



BY FRANCES LEFKOWITZ

SAVORING

the

A FOOD- AND
WINE-LOVER'S GUIDE
TO CALIFORNIA'S
NORTHERN
COAST, WHERE
ORGANIC FARMERS
AND ARTISAN
FOOD MAKERS ARE
HANDCRAFTING
LUSCIOUS CHEESES,
BREADS, WINES
AND MORE.





LANDSCAPE

THE CHINESE ORACLE KNOWN AS THE I CHING TOLD ME RECENTLY that I am an absolute beginner when it comes to love. “You are able to competently handle just about every facet of your life except for this one,” said the ancient book of wisdom. Therefore, anything I say about matters of the heart should be taken with a grain of salt. Still, I believe that curiosity can be a form of love. To be fascinated by another, then strive to understand that other’s mysteries, not to dominate, but to appreciate—surely this is one way of loving. If so, I would like to declare my love, not for a person—I am, after all, only a beginner at this—but for a place, one with which I’ve had a long, often troubled relationship. That place is the landscape I think of as home: the area just north of San Francisco, where in between the flat, dry heat of the Central Valley and the raw, foggy beaches of the Pacific Ocean, the coastal mountain range breaks into the slender cracks and wider valleys of Marin, Sonoma and Mendocino counties. Botanist Luther Burbank called this area God’s Country because its mild cli-

mate and fertile soils can grow almost anything. But that abundance can be elusive—not everyone in the land of plenty is born with the finances or the attitude to take advantage of it—and my memories of the region are tinged with the melancholy of never quite having enough. In an attempt to shake off the past and satiate myself with the brisk and mellow beauty of this area, I recently traveled through here, touching and smelling and tasting, partaking in the bounty of food and wine and vistas that once seemed so out of my reach.

The French, of course, have a word for this kind of love that is landscape and flavor and understanding. *Terroir*, a term from French viticulture, is often translated as “microclimate,” though it refers to the whole confluence of natural elements—the depth of the bedrock and the chemical composition of the soil on a particular south-facing slope, for instance—that

OLIVES FOR OLIVE OIL, SUCH AS THESE MAURINOS FROM THE ORGANIC MCEVOY RANCH (OPPOSITE, TOP), ARE STARTING TO POP UP AMONG THE GRAPES AND LUSH VINEYARDS IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA’S WINE COUNTRY.

create particular growing regions. Terroir is the basis of the French appellation system, in which wines are known by their region (*Bourgogne*, or Burgundy, for instance) and not by their varietal (the Pinot Noir grape that grows so well there). But at the northern California outpost of a very French winery—Roederer, known especially for its champagnes—transplanted winemaker Michel Salgues, Ph.D., emphasizes another factor in the creation of terroir. “Yes, it is the natural conditions, the microconditions, of growth,” he told me on a recent tour. “But it is also the human intervention in those conditions.” It takes people—curious, hungry people—to learn the nuances of a growing region, to determine its unique capabilities and limitations, to figure out what grows best there and how best to grow it. The people in this part of California have come from all over (Italy, China, Mexico), carrying their native foods (artichoke, cilantro, jalapeño) and know-how and replanting them into this fertile ground.

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Terroir, then, like all aspects of agriculture, represents the union of culture and nature. It is the understanding of a place expressed in wine, and in food as well, as farmers and bakers and cheese makers can also interpret the personality of a landscape. But talking to the winemakers of this region is the first step to learning the lush secrets of its terroir and how one goes about extracting the flavor of a place.

Seventeen years ago, when Roederer winemakers went scouting around here looking for a place to grow Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes, the traditional blend for champagne, they settled on the Anderson Valley in southern Mendocino County because its proximity to the coast provides it with a cooling fog that complements its heat and differentiates it from the more inland valleys. While the Chardonnay grape likes some cool weather, the less versatile Pinot more or less demands it. “It’s like a racehorse,” says the affable Salgues, “very temperamental.” Soon the growers discovered that the area had more than coastal fog to offer the grapes. A particularly narrow valley, its soils are strong on drainage and weaker on nutrients—conditions that boost the quality of the grapes. In addition, the cool nights increase their acidity and, as the *Wine Enthusiast* stated recently, “As any sparkling-wine maker will attest, zesty acidity is the key to making eye-popping bubbly.” Or as Salgues puts it, “Suffering is good for the grape.” There is legitimate concern in the Anderson Valley, once known for its apples and hippies, that Sonoma and Mendocino counties are going the way of Napa, where wine

grapes have uprooted the traditional food crops and wine people have reshaped the cultural landscape. But for better or worse, the terroir of the Anderson Valley is becoming famous for its Pinot Noirs.

