





Photos: Courtesy of Bernardus Lodge

## DESTINATIONS



# BERNARDUS LODGE & SPA

Carmel Valley, California

BY RENEE BRINCKS

Lush herbs, greens, flowers and fruit trees fill two acres of organic gardens on the Bernardus Lodge & Spa grounds. Individuals who wander through the vibrant plots might fall into conversation with kitchen staffers gathering ingredients for that day's dishes. Resort Chef Cal Stamenov leads summer Saturday garden walks here, too, exploring the local produce, honey, grapes and other elements that grace his restaurant menus and wine lists. Some travelers plan entire stays around seasonal dinners and annual Bernardus culinary events that celebrate lavender harvests, rosé wines and heirloom tomatoes.

Two wide, gnarled stumps are tucked in one corner of a garden parcel near the resort's main entrance. When a pair of century-old eucalyptus trees fell in a 2017 storm, groundskeepers opted not to remove them. Instead, Bernardus controller Mike Butler put his woodworking hobby into practice by hand-carving seats into each stump.

From whimsical outdoor chairs to winding garden pathways to spacious accommodations with sweeping Santa Lucia Mountain views, Bernardus Lodge & Spa builds on its bucolic Carmel Valley setting. This year's *Forbes Travel Guide Awards* recognized the resort with a four-star rating, hailing it as "a wine lover's paradise" that's "brimming with earthy-chic charm."

Dutch-born winemaker, Olympian and former Porsche race driver Bernardus "Ben" Pon opened Bernardus in 1999. A full resort renovation wrapped up three years ago, followed by a 14-suite expansion that welcomed its first guests in August 2016.

The projects created a fresh look for the 28-acre, 73-room luxury property. "We brought the outdoors in, introducing more of an easy-living atmos-



**Bernardus Lodge & Spa in Carmel Valley has recently been redone to feel “less like a hotel and more like a stylish living room.” (Above) the welcoming new lobby and (below) the Villa Carmelo bungalow.**

phere that feels less like a hotel and more like someone’s stylish living room,” says Alissa O’Briant, director of sales and marketing at Bernardus Lodge & Spa.

French oak floors, Italian stone, beamed ceilings and flowers spilling from oversized vases

give the main lobby an especially cozy feel. Leather seats are clustered around a fireplace near the check-in desk, and a nearby nook dubbed Cooper’s Den accommodates guests who carry laptops by day and wine glasses in the evening. Eclectic chandeliers and richly tex-

tured rugs add a dash of low-key glamour to public spaces.

Sidewalks between the main lodge and the property’s elegant suites and villas ramble past shrubs, succulents and rugged stonework. Set against a Santa Lucia Mountain backdrop, the ValleyVilla Suites offer living room and bedroom fireplaces, bars stocked with snacks and Bernardus wine, sleeper sofas, rain showers and two-person hammered-copper tubs, along with French doors that open to private balconies. The ground-level Vineyard Villa Suites have similar fixtures, plus secluded bath patios with outdoor showers and open-air seating.

Two larger bungalows, Villa Sol and Villa Carmelo, take wine country luxury to a new level. The two-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bathroom accommodations feature vaulted ceilings, vineyard views and dual bathroom patios with

separate outdoor showers set on mosaic tile. The villas also promise private outdoor terraces with fire pits, full-size appliances and 12-person dining tables, making them a popular choice for families, bridal parties and corporate retreats.

All of the resort's villas, suites and traditional guestrooms have limestone fireplaces, garden or balcony access, 42-inch flat-screen televisions, Nespresso coffee and espresso makers, and Bernardus wines, as well as Italian Carrara marble vanities and radiant-heat bathroom floors. The residential-style, outdoors-in ambiance of the main lodge is also reflected in the rooms, which are outfitted in warm tones with copper;



**(Above) The bar at Lucia restaurant “where Old-World craft meets New-World creativity.” Chef Cal Stamenov uses locally grown ingredients in his top-notch creations. (Below) The lovely entrance welcomes guests to Bernardus.**



**(Clockwise from top left) Chef Stamenov, who has been at Bernardus for 20 years; a delectable scallop dish; the fire-lit patio of Lucia Restaurant & Bar, where diners enjoy warm Carmel Valley nights al fresco.**

leather, wrought iron, reclaimed wood and glazed wall tiles.

The recent renovations that refreshed and expanded Bernardus Lodge accommodations also triggered the transformation of its signature restaurants. The former Marinus and Wickets spaces were remodeled to create Lucia Restaurant & Bar; an open, high-ceilinged eatery with flexible indoor and outdoor seating areas.

Booths and small tables surround a grand communal table in the main dining room, and a wall of windows opens to a heated terrace with a retractable glass ceiling. Wide panes also line one wall of the adjacent bar, a casual space with rustic ranch-inspired accents and live music several nights a week.

Despite the updates, Lucia operates according to the same culinary philosophy that has

distinguished this dining destination for nearly 20 years.

"When Mr. Pon opened Bernardus in 1999, he designed the whole resort around food and beverage. He really wanted to put Carmel Valley on the map, and dining remains a signature part of the culture here," O'Briant says.

Stamenov, who has directed Bernardus culinary programs since the beginning, creates

**Spa treatments at Bernardus range from massage to facial care, and wellness programs include group hikes, spa blending workshops, starlit yoga and culinary cultivation.**

approachable California country fare at Lucia by combining his own organic harvests with elements sourced from regional ranchers, gardeners and fishing operations. Seasonal offerings include simple starters and brick-oven pizzas, health-minded vegetable combos, sophisticated meat and seafood entrees, and multi-course tasting menus. Seasonal cocktails are also on offer—several incorporate honey from resort hives—and a 25,000-bottle wine cellar showcases Bernardus releases and other American and international blends.

Bernardus Winery maintains a tasting room a few minutes from the resort on Carmel Valley Road; plenty of on-property activities are available, as well. Guests can engage in some friendly bocce and croquet competitions, or participate in a poolside spin class, yoga session or guided nature hike. There are fitness facilities and a heated outdoor pool, and an extensive spa menu features massages, couples' treatments, salon services and wellness therapies that integrate botanicals from the resort gardens.

However guests spend their time, they can expect a warm welcome and impeccable service from the Bernardus Lodge & Spa team. Forbes highlighted that hospitality in its 2018 award summary, calling out the thoughtfulness of hosts, housekeepers and other staff members.

"Everyone is kind and welcoming at Bernardus Lodge...don't be surprised if everyone greets you by name," notes the guide's Bernardus entry.

"We're very hands-on, and we work very hard to achieve that family kind of feel here. It really appeals to the guests who visit us," says O'Brian. "As a team, we talk about this a lot. There is a true, deep-rooted culture that makes this place special."

*Bernardus Lodge & Spa is located at 415 West Carmel Valley Rd. in Carmel Valley. For resort and restaurant reservations, visit [www.bernarduslodge.com](http://www.bernarduslodge.com) or call 831/658-3400.* ■

