

ONE FINE WEEKEND

Tours hosted by Sonoma Zipline Adventures offer views from the redwoods.

Russian River Rising

Tucked away in Sonoma County, Guerneville promises awe-inspiring redwoods, historic hotels, and outdoor adventures.

BY DANA REBMANN

The calendar may say that summer is over, but Sonoma County refuses to listen, with sunny days lingering through October. And while many wine-loving visitors and locals are focused on the final moments of grape harvest, those looking to escape the Wine Country crowds should head for **Guerneville**. The tiny Russian River town has long been known as a welcoming retreat for the LGBTQ+ community, and word of its laid-back attitude and charm has spread, establishing it as a getaway for everyone.

A 90-minute to two-hour-or-so drive from the East Bay, this rustic river spot boasts an intriguing history. Originally a

logging town, Guerneville produced lumber during the late 1800s, earning it the nickname Stumptown. The Korbels brothers, of **Korbels California Champagne**, got their start here making cigar boxes from redwood trees on their land before planting wine grapes.

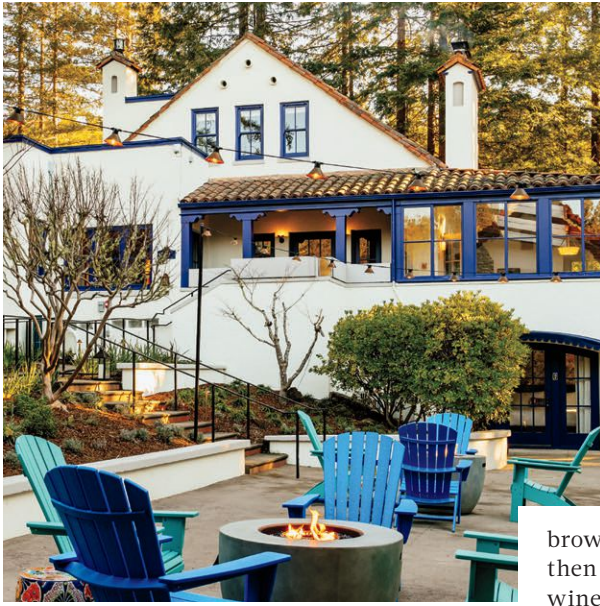
Welcoming Waters

Well before the area became noted for wine, the Russian River was the main draw that pulled folks to these parts. In 1905, Theodosia Button Murphy built a dining hall and several tent cabins, catering to wealthy families looking to escape city life and lounge on the banks of the river. In the late '70s, the property became Fife's Resort, one of the first gay resorts in Guerneville.

In 2005, it was transformed into a wedding and corporate retreat venue called **Dawn Ranch**; it shuttered in 2019 after severe flood damage and was seemingly forgotten until nearly six months ago, when it reopened its 53 cabin-style accommodations to guests.

On its 15 acres are an apple orchard with trees thought to be more than 120 years old and an extremely rare pair of dawn redwoods for which the venue is named. Stands of towering redwoods can be found throughout.

"It really is so magical," says Teach Mayer, general manager at Dawn Ranch. "We're a place for people to come to unplug and just reconnect, reset, and get in touch



a stained-glass art studio where owner Rebecca Lichau has been honing her craft for more than 30 years, has a knack for catching the attention of passersby. Downtown's easiest access to the water can be found at **Johnson's Beach**, which offers a wide, pebbly beach as well as canoe and kayak rentals.

Revel in the Redwoods

Be sure to set aside at least a few hours to explore **Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve**. Closed for more than a year due to damage caused by the Walbridge Fire in 2020, the 805-acre grove of majestic coast redwoods provides cooling shade on a sweltering day and welcome cover on the rare rainy one.

The Parson Jones Tree is the tallest in the grove; at 310 feet, it is longer than a football field. The Pioneer Nature, Discovery, and Armstrong Nature trails are well marked, easy to follow, and suitable for all ages and abilities.

The redwoods in the park stretch so far into the sky that it's next to impossible to get a good look at their upper branches. For a bird's-eye view of the massive trees, head to **Sonoma Zipline Adventures** in nearby Occidental, where you can choose between two zip line courses; there's one for speed racers and

Below, from left: Big Bottom Market's biscuits were named one of Oprah's favorite things; the shop also sells locally made artisanal goods.

one geared more toward first-timers. Whichever adventure you choose, you'll spend the day soaring through the treetops—and take your Russian River escape to new heights.

Above, from left: Relax by one of the Stavrand Russian River Valley firepits or sample a menu showcasing ingredients grown on-site.

with themselves, with one another, with nature, and with their own creativity.”

Sketchbooks and journals are available for guests who are feeling inspired, avid birders can borrow Swarovski binoculars, and a fleet of kayaks makes it easy to spend a lazy day paddling on the Russian River. There are cork mats for yogis and picnic blankets for those who simply want to enjoy doing nothing.

Luxe Living

A relaxed, almost hippie vibe is found throughout Guerneville, though an evolution of sorts seems afoot. Take the **Stavrand Russian River Valley**, another new luxury hotel in town. After changing hands in 2020, the property formerly known as the Applewood Inn got a top-to-bottom makeover, earning it a coveted spot on *Travel and Leisure's* “It List” for 2022.

With portions dating back to the 1920s—one of its structures is a registered historic landmark—the hotel was originally built as a family home. Set on just shy of six acres, it has 21 rooms spread throughout three buildings that are surrounded by a grove of redwoods. The home's original owner, Guerneville banker Ralph “Rooster” Belden, had a green thumb; a variety of the fruit trees he planted—including apples, apricots, pears, and plums—still thrive here.

A stay at the Stavrand gets you access to its guests-only restaurant, where a small but mighty kitchen crew creates distinctive dishes like Armstrong's Curry, with coconut milk, charred vegetables, cilantro, and lime, and kabocha squash agnolotti, with

brown butter and toasted pine nuts, and then pairs them perfectly with local wines. Guests can also lounge by the pool or drift down the river in one of the property's complimentary kayaks or inner tubes.

Explore the Town Center

From the Stavrand, Guerneville's compact downtown is just a 10-minute stroll, thanks to the car-free **Guerneville Bridge**. Take a moment to gaze at the river before visiting the nostalgia-laden **Guerneville 5 and 10**, which stocks everything from candy and greetings cards to water toys. **Big Bottom Market** gained fame when Oprah declared its biscuits one of her favorite things. The Safeway parking lot is always buzzing, thanks in part to the seemingly constant lines at the **Guerneville Taco Truck**.

Other locally loved hot spots include German eatery **Brot**, **Equality Vines** for wine tasting, and **Nimble and Finn's** ice cream shop, located in the historic Bank of Guerneville building (constructed in 1921). **Russian River Glass Images**,