Grow the best grapes you can and then try not to mess them up, goes the humble winemaker’s cliché. Like terroir, this winemaking concept applies equally as well to food. For winemakers like Robert Blue, of the organic Bonterra winery just inland from the Anderson Valley, the goal is getting “the true nature of the vineyard—its terroir” into every bottle of wine. “What is the best way to farm that piece of land, and what is the best way to pull the flavors out of that place?” he asks. Blue and his team, as well as an increasing number of growers and farmers and ranchers throughout the north coast, have decided that the answer to both these questions lies in the organic approach. Mendocino County has some 45 organic-grape growers, and more than 3,000 acres of organic crops of all sorts. Neighboring Sonoma County’s organic statistics are almost as impressive.

Just as the quality of the wine depends upon the quality of the grapes, the quality of the grapes depends, in turn, upon the quality of the soil they are grown in, explains Bonterra adviser Alan York, an expert in a form of organic cultivation known as biodynamic farming. In the vineyard, York strives for a diverse, healthy closed system, in which the fragrant waste from the winemaking process goes back into

the soil as fertilizer, and plantings of clover and wildflowers help prevent insect devastations. Grapes grown under these conditions, he believes, help to “express the individuality of a particular place.” In winemaking, estate wines, which are made on-site from grapes also grown on-site, are considered the purest expression of terroir. York believes that his closed-loop approach, requiring few outside fertilizers, brings Bonterra wines one step closer to pure. In one small but premium corner of the Bonterra vineyard, a block of 35-year-old Petite Syrah vines are being dry-farmed (grown without irrigation), a method that produces fruit with exceptional flavor. In the rainless heat of California summers, this only works with the best grapes on the best plots of land. And if you are lucky—Bonterra’s Petite Syrah is not yet commercially available—you will one day have a glass of the rich, round red wine that comes from the grapes that come from this plot.

But drinking wine is not the only way to taste a place. Out on the coast, the Giacomini family has been raising dairy cattle for generations on the shallow grassy hills, green in winter and brown in summer, that overlook the long finger of Tomales Bay. Recently Robert Giacomini and his four daughters have begun turning some of that milk into cheese—a tangy, award-winning blue cheese—and the family is convinced that their location, often soaked in salty fog, can be tasted in each bite. “You can’t repeat our recipe even 30 miles away,” says daughter number three, Lynn Giacomini Stray, explaining how their

CONTINUED ON PAGE 98

Savoring the Landscape

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 77

Holsteins—all bred, grazed and milked on-site—express the flavors of the land and sea that come together on this particular lull in the coastal range. “We don’t have to add as much salt to our cheese because it’s in the air, the grass.” Though the Giacominis’ Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Company is not an organic dairy, the ranching and the cheese making both take place on the farm, making their blue a true farmstead cheese, the equivalent of an estate wine grown and bottled at the vineyard. And they are but one of a handful of artisanal cheese makers in these hills, many of whom are raising their own animals and working with the nuances of soil and slope and season to create food that is full of the flavor of the landscape. Pouring themselves into their terroirs, they are performing nothing less than a labor of love.

At the crossroads of Sonoma and Mendocino counties, the chefs at Geyserville’s Taverna Santi gleefully pluck from the region’s bounty, foraging for mushrooms and wild nettles in nearby creek beds, buying tomatoes from a guy down the street whose sign says “World’s Best Tomatoes” and serving up olive oil from olives grown and pressed just 40 miles away. “This is the best place in the world to be a chef,” says chef Thomas Oden, who co-owns Santi with chef Franco Dunn. “There are more microclimates in Sonoma County than in any other county in the U.S.,” he says, and most of them get represented at the Healdsburg farmers’ market, where he shops for fruits, vegetables, cheese and other ingredients from local farmers and food makers. Then he goes back to the kitchen, awaits a delivery of crusty hearth bread from Della Fattoria bakery in Petaluma and locally raised Peking ducks from Sonoma County Poultry and puts together a menu that is ripe with the flavors and textures of the surrounding country.

