

The Sunday Telegraph
Travel

**Why I love
The Lakes
by Steve
Cram
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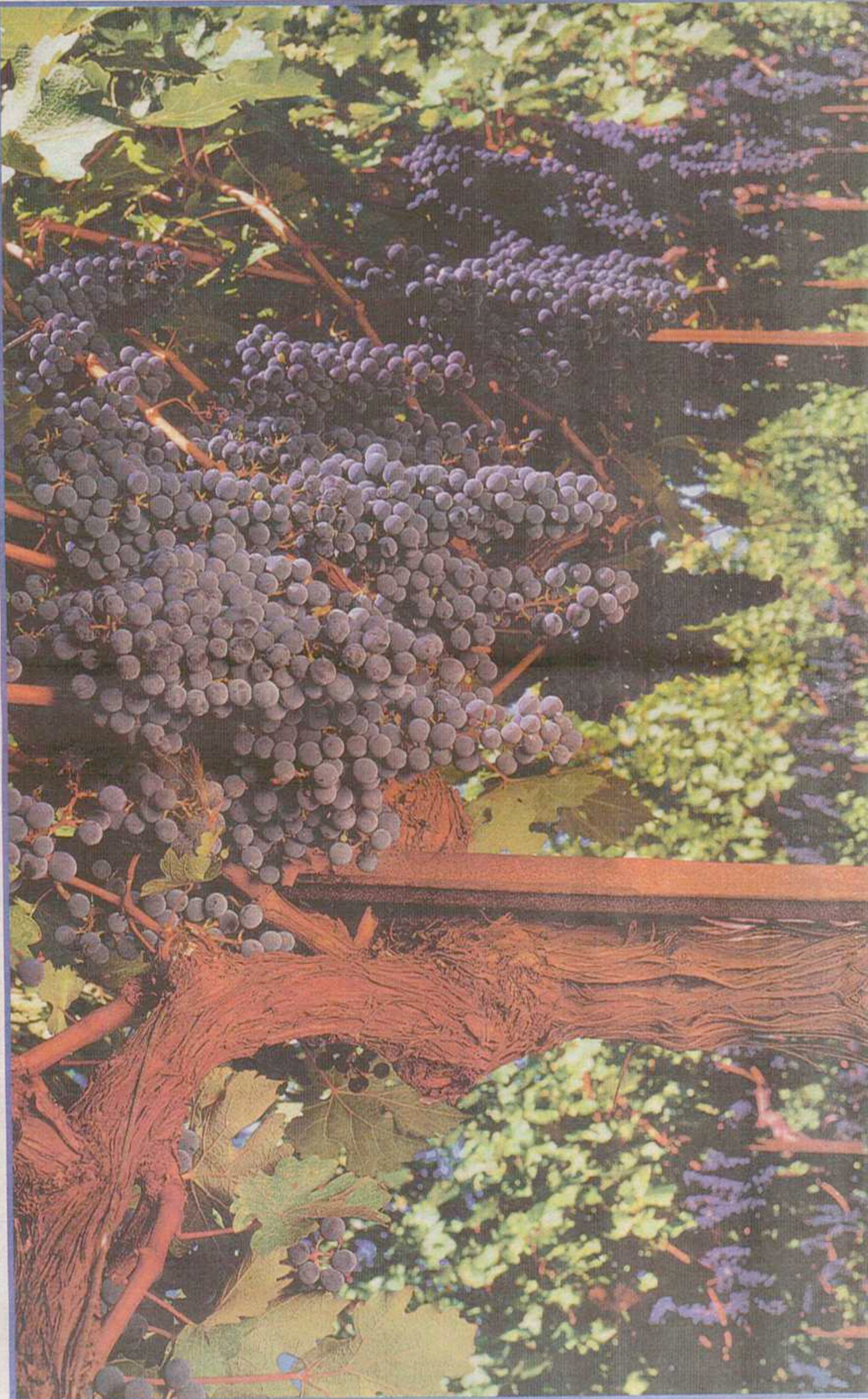


