

San Jose Mercury News

TRAVEL

Really experience a stay in Mendocino County

By Ann Tatko-Peterson

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A weathered wooden swing sits on the property at Mar Vista Cottages at Anchor Bay in Gualala, Calif. One of the 12 cottages is seen in the background. (Ann Tatko-Peterson/Bay Area News Group)

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The roaring surf of Anchor Bay stood as a backdrop visible from our cottage's bay window.

On the table sat steaming omelets I had cooked using the fresh hen eggs left on our doorstep the night before and tomatoes, spinach, broccoli and herbs I had collected that morning in the vegetable garden.

My husband and I dug into breakfast, enjoying the peace, quiet and gorgeous ocean view, when suddenly, a pair of goats strolled past our window.

We laughed long and hard. We hadn't banked on finding a slice of farm life, but that, and more, is what we uncovered at Mar Vista Cottages in Gualala.



The Green Door Cottage sits nestled among the apple trees at Philo Apple Farm in Philo, Calif. (Ann Tatko-Peterson/Bay Area News Group) (Ann Tatko-Peterson)

In a way, that's the beauty of a trip to Mendocino County. You can find the traditional inns, bed-and-breakfasts and hotels with daily maid service, or you can find options that let you genuinely experience a stay in this rural corner of the North Coast.

COUNTRY COASTAL LIVING

Mar Vista's location drew Renata and Tom Dorn in 2000, but the dozen fishing cabins-turned-vacation cottages were in serious disrepair. The Dorns undertook a major restoration, angling for a simplicity that wouldn't detract from the property's spacious rolling meadow amid tall trees and the ocean across the street. Country-inspired furnishings and "hankie"-style window coverings that hang from pegs are a few ways they have accomplished that. The cottages do show their age -- an old range in the kitchen, some cracks in the bathroom floor -- but they are a step above rustic and part of the property's overall charm.

At the heart of that charm is a large organic vegetable garden, where guests can help themselves to dozens of varieties, and a yard where more than 150 hens roam and lay eggs, which guests can help collect every afternoon. A picnic area, fire pit and soaking tub are available for guests.

"I love the way the cottages are like pioneer wagons surrounding the gardens," Renata said during our visit. "We are unique, and that's the way we like it."

That night, we sipped wine in a pair of outdoor Adirondack chairs as we listened to the crashing waves and stared at a magnificent blanket of stars.

"If this is farm life," my husband said, "sign me up."

LIFE IN THE WILD

Up the road in Point Arena, Judy and Frank Mello have created a sanctuary of a different sort. They have turned their 110-acre property into B Bryan Preserve, where they care for and breed endangered African hoof stock, including zebras, antelope and giraffes.

Year-round public tours and lodging guests have helped fund the Mellos' conservation efforts.

Guests can stay in two cottages or a carriage house over the garage. The two cottages feature decks with hot tubs that overlook a pond and small, fully equipped kitchens.



Co-owner Judy Mello asks Jagger, a Rothschild Giraffe, for a kiss at B Bryan Preserve in Point Arena, Calif. By design, the giraffes are the encore of a tour of the preserve, that is home to endangered African hoof stock. (Ann Tatko-Peterson/Bay Area News Group) (Ann Tatko-Peterson)

The interiors really impress with antique parlor stoves, comfortable upscale furniture and reclaimed materials, from floors to stained glass windows. In the Bridge Cottage, old church pews were used to create a stunning staircase.

But what sets B Bryan apart are the animals. A Range Rover tour at feeding time gives visitors an up-close view of the preserve's more than 100 residents, who are among the world's most endangered species.

Judy knows all of the animals by name, as well as their personalities.

Why is Henry, a male antelope, living with Elvis the plains zebra? "He wants to mate with the girls, but it's not his turn," Judy explained.

Why does it look as if new-mom Jewel is shooting daggers at another Grevy's zebra? "That's Emily, and she loves being a mom. She's stolen two babies," Judy replied.

Then there's Jagger. "Our rock star," Judy said proudly. The Rothschild giraffes are the tour's encore act. These are the only animals whom guests can pet, feed -- and kiss. Leaning his long neck down to rub cheeks, Jagger puts a stamp on an enlightening tour.