It doesn’t seem fair when food like this—made with passion and time, in step with the seasons—falls into the domain of the elite, relegating the rest

of us to the bland food of chain supermarkets and chain restaurants. It has been said before, but there is nothing new about eating fresh food grown and made near where you live. This is how my ancestors—everyone’s ancestors—used to do it. Taverna Santi attracts a high-end clientele, but it also attracts the old Italian-American families who have lived in this area for generations, growing their plots of tomatoes and arugula and Zinfandel wine grapes. The dishes here—a sage-scented osso buco made with local veal, a young chicken cooked, by tradition, under a brick and served with sautéed greens—are delicious and indulgent, but they are also honest and real, a kind of gourmet peasant cuisine that feels inviting, even to someone like me who has often felt more peasant than gourmet.

When I ate at Santi it was winter, fertile and wet; the food, harvest-colored in deep reds and golds, tasted of rain and earth. Freshly dug beets, roasted with blood oranges, were dusted with Bodega goat cheese brought in from the coast and served atop green shoots of arugula grown at nearby Balletto Ranch. The Torta di Polenta, a savory cornmeal torte, was saturated with local mushrooms—criminis, along with whatever wild ones the chef had foraged. Ravioli stuffed with sweet winter squash and pine nuts was topped with smoked ricotta cheese from the local Bellwether Farms dairy. And then, just before the rich, dark flavors could overwhelm, out came the fish, Trancia d’Ono, showered in a bright, raw salsa made of lemon, lime and orange segments with chopped green olives and fresh mint. With each bite, I felt the land open up to me, offering me a chance to enjoy her abundance, to taste her succulence, to maybe even fall in love. And the next day, as I drove through patches of fog and sunshine, past the redwoods reaching skyward and the oaks hovering down low against the wind, by the bright yellow of sourgrass and the pale buds of apple trees, I felt like I was being welcomed home.

Three Days in the North Coast Region

DAY 1 | POINT REYES AND SOUTHWEST SONOMA Start your terroir tour in Marin County, most famous for its hills and hot tubs overlooking the San Francisco Bay, but in its northwestern region known more for its rugged beaches and grassy hills that blend into the Sonoma, then the Mendocino, coastline. The town of Point Reyes Station, located at the tip of Tomales Bay, is the gateway to a national seashore area filled with scenic views of both ocean and bay. The surrounding hills are dotted with sheep, goats and cows. Ranched for generations by dairy farmers, many of them with Italian roots, this area is now a nexus of artisanal cheese making, including the Giacominis’ *Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Company* (www.pointreyescheese.com; 800-591-6878). You can’t visit the Giacominis’ dairy, but you can visit—and watch the cheese making—at the *Cowgirl Creamery* (www.cowgirlcreamery.com; 415-663-9335), located right in the middle of town. The Cowgirl Creamery produces a variety of soft cheeses, including Mt. Tam, its signature Brie-like cheese, and Red Hawk, a pungent triple cream, all made from milk from the organic Straus dairy nearby. The Creamery is housed in the *Tomales Bay Foods* building, which also features an organic-produce stand, a gourmet take-out deli and a cheese shop that sells artisanal and farmstead cheeses from all over the world. Many of the local cheese makers do not have public facilities or retail outlets, so this is a great spot to taste these cheeses. Each one has a story, and the Creamery staff will gladly share it with you. Among the local choices: Cindy Callahan’s prizewinning Tuscan-style sheep’s milk cheeses from *The Bellwether Farms* (www.bellwethercheese.com) in Valley

Ford; mild goat's milk cheeses that resemble ricotta, cream cheese and feta from *Bodega Goat Cheese* (www.bodegagoatcheese.com); and Humboldt Fog chèvre, covered in the ash of burnt grapevines, made by the Cypress Grove Dairy (www.cypressgrovechevre.com) in Humboldt, just north of Mendocino.

If you want to spend the night and feel like splurging, stay at the casual but indulgent *Manka's Inverness Lodge* (www.mankas.com; 415-669-1034) in Inverness, just across Tomales Bay from Point Reyes. Housed in a 1917 hunting and fishing lodge built in the California Arts and Crafts style, Manka's also has a popular restaurant that showcases the region's finest growers, ranchers and artisan food makers in an elegant—and expensive—menu.