**Wonders
of Oz:
Australia
special
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SPRY ALEXANDER/GETTY





THE PICK OF THE BUNCH

Maurice Gran and his writing partner, Laurence Marks, quaff their way through the wineries of California's Napa Valley

If you think California is one big theme park, then imagine a lovely valley full of vines; imagine a hundred wineries (that's American for châteaux), in every architectural style, staffed by erudite, friendly English-speakers; imagine, too, fabulous hotels, world-class restaurants, and neat Norman Rockwell towns full of chic shops and careful drivers. That,

friends, is the Napa Valley, just an hour's drive from San Francisco. I'd yearned to visit this semi-paradise ever since I saw the prize-winning film *Sideways*, the story of two middle-aged losers, Miles and Jack. Jack is getting married (to a girl who is much too good for him), so best man Miles treats him to a wine-tasting holiday. Miles doesn't realise Jack intends to mark this last

week of bachelorhood by having as much meaningless pre-marital sex as he can get. I decided to emulate the film by taking my script-writing accomplice Laurence Marks with me. He's a wine buff, so he could play the role of Miles, who swills and swirls and thoughtfully chews every drop before pronouncing. I'd be Jack, the ignorant sidekick who glugs down

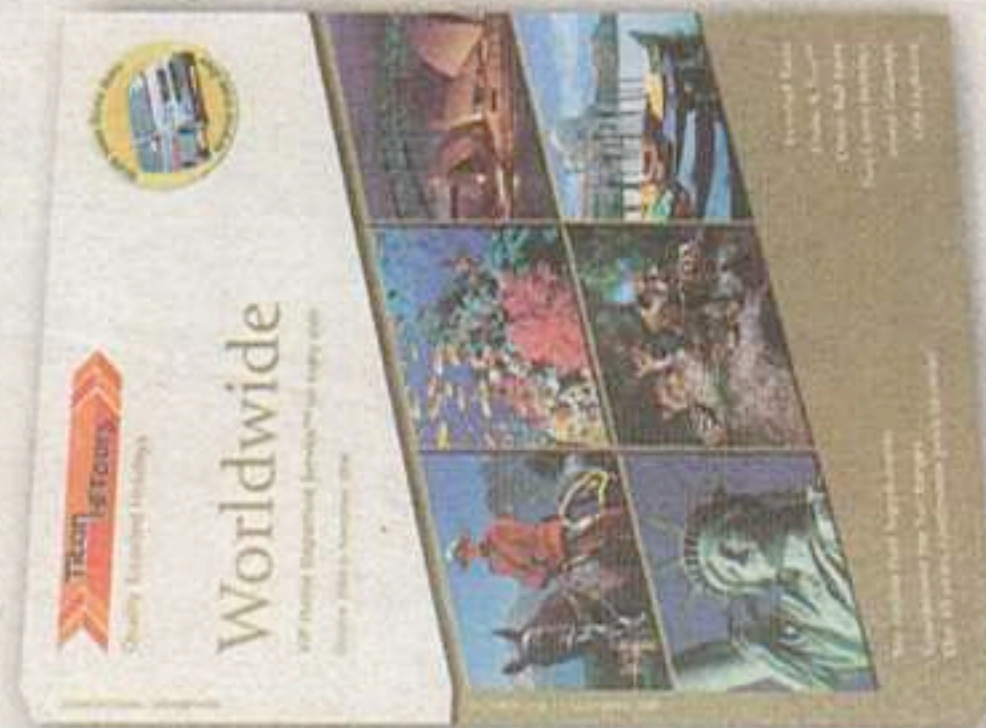
everything with uncritical gusto - though obviously, as a happily married man, my emulation of Jack could only go so far. Incidentally, I was taking Laurence because I had lost a bet too foolish to explain that resulted in a debt to buy him dinner in North America. For me, the wine odyssey began with a quarter-bottle of British Airways' finest Peruvian red. Laurence doesn't

drink alcohol on planes, so he requested camomile tea. The flight attendant explained there was only one camomile teabag on board, and it was reserved for business class. I asked what would happen if two business-class passengers desired camomile? A look of horror flitted across the flight attendant's elfin features.