Down on the farm

For wine lovers, about an hour's drive inland, the burgeoning wine region of Anderson Valley also offers a real farm experience in Philo.

Karen Bates' family has operated Philo Apple Farm for three decades. Along with her mother, Sally Schmitt -- who predated Thomas Keller as owner of Yountville's French Laundry -- Bates began inviting visitors for a hands-on cooking experience in the farm kitchen.

Then in 2000, the family built three cottages nestled among the apple orchard, and the Stay & Cook opportunities were born. Now, guests roll up their sleeves and cook alongside Bates in the kitchen, where she and her family make the juice, jams and chutneys they sell at an honor-system farm stand and a shop in Boonville.

"We don't advertise, because for some of the general public, this wouldn't be a good fit," Bates says. "People drive by and we let them explore the farm. We tell them what we do. Our clientele is all word-of-mouth or people who discovered us on their own."

Each cottage is spacious and exquisitely appointed. You won't find televisions, telephones or even cell service, but you will find huge windows that make it feel as if you're sleeping in nature.

In the morning, the warm Tuscan-style farmhouse kitchen welcomes guests with fresh apple juice, biscuits and homemade jam, yogurt and tea.

Cottages are designated by the color of their door. We stayed in the Green Door, featuring a comfortable four-poster queen-size bed and antique twin-bed, Hearthstone gas fireplace, cushy sitting chair, large open shower and porch perfect for sitting under the stars.

Just moments after parking by our cottage, we met Lefty -- a farm dog who truly loved playing fetch. He chased everything my husband threw for him. As we sat stargazing late into the night, there was Lefty, repeatedly dropping a stick on the porch.

Again, we found ourselves laughing. It seems farm life suits us, at least while on vacation.

☑ Mar Vista Cottages: 35101 Highway 1, Gualala; 877-855-3522; www.marvistamendocino.com. Rates \$185 to \$305.

☑ B Bryan Preserve: 130 Riverside Drive, Point Arena; 707-882-2297; www.bbryanpreserve.com. Rates for cottages \$185 to \$225 with two-night minimum; one night may be available for additional \$100. Rates for carriage house, \$135-\$185. Tours -- 9:30 a.m. and 4 p.m. (3:30 p.m. November to February); \$30 adults; \$15 children 9 and under; discounts for lodging guests; reservations required.

☑ Philo Apple Farm: 18501 Greenwood Road, Philo; 707-895-2333; www.philoapplefarm.com. Rates \$200 midweek and \$275 weekend with two-night minimum. Stay & Cook weekends are \$700 per person (double occupancy), which includes three hands-on meals, recipes, instruction, wine and two nights' stay.

☑ Where to eat: Uneda Eat -- 206 Main St., Point Arena; 707-882-3800; www.unedaeat.com. Tasty dishes from a changing menu of food sourced from local farms and meats that chef Rob Hunter hangs at his own home; a more casual version of Hunter and wife Jill's former restaurant, Pangaea in Gualala. Franny's Cup and Saucer -- 213 Main St., Point Arena; 707-882-2500; www.frannyscupandsaucer.com. Tiny bakery sells sweets such as the Chocolate Chip Obama-licious cookie with four kinds of chips and decadent dark chocolate-covered caramels sprinkled with sea salt.

For Philo restaurants, see the accompanying article on the Anderson Valley.

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Mendocino's Anderson Valley: Gem for wine and food lovers

By Ann Tatko-Peterson

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A 22-acre vineyard property and hospitality center will soon be on the outskirts of Philo, Calif., as the new winery and tasting room for Lula Cellars. (Ann Tatko-Peterson/Bay Area News Group)

Driving the 15 miles of picturesque road between Boonville and Navarro, one thing instantly struck me. Why hadn't I heard more about the burgeoning wine region of Anderson Valley in Mendocino County?

The two dozen wineries dotting Highway 128 drew my husband and me to the valley, known for its pinot noirs, dry gewurztraminers and chardonnays. And while the wine offerings more than satisfied, we also discovered a growing food scene that makes this a gem of a weekend getaway.