Another cheesery open to the public is just inland on the Point Reyes-Petaluma road. *The Marin French Cheese Company* (marinfrenchcheese.com; 800-292-6001), which makes and sells dozens of cheeses, including Camembert and eight kinds of Brie, is the oldest continuously operated cheese maker in the nation, established in 1865. Look for the black-and-red sign in front of a picturesque pond; picnic supplies are sold in the shop. Further down the road is the *McEvoy Ranch* (open for tours by appointment only; www.mcevoyranch.com; 707-778-2307), a lush organic olive farm that will make you think you took a wrong turn and landed in Tuscany. For bread to dip into the oil, head back to the coast, then north along Tomales Bay, veering with Route 1 as the jagged coast forces it inland to the town of Tomales, then over the Sonoma County line, stopping at the bend in the road that is the town of Freestone. Here Jed Wallach of the *Wildflower Bakery* (707-874-2938) creates wonderful hearth breads using organic flours, wild yeasts and herbs from his adjacent garden. Next head inland to the larger town of Sebastopol, which holds a farmers' market on Sundays (10:00

A.M.—1:30 P.M.), May to November, and is also the home of *Redwood Hill Farm* (www.redwoodhill.com; 707-823-8250), which invites you to meet more than 400 goats—all named—only on selected open farm days. This is apple country, and one farm to visit is the *Twin Hill Ranch* (www.twinhillranch.com; 707-823-2815) in Sebastopol, which grows 10 varieties and sells apple pies, breads and other foods at its country store.

DAY 2 | INLAND FROM SONOMA INTO MENDOCINO Highway 101 is your typical traffic-laden California highway, but you can take the parallel Old Redwood Highway to get better views as well as access to some of the hundreds of wineries in Sonoma. The California Welcome Center (www.sonomawine.com; 800-939-7666) off the Golf Course Drive exit in Rohnert Park will help you decide which wineries to visit. The Welcome Center (open 9:00 A.M.—5 P.M. daily) is also home to regional food and agricultural groups (www.sonomagrown.com) with maps and other information on local farm trails, farmers' markets and artisan food makers. In the adjacent city of Santa Rosa, check out the huge year-round farmers' market held on Wednesdays and Saturdays (8:30 A.M.—noon) at the Santa Rosa Veterans Memorial Building parking lot, at the intersection of Highway 12 and Maple Street. Local food makers sell their cheese, bread and more alongside the farm-fresh fruits and vegetables. You can also buy a delicious, if simple, hard cheese called St. George at the *Matos Cheese Factory* (707-584-5283) on Llano Road. Since 1979, Joe and Mary Matos have been making and selling this one cheese named after the Azorean island off Portugal where it, and the Matos family, originates.

Continuing north from Santa Rosa, check out the newly upscale city of Healdsburg, on the Russian River. When I was growing up, Healdsburg was little more than a pit stop before more-attractive destinations in Lake

County or Mendocino. But now it's a veritable wine-boom town with artisan bakeries, restaurants, art galleries, inns and hotels, all surrounded by the more than 60 wineries in the Dry Creek and Alexander valleys. Among the vineyards, Colleen McGlynn and Ridgely Evers run an olive grove where they grow Italian varieties for their pungent, peppery, unfiltered olive oil. Their farm is not open to the public, but their DaVero olive oil (www.davero.com) can be found at the *Oakville Grocery* (707-433-3200) and the *Cheese Course* (707-433-4998), two Healdsburg shops that sell a great variety of local foods. Another spot for local goods is the *Jimtown Store* (www.jimtown.com; 707-433-1212), an updated country store located on the outskirts and featuring antiques, picnic supplies and more. Healdsburg's farmers' market is open Tuesdays (4:00–6:00 P.M.) June through October, and Saturdays (9:00 A.M.—noon) May through December. This is the market where the dedicated chefs at *Taverna Santi* (www.tavernasanti.com; 707-857-1790) often shop. To try Santi for yourself, head eight miles north to Geyserville; look for the plain brick building on Geyserville Avenue with the unassuming neon sign that says simply "Taverna," and get ready to enjoy a rustic Italian-style meal featuring regional, seasonal ingredients.