A greater mishap befell Laurence at the Hotel Nameless in San Francisco, where we spent our first night. My jet-lagged slumber was log-like, but Laurence, on a different floor, was kept awake by the woman next door repeatedly shrieking "Oh God!" He rang reception to ask if his neighbour could tone down either the orgy or the prayer

Continued overleaf

WIN A TRIP TO MARRAKESH 2 AWAY FROM IT ALL IN THE WESTERN ISLES 4-5 WHERE TO STAY IN ANGUILLA 11



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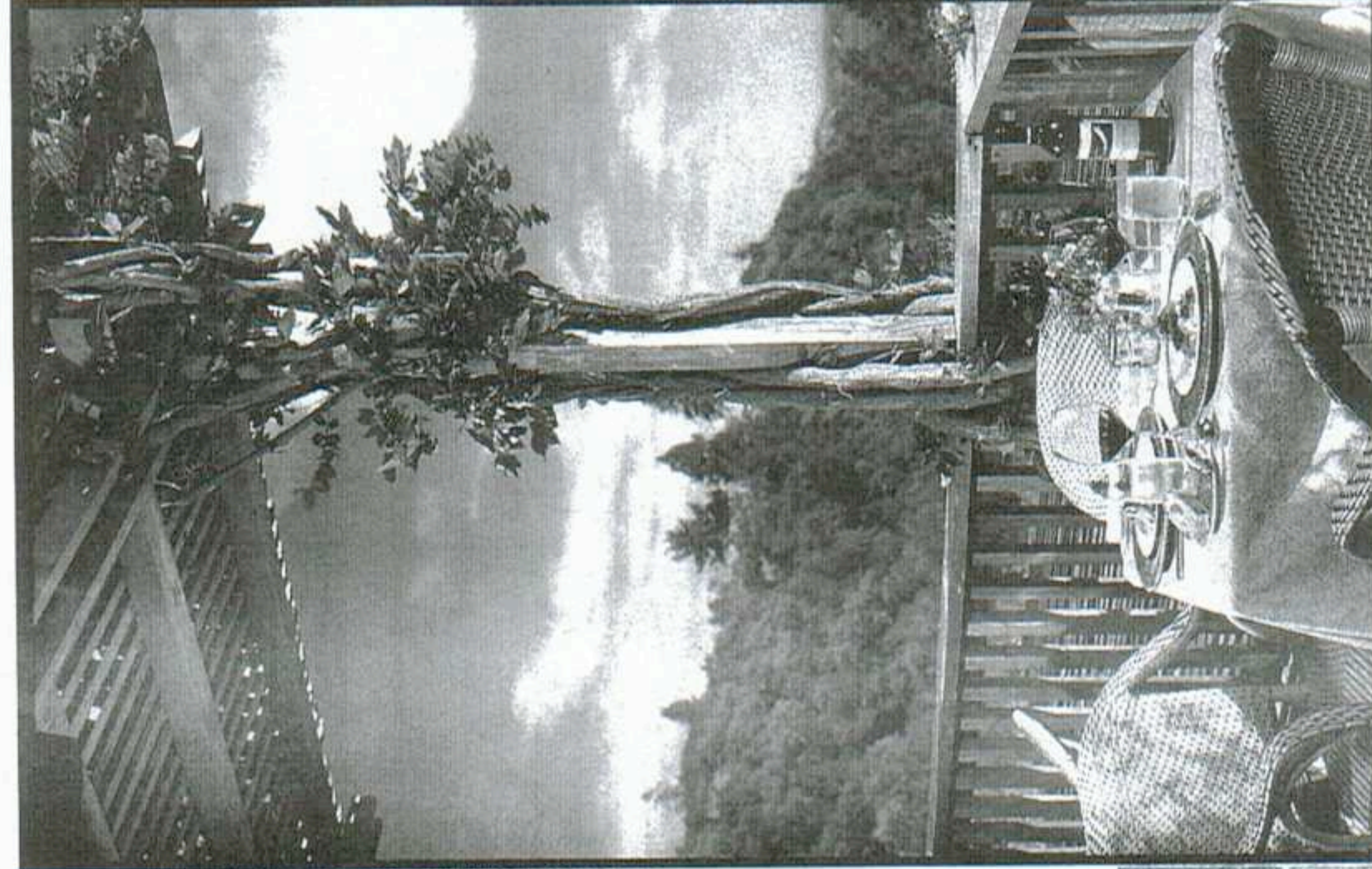
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TRAVEL

