

The Malibu Times

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Ojai delight

By Laura Tate
Editor

Ojai Valley is a unique place for visitors and residents alike in that it offers distinct settings and activities, from the famed Ojai Music Festival to camping and fishing, to fine dining, wine tasting, and art gallery and spa hopping.

The Ojai Music festival, now in its sixth decade, happens next month, and it might be tough to find a place in town to stay near Libbey Bowl, where the main concerts take place, or anywhere in the "village" (as the local government describes itself) of 8,000 people, however, it's worth a try to get a room at The Emerald Iguana Inn, which is a few blocks walk to the main part of town, and to Libbey Park. If booked, its sister lodging, The Blue Iguana, is off Highway 33, the main road into Ojai.

Ojai natives Marc and Julia Whitman bought the property that houses the Blue Iguana Inn about 13 years ago. They transformed a broken down motel into a rustic, stylish inn with a desert-like feel. The Emerald Iguana Inn was the second such venture for the couple that at first faced opposition from local residents, but the result is such a delight it is hard to imagine anyone opposing such an eye-pleasing establishment.

Marc, an architect, designed both inns and Julia focused on the interiors.

The feeling when arriving at the Emerald Iguana Inn, located in a

cul-de-sac at the end of residential street, is that of a private retreat surrounded by lush foliage, flowers and a grove of California native oak and sycamore trees. A multicolored, tiled "Emerald Iguana" fountain greets guests at one side of the gravel driveway. A medium sized pool is surrounded by an iron gate, and more plants, flowers and trees add a tropical feeling to the area. Breakfast of boiled eggs, an assortment of pastries, yogurt and fresh fruit, along with coffee or tea, and fresh orange juice is served daily, and in the evenings, guests can stop by the poolside office for wine and cheese.

Both inns are beautifully appointed, with the Emerald furnished with items from Europe and Asia, and some rooms having wood-burning stove fireplaces, whirlpool or claw-foot bathtubs and private patios or balconies.

The focal point of the Emerald is the original "River Rock" house on the property that is nearly 100 years old, which Marc used with his unique style of architecture, featuring organic materials, and shapes and lines. Much of the artwork at both inns features Ojai artists, including that of Marc's mother, Nancy Whitman.

Guests of either inn can be treated to private tours of the Taft Botanical Gardens, which is a must-see if one is visiting Ojai.

Situated on more than 20 acres, the gardens are renowned for their South African and Australian native plant collections. With the many

unusual and colorful species of cacti, flowers and plants, it is an extraordinary experience to walk through the gardens; it feels as if you could encounter one of the fanciful characters from the story of Alice and Wonderland.

Dining in Ojai

The Ranch House is a legendary eatery in Ojai. Founded more than 40 years ago by Alan Hooker, current owner David Skaggs (along with wife Edie) first got his start as a waiter there. Using herbs from its onsite garden, the gourmet dishes are fresh and delicious. The wine list is extensive with more than 650 selections, and the service is excellent. It's as if you are dining amongst good friends or family members. The dining areas are set amongst lush foliage and one can take a walk through the gardens, where a stream wanders. If you dine there, the Grilled Diver Scallops are a must. Huge, tender U-10 scallops are grilled and served on lightly curried sweet corn sauce with oil infused with dry vermouth and basil, and shredded bok choy.

For a casual, no hassle lunch try Antonio's Mexican Cantina at the east end of the main strip of Ojai. Nick Moeller, a former Hollywood nightclub manager, and his wife decided that Ojai was the perfect place to raise their two children, and bought the place from the original owner five years ago. Basics such as cheese enchiladas and nachos will fill you up as you take in the sun in the outdoor patio.

Vesta Restaurant also offers outdoor dining behind the main avenue (the restaurant can be accessed off Ojai Avenue across from Libbey Bowl, or from the courtyard in the back). Tasty, fresh lemonade is the perfect accompaniment to their sweet potato, garlic or rosemary-salted fries (order the Three-Way and you can have a taste of all three.) A variety of salads, sandwiches and wraps is on the lunch menu, and the macaroni and cheese is very good. The restaurant has a full wine and beer list, as well as specialty drinks. Before



or after dining, you can browse for home or culinary accessories in the front store.

Ojai is filled with a plethora of wine tasting opportunities. If you're downtown and don't want to go too far, try the Casa Barranca Winery Tasting Room and Art Gallery, located a few doors down from Vesta.

You can get a Shangri-La Flight for \$10, featuring organic and vegan wines, or the Chiefs Peak Flight for \$15, which also features organic and vegan, and unfiltered wines. Their 2007 Cabernet Franc, which is unrefined, unfiltered and vegan, is a smooth red that sells for only \$30 per bottle.

If you love the music and crowds, do visit Ojai during the festival; if not, an off-season visit in February or March is a perfect time to visit. The weather may be a little cooler, but the quiet and the beauty of Ojai Valley are worth it.

Information:

- Emerald Iguana Inn: 108 Pauline St. Ojai, 93023; 805.646.5277; www.iguainnsofojai.com



Top: The Gecko room porch looks out onto the grounds of the Emerald Iguana Inn in Ojai. Architect March Whitman used the 1900s river stone- and woodwork of the original buildings on the site as inspiration for the Art Nouveau inspired cottages.

Above: The Barranca Winery Tasting Room on Ojai Avenue offers wine made with organic grapes. The tasting room's interior reflects the Arts and Craft design of the Casa Barranca Certified Organic Winery estate designed by Charles and Henry Greene.

- The Blue Iguana Inn: 11794 N. Ventura Ave. 805.646.5277; www.blueiguanainn.com
- The Ranch House: 500 S. Lomita; 805.646.2360; www.theranchhouse.com
- Vesta Restaurant: 242 E. Ojai Ave.; 805.646.2339; vestaojai.com
- Antonio's Mexican Cantina: 106 S. Montgomery; 805.646.6353
- Casa Barranca Winery Tasting Room: 208 E. Ojai Ave.; 805.640.1255; www.casabarranca.com