Your next stop is just over the Mendocino line in Hopland, named after the hops that beer-making settlers planted here. In fact, this is the site of the Mendocino Brewing Company's *Hopland Brewery* (www.mendobrew.com; 707-744-1361), one of the pioneers in the renaissance of American craft brewing. Bonterra organic wines can be tasted at the Fetzer vineyards visitor center, *Valley Oaks* (www.fetzer.com; 800-846-8637), which also boasts a deli and a lush organic garden open to the public. If you like sleeping in high-ceilinged, wooden historical houses located within smelling distance of the grapevines, then Valley Oaks is

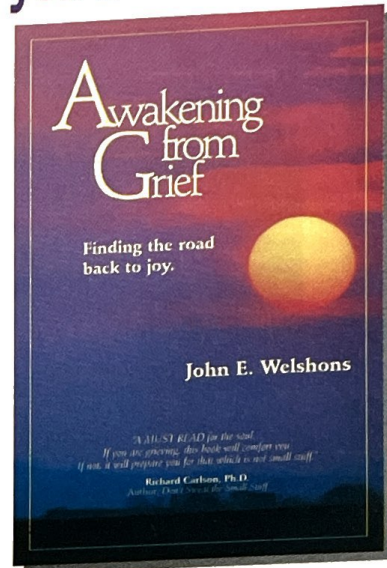
also a wonderful place to spend the night.

DAY 3 | THE ANDERSON VALLEY TO THE MENDOCINO COAST The Anderson Valley—take Route 128 through the length of it—is not that easy to get into and out of, so over the years it has developed a unique personality derived from its population of farmers, loggers, ranchers and back-to-the-landers. The valley actually has its own dialect, Boontling (named after the town of Boonville), which the locals created in the 19th century partly as a way to confound newcomers. Boonville is the home of the *Anderson Valley Brewing Company* (www.avbc.com; 707-895-2337), which makes several acclaimed beers and offers tours of the brewery. This valley is also the home of a growing number of wineries, including *Roederer* (www.roederer-estate.com; 707-895-2288) in the town of Philo, which makes a sparkling wine. The *Anderson Valley Winegrowers' Association* (www.avwines.com; 707-895-9463) sponsors a Pinot Noir festival with wine tastings and winery open houses in May. Before grapes, this valley was known for its apples, and several farms are keeping that tradition alive. On Route 128 in Philo, look for the sign for the organic *Apple Farm* (707-895-2333), established on an abandoned apple orchard in 1984, which is doing its best to preserve heirloom species such as Sierra Beauty and Pink Pearl. The Apple Farm has an upscale country stand featuring gourmet jams, syrups, ciders, vinegars, chutneys and more; it also offers accommodations in its cottages located right in the orchards.

Route 128 is slim and steep as it winds its way over the Navarro Ridge and then finally down to the coast, where the wide, open expanse of the Pacific awaits. Head north 15 miles along the coast road to the town of Mendocino, known for its art galleries as well as the foggy, rainy conditions that produce a bounty of wild and cultivated mushrooms. The Mendocino

County Alliance (www.gomendo.com; 1-866-466-3636) organizes several food festivals, including a wonderful *Wine and Mushroom Fest* every November, which enlists the culinary talents of chefs in restaurants all over the county, and the *Crab & Wine Days* in late January–early February. Crab, abalone and a variety of fish are caught in these cold, salty waters and trucked inland or cooked up in local restaurants. One family, the Lewallens, harvests seaweeds from these waters as well and sells them locally and nationally under their *Mendocino Sea Vegetable Company* label (www.seaweed.net; 707-895-2996). The Lewallens offer occasional seaweed identification and harvesting seminars. *The Ravens Restaurant* at the *Stanford Inn by the Sea* (www.stanfordinn.com; 800-331-8884) serves a sophisticated menu of organic, vegetarian ingredients, including fresh seaweeds, mushrooms, and vegetables grown in the adjacent kitchen garden. You can also stay at the inn and swim in the greenhouse pool. Or you can dine at *Café Beaujolais* (www.cafebeaujolais.com; 707-937-5614), which has been artfully preparing organic and local foods since 1977. Or head south down the twisty coast—known in this stretch as the Elk Coast—to the funky *Pangea Café* (www.pangeacafe.com; 707-882-3001) in Point Arena, where chef-owners Rob and Jill Hunter cook up a world cuisine inspired as much by their travels as by the organic local ingredients. Moroccan lamb, coq au vin and Thai curries have appeared on the menu alongside their home-baked hearth bread. Further south, in Gualala, Rosemary Campiformio cooks up her own North Coast cuisine at *St. Orres* (www.saintorres.com; 707-884-3335), which also offers accommodations in its gorgeous oceanside lodge and cottages (707-884-3303 for lodging). The food here, emphasizing local, fresh ingredients including the unusual (sea urchins, huckleberries, wild boar), is pricey, inventive and as dramatic as the sea cliffs dropping into the Pacific. ♦

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