Here are a few suggestions for sampling Anderson Valley, starting in Boonville:

📍 **Pennyroyal Farms:** By midsummer, owner Sarah Cahn Bennet hopes to open a retail space and offer tours at her 100-acre sheep and goat cheese farm in Boonville. A sneak peek tour offered us a glimpse of the milking station, goat barn and creamery. We also sampled the blue and three Boont Corners aged cheeses, which are sold at Navarro Vineyards in Philo. Closer to home, they are available at Albany's Wednesday farmers market during the summer. (14930 Highway 128, Boonville; 800-537-9463; www.pennyroyalfarm.com.)

📍 **Buckhorn:** Billing itself as a "fine grub pub," this restaurant feels like a mountain chalet with wood paneling, buck heads on the wall and a very cool antler chandelier. The menu includes hot sandwiches, burgers (including venison) and lots of sides. The crispy, seasoned steak fries are exceptional. We also got a chuckle out of a daily special: Guinness cupcake. (14081 Highway 128, Boonville; 707-895-3224; www.thebuckhornboonville.com.)

📍 **Boonville Hotel:** Two of Boonville's claims to fame can be found here. Bite Hard, a champagne-style hard cider, and piment d'ville, a Basque-style dried chile, are the creations of Brooks Schmitt, the 25-year-old son of the hotel's proprietor. The hotel serves as a de facto tasting room for the cider, while the hotel restaurant, Table 128, offers menu selections utilizing the sweet chile pepper. Both also are sold in the hotel gift shop. (14050 Highway 128, Boonville; 707-895-2210; www.boonvillehotel.com.)



Phillips Hill Winery has relocated its tasting room from downtown to an old apple dryer in Philo, Calif. Authentic equipment from its apple drying days remain on the property. (Ann Tatko-Peterson/Bay Area News Group) (Ann Tatko-Peterson)

📍 **Stone and Embers at the Madrones:** The Madrones in Philo combines guest quarters for overnight stays, four tasting rooms and one of the area's most delightful restaurants. The intimate restaurant has just five tables and some bar seating. Chef Patrick Meany -- whose résumé includes Yountville's Bouchon and San Francisco's Gary Danko -- masters blending flavors and textures with a changing menu based on farm-to-table

ingredients. The wine, beer and ciders all come from Mendocino County. (9000 Highway 128, Philo; 707-895-3471; www.stoneandembers.com.)

📍 **Lula Cellars:** This small winery has very big plans for its future. On May 1, winemaker Jeff Hansen plans to open a hospitality center at the 22-acre winery in north Philo. The new venture will include a tasting room, 8-acre pond surrounded by Adirondack chairs, guest cottage, 14-acre vineyard and 1-acre organic vegetable garden. "I want to make this a great sensory experience," Hansen says. "We don't want to be just another winery." Until then, sample wines at its downtown Philo tasting room. (Tasting room: 8627 Highway 128; 707-895-2904; www.lulacellars.com. New winery: 3101 Highway 128.)

📍 **Phillips Hill Winery:** Artist Toby Hill stumbled into winemaking when he accepted four barrels of unfinished pinot noir so he could design the wine label. A decade later, he has his own label and one of the region's most charming tasting rooms. Hill and fiancée Natacha Durandet have restored a former apple dryer, adding an outdoor tasting area overlooking a creek and a museum honoring the building's history. A cozy balcony is an ideal spot to taste the wines and sample cheeses. "This tasting room really fits our vision of what we want to bring to the valley -- nature, history, all the senses in one," Hill says. (5101 Highway 128, Philo; 707-895-2209; www.phillipshill.com.)

📍 **Husch Vineyards:** The valley's oldest winery, started in 1971, offers tastings in a rustic pony barn that dates back to the late 1800s. An incredibly knowledgeable tasting room manager tapped us into what the region had to offer -- and where else we could find top-notch chardonnays. Best of all, we got to sample six wines with no tasting fee. (4400 Highway 128, Philo; 707-895-3216;www.huschvineyards.com.)

