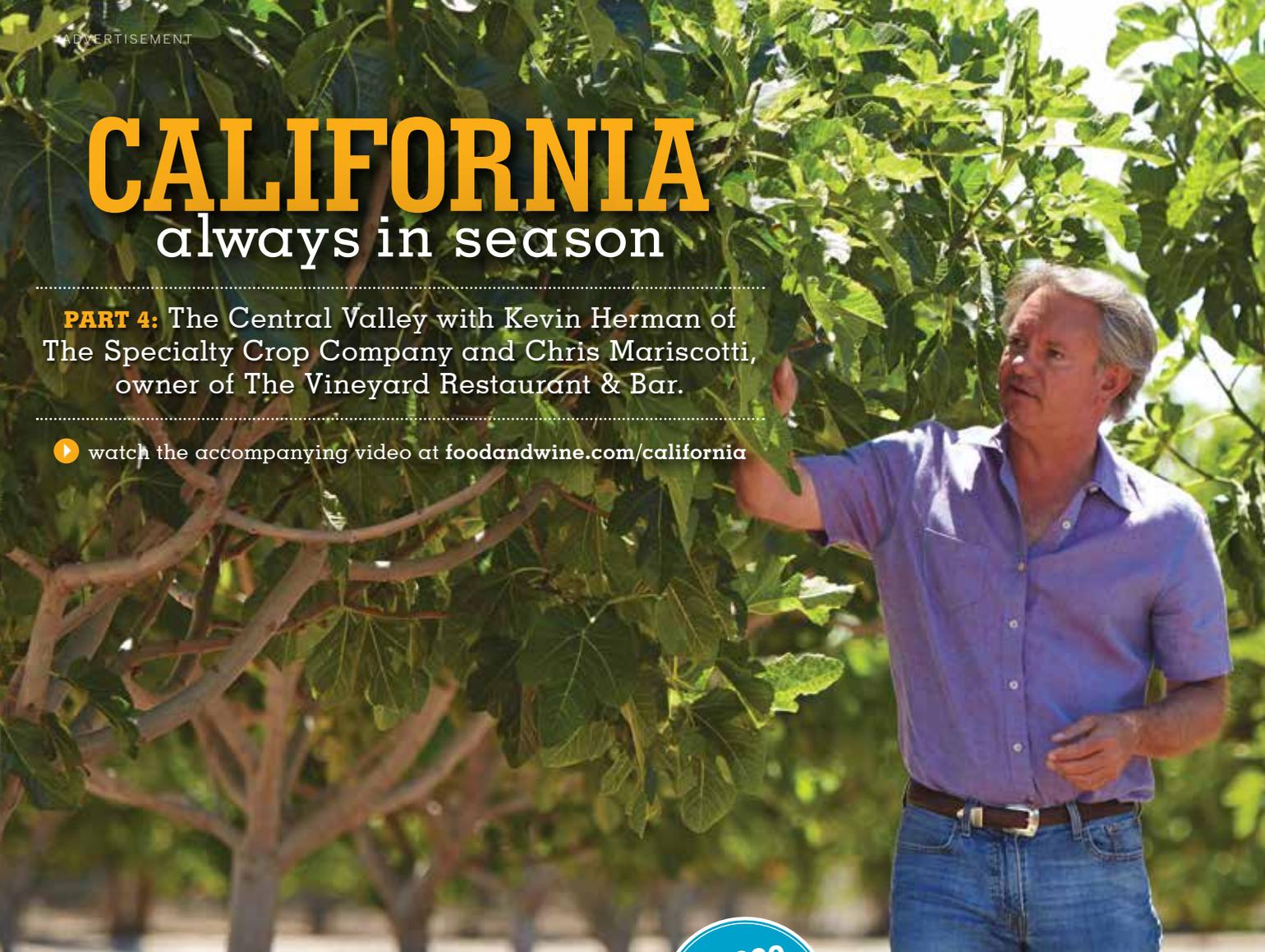


CALIFORNIA

always in season

PART 4: The Central Valley with Kevin Herman of The Specialty Crop Company and Chris Mariscotti, owner of The Vineyard Restaurant & Bar.