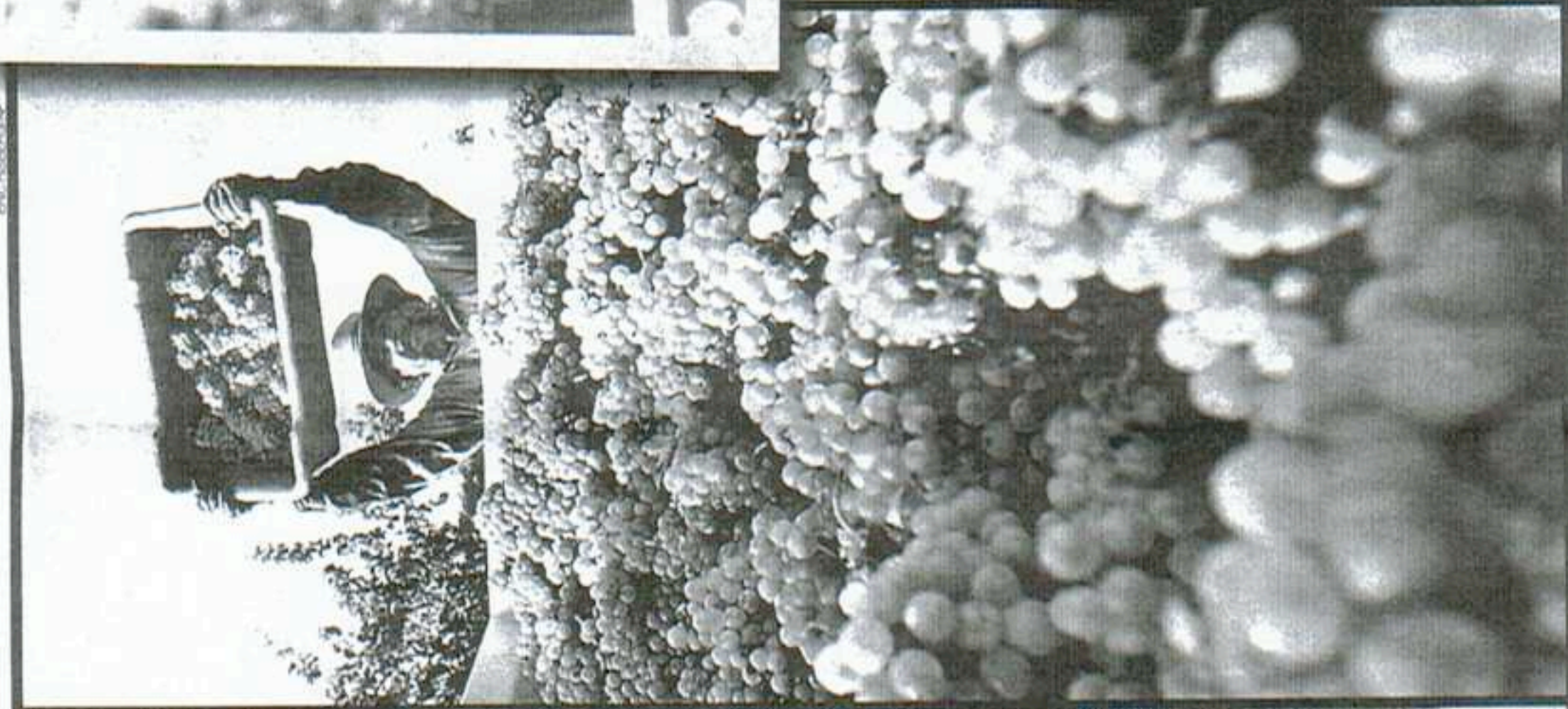
T2



Grapes of mirth Maurice Gran and Laurence Marks stayed in the Auberge de Soleil, above left, and Calistoga Ranch, above right, both about an hour from San Francisco's Golden Gate, below. In *Sideways*, Miles and Jack, top right, opted for more modest accommodation

gorgeous location, 10 miles farther south. The cabins at Calistoga Ranch must be the most luxurious wooden structures in the world. Ours had a kitchen, a sitting room, indoor and outdoor dining areas, a hot tub, and a full-size bowling alley (only kidding about the last one). The Ranch has one of the best restaurants in the state, a fabulous spa, a hiking trail through the