A taste of Mendocino County's gourmet treasures

By Jackie Burrell and Ann Tatko-Peterson

Bay Area News Group



Cranberry and Apple Kuchen, photographed in Walnut Creek, Calif., on Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2014. (Mark DuFrene/Bay Area News Group) (Mark DuFrene)

Mendocino County's bounty is hardly limited to its scenic splendors. This is a gourmet mecca as well, with a crab and wine festival that draws crowds every January, the world's largest salmon barbecue in July, and a mushroom extravaganza every November. And the region's scores of wineries, inns and breweries stand ready to slake your thirst and hunger for all things, whether it's a sublime chardonnay, hoppy ale or briny shellfish -- or a sumptuous apple cake with a French Laundry pedigree.

Philo Apple Farm's Sally Schmitt owned The French Laundry in the 1980s and early '90s, when her beautiful apple-cranberry kuchen was a mainstay on the menu. The dessert was so popular, Thomas Keller included it in his "French Laundry Cookbook"

(Artisan, 1999). Today it's a favorite at Philo Apple Farm, where the cooking school, rustic cottages and heirloom orchards are run by Schmitt's daughter, Karen.

Cooking is a collaborative act at Renata Dorn's Mar Vista Cottages in Gualala, as well. Guests can collect mussels at Anchor Bay Beach, clean them at the fish cleaning station on the property and bake them up in the cottage kitchen -- with a recipe provided by frequent guests Susan and Harry Squires.

Here's just a taste of those flavors.

-- Jackie Burrell and Ann Tatko-Peterson

Recipe: Baked Anchor Bay Beach Mussels with Tomato and Feta

Recipe courtesy of Susan and Harry Squires

BAKED ANCHOR BAY BEACH MUSSELS WITH TOMATO AND FETA

Serves 2 to 4

Note: This recipe is a favorite with guests at Mar Vista Cottages at Anchor Bay in Gualala.

1/4 cup olive oil

1/2 yellow onion, chopped

2 cups tomatoes peeled, seeded and chopped

1 cup white wine

2 teaspoons fresh oregano

1 bell pepper diced

1 tablespoon red wine vinegar

2 pounds mussels, well scrubbed

6 ounces feta cheese, crumbled

Salt, pepper to taste

1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley

1. In a large skillet, warm the oil. Saute onion over low heat for 10 minutes. Raise heat to high; stir in tomatoes, wine, oregano, bell pepper and vinegar. Lower heat and simmer, uncovered, until thick, about 20 minutes.

2. Preheat oven to 400.

3. Pick over the mussels; discard any that are open and do not close if touched. Add mussels to tomato sauce, cover and cook until most of the mussels have opened, 2 to 4 minutes. Discard any that did not open.

4. Remove the meat from the mussel shells and transfer the meat to a baking dish, along with the sauce. Sprinkle with cheese. Bake 15 minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Sprinkle with parsley and serve immediately.

-- Courtesy Susan and Harry Squires

Recipe: Husch Fresh Crab Dip

Recipe courtesy of Husch Vineyards, Philo

HUSCH FRESH CRAB DIP

Note: This recipe was served during Mendocino County's 2014 crab and wine festival.

8 ounces cream cheese

2 tablespoons Husch Vineyards chardonnay

9 ounces crab meat

2 tablespoons chopped green onion

1/2 teaspoon creamed horseradish

1/4 teaspoon seasoning salt

Grind of pepper

1/4 cup chopped pistachios

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

2. Soften the cream cheese with the wine, mixing until smooth. Fold in all the remaining ingredients, except the pistachios.

3. Transfer the mixture to an ovenproof serving dish. Sprinkle with chopped pistachios. Bake for 15 minutes. Serve with crackers or a sliced baguette.

-- Courtesy Husch Vineyards

Recipe: Savory Philo Apple Farm Applesauce

Recipe courtesy of Philo Apple Farm

SAVORY PHILO APPLE FARM APPLESAUCE

1. Peel and slice apples to fill a heavy saucepan three-quarters full. The best apples for this would be Gravenstein, Pink Apple, Jonathan, Golden Delicious, Spitzenberg, Sierra Beauty or Astrachan. Mixing apples is fine.
2. Fill pan halfway with apple juice. Cover and cook over medium-low heat until apples are tender.
3. Add sugar to taste, salt, 1/4 cup (1/2 stick) butter and chopped fresh thyme. Stir vigorously and cook for 3 to 5 minutes longer. Serve over pork or poultry.

-- Philo Apple Farm