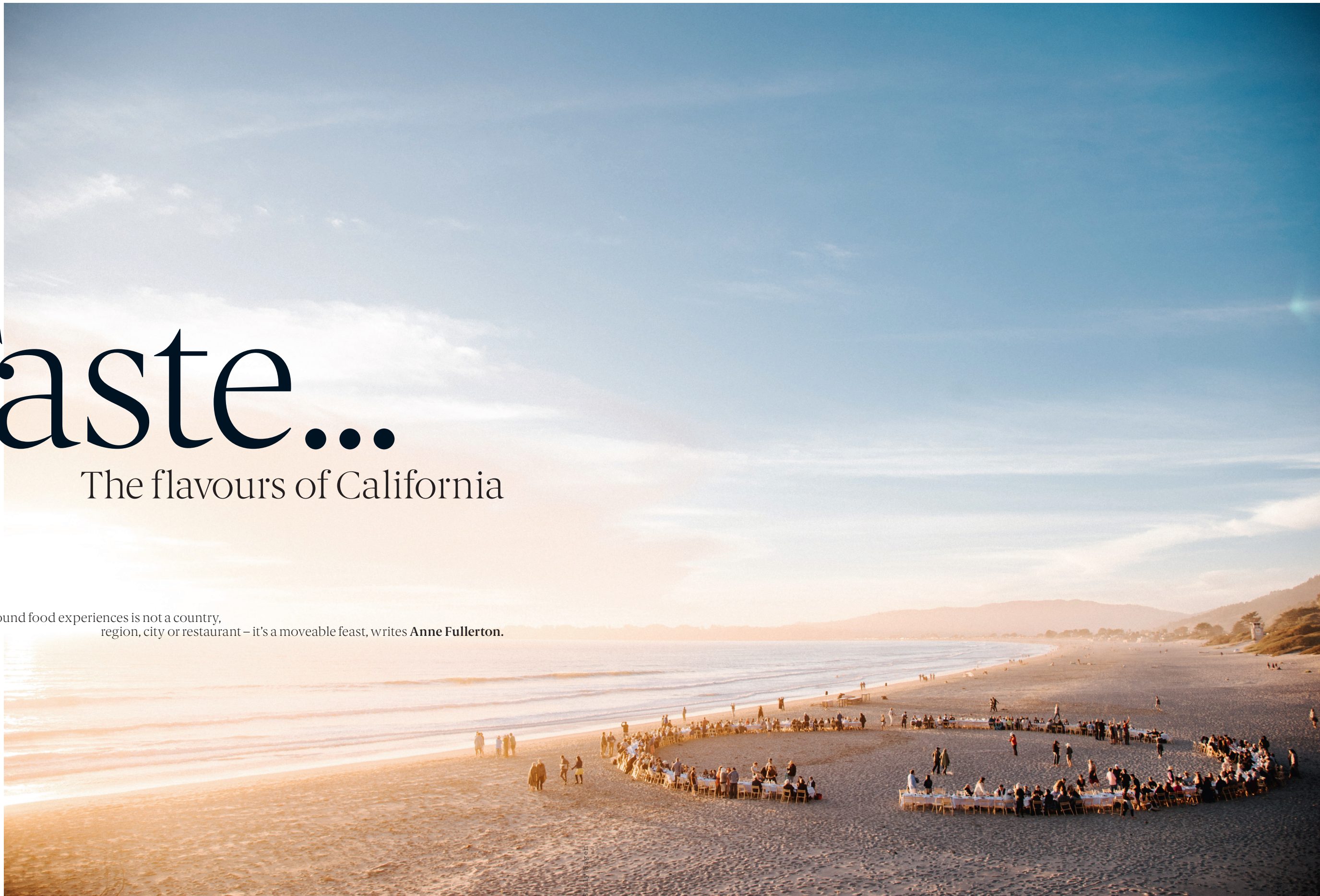


Taste...

The flavours of California

One of the world's most profound food experiences is not a country, region, city or restaurant – it's a moveable feast, writes **Anne Fullerton**.



PICTURE TWO hundred people trickling down to the beach, wine glasses in hand, to take their seats at one long communal table on the sand. Waves lap against the shore and during the entrée, the tide rises just far enough to dampen diners’ toes beneath the white tablecloth. Later, as dessert arrives, the sun sinks beneath the Pacific, bathing the scene in golden Californian light. It’s these perfectly choreographed moments, delivered in idyllic natural settings, that have made Outstanding in the Field’s pop-up dinners (outstandinginthefield.com) some of the most coveted reservations in the world.

But today, nature has other plans.

I’ve arrived in Santa Cruz during a phenomenon dubbed an “atmospheric river”. The United States’ western coast is engulfed by record-breaking rainfall and thunderstorms – “In spring!” says my Uber driver, aghast. It’s a sobering experience for Californians. Here, rain in May is not just unlucky – it’s celestial betrayal.



The only person who seems unconcerned is Jim Denevan, Outstanding in the Field’s founder and the man responsible for luring hundreds of people to a private beach 20 minutes drive from downtown Santa Cruz. If anything, he seems kind of thrilled. “Nature has wildness, variability, potentially danger,” he says later. “People go rock climbing or they go on long hikes so why can’t we go looking for adventure in our dining? Life doesn’t have to be all perfectly predictable.” This daring spirit has underpinned Outstanding in the Field since 1999, when Denevan, an artist and former chef, devised the idea of a roving fine-dining experience.

