf in



The Topa Topa mountain range is bathed in fiery tones of pink and orange in another signature sunset.

Freckled with gnarly 200-year-old oaks, the heaving Ojai layout was expropriated during WWII by the U.S. military, who used it as a training camp. Some holes were lost in the process.

order to secure pars." He accomplished the feat, his course having played host to the Champions Tour as well as events like the Michael Douglas & Friends Invitational.

Freckled with gnarly 200-year-old oaks, the heaving Ojai layout was expropriated during WWII by the U.S. military, who used it as a training camp. Some holes were lost in the process. When the war ended, new owners christened the golf course once again. The two nines were reversed, but the course wasn't properly restored until 1999, when Jay Morrish was hired to reinstate "The Lost Holes" (Nos. 16 and 17).

We had a morning to fill before our tee time, and commenced with breakfast at Marvilla. The menu featured locally grown fruits, fantastic homemade granola, organic eggs, freshly squeezed juices, custom blended coffee and a wide selection of teas and smoothies. The service, as usual, was prompt, friendly and exceptional. After breakfast we scoured the property in a golf cart before hitting the greens. There is much to see and do at OVI, with options including hiking on trails, horseback riding,

tennis, swimming, yoga, shopping in town, rejuvenating in the spa or doing nothing at all—and there's no shortage of places to do that as well.

Scent of a Woman

Later in the day, we found Renate Collins at the Artist Cottage and Apothecary, a haven for those seeking to tend to their mental and creative sides. Drifting in through open windows were the sounds of singing birds and the scents of wild lavender, rosemary and thyme—sweet aromas that permeate the entire resort. Renate, a most charismatic woman, teaches a class that takes you through a personal custom blending of herbal oils to discover your true scent, which afterward can be used for your massage at the Spa and Wellness Center across the way, with a personal supply to take home with you (the \$120 US for ninety minutes is money well spent).

Next up was the welcome reception for the Celebrity Chefs Classic, which took place both outside and inside. The temperature had dropped off dramatically throughout the evening and we found ourselves underdressed, but it didn't seem to bother many. Each chef had a station with signature dishes including ahi poke with avocado salsa and wasabi; Point Keyes macaroni

On hand for the inaugural Celebrity Chefs Classic were (left to right) Salvatore Martone, Budi Kazali, Todd Gray, Jamie West, Alan Wong and Ming Tsai.



A CHEF AND HIS GARDEN



Having had the luxury of teeing it up with the Ojai Valley Inn & Spa's culinary genius Jamie West during the Chefs Celebrity Classic, Diane and I knew a tour of the executive chef's herb garden the next morning would be an enjoyable affair. What else would one expect from a man who enjoys offering cooking classes for resort guests between the ages of four and fourteen?

"I like to eat seasonally," says the 1987 graduate of the Culinary Institute of America at Hyde Park, NY, "and the nice thing about having my own garden is that it keeps me grounded to where we are in the year."

West also likes to keep it real, and is currently favouring Ojai Vineyard wines of late—in particular, the acclaimed organic Casa Barranca.

A former pizza boy in a family Italian restaurant—"They taught me how to make fresh-from-scratch Italian food"—West is unlike many of his ilk in that he motivates through positive reinforcement. "We have six kitchens here, so I really need to rely on my staff of forty. I believe in giving them the ability and I have confidence they will grow."

While he cites Thomas Keller (of the landmark Napa Valley restaurant, The French Laundry) as a major source of influence, the legendary Julia Childs played a vital role in West's development.

"Julia lived in Santa Barbara, very close to San Ysidro Ranch, where I worked," he recalls. "She came in to eat one time. I introduced myself and asked if there was anything special I could do for her. But she never did ask for anything special. She just enjoyed everything. We became great friends. When I started doing a local TV show I went to Julia and asked her if I could pick her brains a little. It was great developing that relationship—I felt like she was my grandmother."

"We did an event together up in Carmel, California called Masters of Food and Wine. I drove her from her Montecito home. We were doing most of the recipes from her new book. She talked; I did all the work for the on-site cooking demo. Her recipes were great and pretty straightforward."

"It was interesting though," West chuckles. "If you did something she didn't exactly agree with, she would tell you. She was very straightforward, which I liked. I asked her to taste this crab cake and the seasoning. She did and replied, 'Well, it's not going to do me any good now—it's already made.'"