forest if you feel energetic, and a team of friendly people to ferry you around in oversized golf buggies if you don't. To be honest, I found it

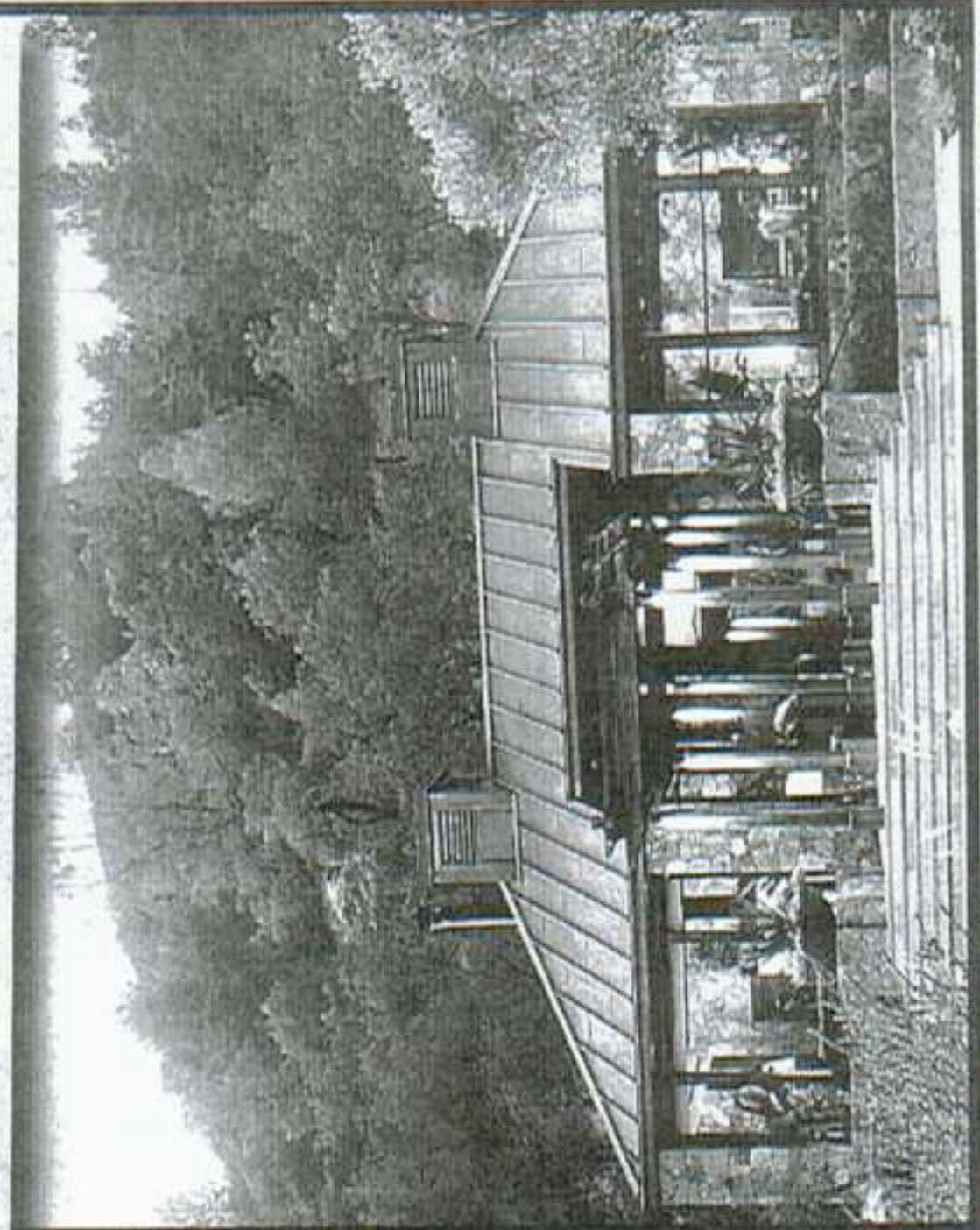
accommodation is in neat blocks like an up-market American motel. It's only when you enter your room that you realise it's the size of a British primary school. Both hotels were perfect bases for our daily wine-tasting expeditions. Though it was late October, most of the vines were yet to be cut back, and the autumnal colours were as lovely as those we had left in England. As the Californian air was 10 degrees warmer, we rarely needed our sensible jumpers as we sallied forth to taste, swirl and spit.