Over the past 20 years, he’s grown the outfit from small gatherings comprised largely of family and friends to an international sensation that frequently sells out tickets. The travelling table has been through 50 US states and more than 15 countries, setting up everywhere from a water buffalo farm in New Jersey to a winery in the foothills of Mount Fuji and an agrarian castle in Sweden. The premise is simple: get people to eat in the places where their food is produced and let them hear from the people who produce it. The execution is another matter entirely.

“We’re like roadies for chefs,” says Denevan of the culinary convoy it takes to host world-class dinners

Setting up for events at Wattles Farm, Los Angeles (left), and Waseda Farms, Baileys Harbor, Wisconsin (above)



in the wilderness. He and his team travel between locations in a retrofitted bus, while three trailers contain everything required to build a pop-up restaurant and kitchen on site from scratch. Each event is unique: a farmer (in this case, fisherman), who often doubles as the host, works with a guest chef to create a menu from local, seasonal produce. When I arrive, Jason Ryzcek, the executive chef of San Francisco restaurant Farallon, is already prepping under a mud-encircled tent in a scene reminiscent of Woodstock. Closer to shore, staff are wading shoeless through the quagmire to the dining tent (our back-up plan) to measure table settings with a ruler. The attention to detail amid chaos is as staggering as it is anxiety-inducing.

As if on cue, the drizzle stops and I join the alfresco cocktail soirée taking shape at the northern end of the beach. Guests arrive along a nasturtium-lined path, before emerging into a clearing where waiters in denim aprons circulate with trays of smoked oyster escabeche, anchovy toast and steak tartare. I opt for seaweed ceviche on spiced corn chip and the salty emulsion tastes like I’ve taken a bite of the view. In fact, I might be doing just that – most of the ingredients being served were caught within sight of this beach. Local wine and cider flows at the makeshift bar and families with adult children mingle with middle-aged couples in windbreakers and girls in their late 20s wearing cocktail dresses. The crowd is about as diverse as you can get with a US\$285-a-head (about \$400) price tag.

Flight path

SFO

Qantas flies from Sydney and Melbourne to San Francisco. qantas.com



Dinner is served at Bloomsbury Farm, Smyrna, Tennessee (far left); a dish of grilled asparagus with yoghurt, rhubarb, frissé and herbs for a pop-up in Santa Cruz

After fisherman Hans Haveman addresses the crowd, the sun appears from behind angry-looking clouds and Denevan announces that the tables will be moved out of cover and onto the sand. The crowd whistles and applauds. Many diners have brought their own plates, a long-standing tradition, and we head onto the beach for a procession of courses served family style. The table overflows with food: bread with cultured butter; enormous bowls of olives; king salmon shiso with jade rice and pickled pepper; a salad of mixed greens, kiwi fruit and cashew cheese in a honey vinaigrette; Monterey Bay squid, mussels, clams, prawns, crab and halibut served in a chorizo and saffron-shellfish broth; corn grits with spring greens, broccolini, peas and fava beans. Each course is paired with a wine from a local vineyard. “What’s going to make as many people happy as possible?” is how Ryzcek describes the menu, which puts the spotlight firmly on produce while also catering for every dietary restriction imaginable.

I take a seat opposite a retired Silicon Valley executive, her psychologist husband and a couple in their late 20s who recently moved to the area from New York. It takes a remarkable 45 minutes before anyone brings up the *Game of Thrones* finale, which is airing at this very moment. We needn’t worry about spoilers – there’s no wi-fi or mobile phone coverage on the beach. It’s a little bittersweet that the most instagrammable event I’ve ever attended precludes any actual instagramming but the absence of phones is refreshing.

When the rain begins to fall again after the main course, everyone rushes back to a tent where dessert is served as a buffet. After a brief downpour, not one but two rainbows form above the hills behind us. “This reminds me of growing up,” says Ryzcek later, chatting with lingering guests around an enormous beach bonfire. Tonight he’s dealt with everything from mud-entrenched vans to macaroons melting in the rain – and he seems elated. “Not to take anything away from restaurants but no dining room can beat this,” he says, gesturing to the waves with a glass of red wine.

“You can’t build this. You can only come here.”



Outdoor dining at
Santa Cruz (above)
and the West Sonoma
Coast (below)

Out there

Four other pop-up dining experiences around the world.

Fervor

Executive chef Paul Iskov works with Aboriginal land custodians to showcase Australia's native flavours. The pop-up (fervor.com.au) sets its table in some of the nation's most remote and spectacular destinations, from the Pinnacles Desert to Kakadu National Park, adjusting the menu according to region and season.

Diner en Blanc

Founded in Paris in 1988, Diner en Blanc (paris.dinerenblanc.com) has grown from a small gathering of friends into an international event that takes place in more than 80 cities on six continents. As the name suggests, guests dress in white. Diners bring their own tables to set up, often at an iconic location.

Silent Dinner Party

Part dinner party, part social experiment, this is an ongoing art project in which up to 200 guests gather to eat a three-course meal while making as little noise as possible (silentdinnerparty.com). The quirky events began in 2006 and have taken place in cities such as Sydney, Edinburgh, Beirut and Shanghai.

The Art of Dining

The United Kingdom-based Art of Dining (theartofdining.co.uk) combines set design, theatre and cooking to create one-off themed events at a variety of venues, from National Trust homes to industrial warehouses. Whether it's an '80s office party, servants' supper at a grand estate or camping-themed cookout, guests never know what to expect. ●