Although just under 6,300 yards, Ojai's elegant 1923 design is well defended.

and cheese; braised beef with crispy onions, rosemary and a maple glaze; citrus curried wild haddock with cucumber noodles and French tarragon; and Santa Barbara spicy lobster with coconut risotto. Set up inside was West; Todd Gray, the executive chef and co-owner of Equinox, which sits down the street from the White House; and Hawaii's Alan Wong. Chilling outside was the charismatic Ming Tsai, the host and executive producer of the television cooking show *Simply Ming*, and Budi Kazali, the executive chef and owner of the acclaimed Ballard Inn and Restaurant in Santa Barbara.

Our stomachs duly stretched, Diane and I followed the faint strains of live jazz into the Neff Lounge, where a very cool and eclectic group of locals and Hollywood actors were mingling in an intimate setting—conversations easily shared without any of the stars' privacy being invaded. It was as if we had just walked into someone's living room. I could see why so many luminaries have become fond of this hidden gem of a resort.

The buzz around the pro shop the next morning was electric as the tournament day dawned. The sun was already warm with not a cloud in sight. The smell of freshly brewed coffee enveloped us as we climbed the stairs to the pro shop, while a table below teemed with healthy muffins and fresh fruit. Dominating the view was a beautiful new convertible sports car for anyone lucky enough to ace the par-three sixteenth.

Every group was joined by a celebrity chef for six holes, and the scramble tournament format was ideal, given that Ojai is flush with dramatically elevated greens, diabolical bunkering, narrow shoots and penal *barrancas* (Spanish for ravines). Indeed, The Lost Holes stretch of sixteen and seventeen could be called The Lost Balls. "Here lies my Pro-VI, next to the many that have gone before." The first time Ben Crenshaw saw the par-three sixteenth, he observed, "This is going to be one of the best shots in all golf." Its multiple hazards include a fifty-foot-deep barranca left of the green, the final resting place of one of my Pro-VI's. I choose to believe it lies eternally next to one of Ben's.

While Diane and I were exhausted by round's end, all five chefs made their way directly from the greens into the kitchen



A golf course and mountain backdrop await visitors to the Oak Grill terrace.

We followed the trails into town, where we saw street performers intermingle with friendly, open-minded, laid-back locals encompassing every type of divinity and philosophy you could imagine.

to prepare for the night's concluding gala. After dinner, we headed over to Jimmy's Pub, its rich earthy decor and hardwoods along with 60" plasma TV screens providing a cozy feel. We knew we would be back to enjoy their brick oven-baked thin-crust pizza and award-winning California micro-brewed beers, and perhaps its signature margaritas, single malt scotches, another alluring wine list...This was going to be a long night.

As a nod to a perfect sunrise—and the need to burn off the excess caloric and alcoholic intake of the previous night's frivolities—we borrowed a pair of the Inn's bicycles and followed the trails ten minutes into town and through Libbey Park, where we saw street performers intermingle

with a hamlet filled with friendly, open-minded, laid-back locals encompassing every type of divinity and philosophy you could imagine from East to West. A locavore's dream come true—one can pick fruit off trees and grow vegetables all year round—there's also great shopping, local wine tasting from the surrounding vineyards, and assorted body-mind-soul retreats. But we had to double back to catch the Pink Moment. And it was amazing—a glowing infusion from Heaven above.

Our final day was in the hands of the resort's spa attendants. It was like being wrapped in the arms of angels. Amid a whitewashed villa complex of terra cotta roofs and multiple arches, we entered through a black gate that opened to a soothing setting of a garden terrace with salmon pink tiles, wrought iron chairs and tables of blue mosaic ceramic tiles surrounding a stone fountain and an outdoor fireplace. There were citrus trees and lavender-scented pathways and a lovely staff with genuine smiles.

Diane and I enjoyed the signature detoxifying treatment, Kuyam—a native word meaning “a place to rest together.” We relaxed in a communal steamroom scented with lemongrass, before having several different mud clays applied, all with different medicinal properties to help the body rid itself of impurities. We were then guided through a meditation, with staff, in timely fashion, quietly slipping a lavender-scented cloth over our eyes and spraying a mist of cool water over our bodies. I swear I saw angels—perhaps they work there!

After the Kuman treatment we were escorted into massage rooms where each of us had two massage therapists working synergistically from head to toe.

Our spa lunch at Café Verde on the terrace overlooking the pool provided my favourite dining experience of all, the menu filled with healthy offerings highlighting organic and locally grown produce.

It was yet another perfect moment. Not pink, mind you—just perfect. ■