“fruit-forward” and easy to drink young. To our European palates most of them seemed rather jummy. There were notable exceptions, of course – Grgich Hills, for example, founded by a Croatian immigrant, produces wines that have beaten the best of France in blind tastings. And

One, founded by Robert Mondavi and Philippe de Rothschild, Opus One is dedicated to producing one absolutely perfect red wine. Sales suggest the Americans think they have succeeded. We quite liked the wine, but we loved the building. Many of the wineries are owned by enthusiasts who

made their money a few hundred miles south, in Hollywood. Francis Ford



created 16 courses of the most extraordinary tastes and textures, accompanied by seven different wines. The onslaught of cauliflower panna cotta, cured Michigan brook trout roe with shaved bonito, white truffle-oil infused custard, and herb-roasted Australian wagyu was so intense that I almost hallucinated. And when they offered two types of handmade butter and a selection of nine different salts, I didn't even laugh.

People travel thousands of miles and book months in advance to visit the Laundry. America if they didn't find a

Then she said, and I promise you this is true. “Honey, just put this in your mouth, very, very slowly.” The wrap party from Laurence's adult movie? We shall never know. The next day we drove back to San Francisco to meet up with a friend called Jeff. I filled him in on the details of our mission. Jeff said, “Better not tell anyone that *Sideways* is set near Santa Barbara, 400 miles south of here.” I admit I was shocked. It just goes to show how little we truly know of the US. Still, I think I'll keep my geographical faux pas under wraps. Don't want people to

‘We rarely needed jumpers as we sallied forth to taste, swirl and spit’

preferred an old red Saab convertible, such as Miles drives, but Avis doesn't rent those. We were also straying from the script in our choice of accommodation. Miles and Jack stayed in cheap motels, but we were booked into two of the most luxurious hotels in the Valley - Callistoga Ranch, a collection of log-palaces scattered across a wooded hillside, and Auberge de Soleil, in an equally

fabulous spa, a hiking trail through the forest if you feel energetic, and a team of friendly people to ferry you around in oversized golf buggies if you don't. To misquote The Eagles, you can check in any time you like, but you'll never want to leave. But after a few nights we had to decamp a few miles down the road to try out the equally lovely Auberge de Soleil, where the

the homely Frank Family Winery in the Napa, and tiny Wellington, over the ridge in next door Sonoma Valley, are two others that produce subtle reds at sensible prices. In contrast to these rustic gems are the many grand wineries, such as the architecturally stunning Opus