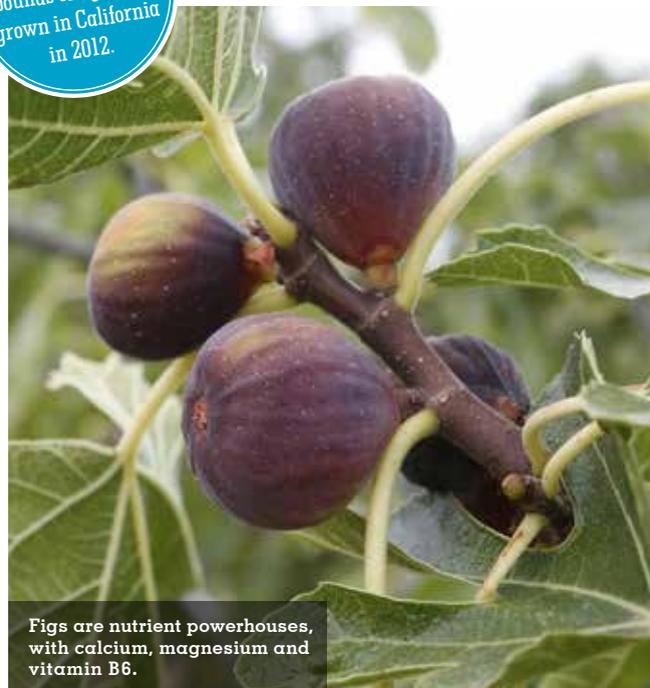
▶ watch the accompanying video at foodandwine.com/california



38,660
pounds of figs were grown in California in 2012.

In part 4 of this 6-part series, we invite you to join us for a taste of California's sweet spot: the Central Valley. With its moderate, Mediterranean climate and its central location, the Central Valley is a hidden gem nestled between San Francisco and Los Angeles. Once overlooked by visitors driving between cities, the Central Valley today has become a destination for travelers in search of a few days of relaxation—and some amazing food and wine.

"We really are the heart of California," says Kevin Herman, the farmer behind The Specialty Crop Company, the world's largest grower of fresh figs. With the backdrop of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, the Central Valley offers easy access to Yosemite, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, hiking trails, fishing and a host of winter sports. In the summers, which are hot and dry, you can reach the Pacific Ocean in a few short hours. The valley itself is home to long stretches of farmland, where you'll find pistachios, almonds, grapes, citrus and persimmons as well as figs, and a growing number of boutique wineries, a compliment to the nearby restaurants—like Chris Mariscotti's The Vineyard Restaurant & Bar in Madera—that rely on local ingredients to shape their menus.



Figs are nutrient powerhouses, with calcium, magnesium and vitamin B6.

local flavor

A fourth-generation restaurateur, Chris Mariscotti has always offered dishes that highlight local produce. "There are 40 or 50 crops we can source locally," he says. And of all the locally grown fruit and vegetables that shape his menu, California figs from Kevin Herman's farm are often the star.

But Chris and Kevin's relationship goes beyond farm to table: A shared interest in wine sparked a friendship that has spanned two decades and taken the pair—and their families—on local ski trips and far-flung vacations. "Through our relationship I've gotten to know a lot about farming," says Chris. "We have a lot of fun together and once in a while we're able to incorporate work with the fun."

Some of The Vineyard Restaurant & Bar's finest fare: an award-winning fig-and-almond cheesecake, bacon-wrapped Mission figs drizzled with a balsamic reduction and a fig-topped pizza.



Chris and Kevin inspect this season's crop of figs.

195
types of figs are showcased in the USDA's federal collection.



© 2014 TIME INC. AFFLUENT MEDIA GROUP. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. PHOTOS: (FIGS) THINKSTOCK.COM; ALL OTHER PHOTOS BY PETE THOMPSON

Q&A

with **Chris Mariscotti**, owner of The Vineyard Restaurant & Bar

What makes the Central Valley in California such a great culinary destination?
People are discovering what locals have known for generations: It's a great place to live and a great place to visit. Visitors come to explore the growing food and wine scene, and they come back when they see all that our central location gives them access to.

Why have figs become so popular over the past few years?
Thanks to farms like Kevin's, figs are available outside of their once-limited seasonal window; consumers and chefs now have access to figs almost year round. When people pick up figs and smell them, they get excited about them.

How do you enjoy the Central Valley when you're not working?
Kevin and I had a professional-grade bocce court built at one of the ranches we're involved in. Playing bocce, drinking wine and watching the sun go down from 100 feet above the fig trees is a very nice way to spend an evening.

california calling
foodandwine.com/california

From figs to pistachios and almonds, there's a bounty ripe for the picking every day of the year in California. Over 400 crops are grown here, and the diversity is a boon to farmers and chefs alike. Visit foodandwine.com/california to learn their stories, and enter for a chance to win a 7-day foodie vacation in the Golden State, complete with dinner at The Vineyard Restaurant & Bar.

California dream big



This project is possible with funding from the California Department of Food and Agriculture's Specialty Crop Block Grant Program