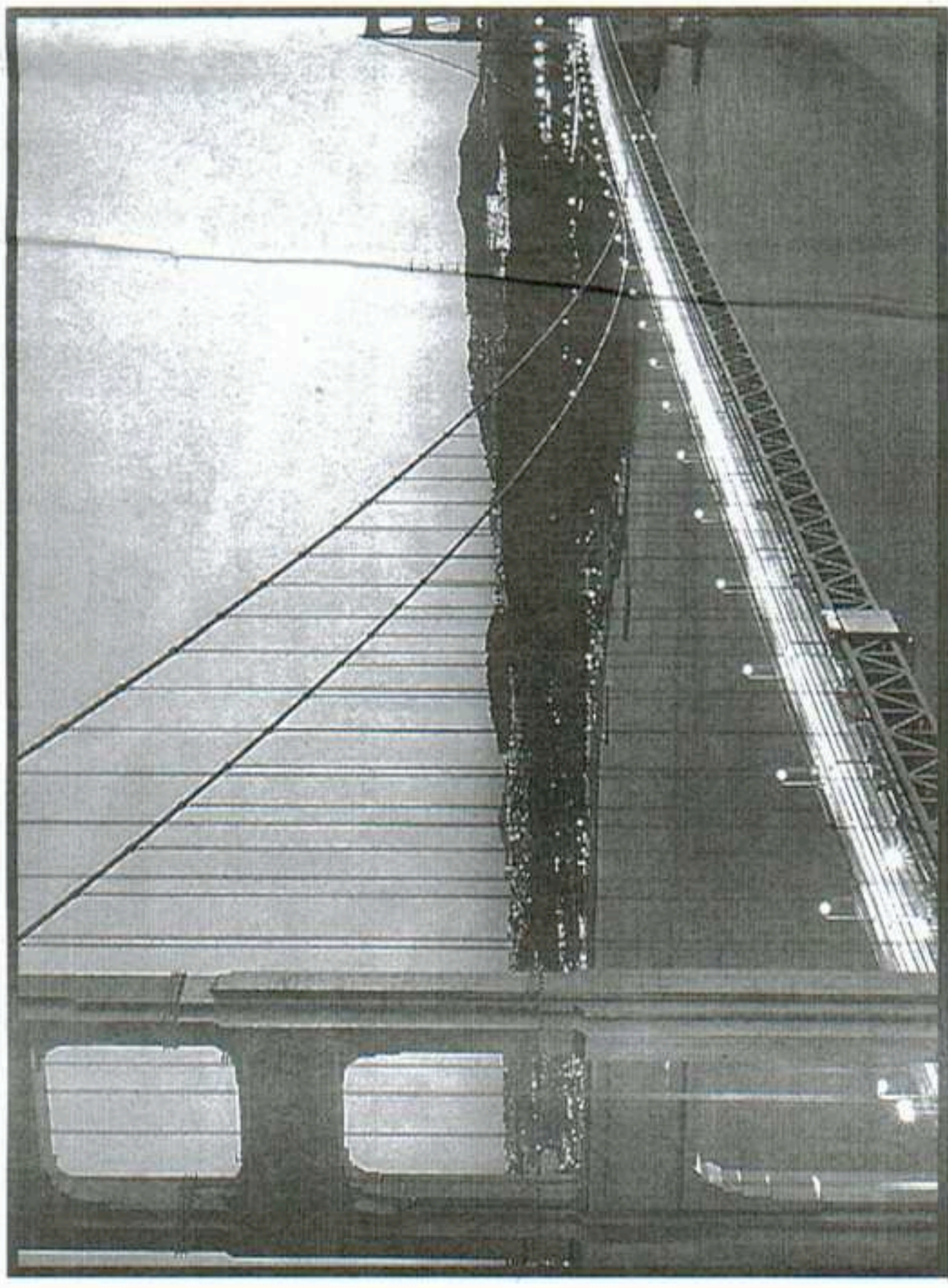
made their money a few hundred miles south, in Hollywood. Francis Ford Coppola's Niebaum-Coppola Estate is crowned by a huge and gorgeous pastiche of a Bordeaux chateau. As well as wine, it sells Coppola's favourite glasses, plates, cheese, even his favourite

discovered they were already taking bookings for next year. Luckily we convinced the Launderers that they would be letting down the whole of America if they didn't find a table for the man from *The Sunday Telegraph*. The kitchen then went off piste and to town. They normally offer a six-course à la carte, or a 10-course tasting menu. For us they

offered two types of hand-made butter and a selection of nine different salts, I didn't even laugh. People travel thousands of miles and book months in advance to visit the Laundry. But during our Maine lobster tail with king trumpet mushrooms, Laurence thought he recognised a voice. "Oh God, oh God," moaned a woman behind us in a familiar-sounding ecstasy.

I admit I was shocked. It just goes to show how little we truly know of the US. Still, I think I'll keep my geographical faux pas under my hat. Don't want people to think I'm an idiot, do I?

Read Alan B'stard's column, written by Maurice Grant and Laurence Marks, in today's main paper.



ESSENTIALS

Getting there
British Airways (0870 850 9850; www.ba.com) flies twice daily Heathrow to San Francisco from £328 in October.
Calistoga Ranch (001 707 254 2800; www.calistogaranch.com; packages from £3,050).
Auberge du Soleil (963 1211; www.aubergedusoleil.com; from £280). French Laundry (707 944 2380; www.french

laundry.com). Bookings can also be made at www.opentable.com. Recommended wineries in addition to those mentioned above include Duckhorn Vineyards, Beaulieu Vineyard, Clos Pegase and the Sutter Home Winery. If you prefer to take a package, British Airways Holidays Prestige Collection (0870 242 1276;

www.ba.com/holidays) offers seven nights in San Francisco and the Napa Valley from £1,198 per person in October, including return flight from Heathrow, four nights at the five-star St Regis in San Francisco, and three nights at the four-star River Terrace Inn, Napa Valley. Rental only car hire for the duration costs from £74 per person.



WIN THREE NIGHTS AT LA SULTANA, MARRAKESH

This week we are offering readers the chance to win three nights' b & b for two at the fabulous La Sultana hotel in Marrakesh, with return flights on EasyJet. Set close to the Royal Palace, La Sultana has been beautifully converted from four riads and has palatial guest rooms, hanging gardens, a swimming pool, spa and hammam. The rooftop restaurant serves Moroccan and Mediterranean cuisine. To win the trip, simply answer the following

questions, the answers to which can be found in this week's Travel section.

a. What is *molajma*?
b. Where was Castaway 2000 set?
c. How did Rottnest Island get its name?

Send your answers and phone number, by next Thursday, to the La Sultana Competition, The Sunday Telegraph, PO Box 7273, Colchester, CO2 8XT. The winner will be the sender of the first correct entry drawn after the closing date. The

prize includes a three-night stay for two, with breakfast, at La Sultana (non-transferable and non-refundable). Lunch and dinner not included. Return flights from London to Marrakesh with EasyJet are included, with transfers from Marrakesh airport. The prize is valid until September 2007, subject to availability and excluding public holidays. Full terms and conditions are available on request. You can book rooms at the La Sultana through the Small Luxury Hotels of the

World (toll-free 00800 5254 8000; www.slh.com). EasyJet flies daily to Marrakesh from £56.98 return, including taxes. For further details, contact EasyJet (0805 821 0905, calls cost from 65p a minute; www.easyjet.com). The answer to last week's competition were **a.** Kemal Jumbatt; **b.** A folksong; **c.** Hue. The winner was SC Presswood from Cheshire.

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