The first thing you notice about Pat Kuleto's office at his Napa Valley estate winery is the tree. It's hard to miss—a live oak that's 5 feet in diameter, it rises from the ground and continues right through the ceiling. While building his winery in the mountains east of St. Helena, Kuleto thought it a waste to cut down the oak, so he integrated it into the structure's design.
No one designs restaurants quite like Kuleto, as evidenced by the art deco revisionism of Buckhead Diner in Atlanta, the under-the-sea adventure that is Farallon or the colorful modern art extravaganza of Postrio, both in San Francisco. He creates a fanciful space that somehow makes you feel at home, yet his vision goes beyond design—it informs almost everything he does. Whether it’s as a vintner and grower, a restaurant mini-mogul, an outdoorsman or a dedicated bon vivant, Kuleto pursues his passions with gusto.

“He’s bigger than life and he has a lot of energy. It’s no holds barred with him,” says friend and Napa Valley vintner Carl Doymian. “A lot of people dream about something and never do it. He thinks big and then does it.”

With a résumé that includes 18 restaurants around the world, the front-share of which are in California, Kuleto is also a principal owner of four: Boulevard, Farallon and Jardinière in San Francisco and Martini House in St. Helena. This year, he is launching his most ambitious project thus far. In the fall, he is opening Waterbar, a waterfront, two restaurants side by side on San Francisco’s waterfront, near the high-profile Ferry Building and the shadow of the Bay Bridge.

Outside of the city, Kuleto is scheduled this spring to open Nick’s Cove & Cottages resort on the shores of Tomales Bay, one of the most beautiful beaches of the California coast. When Kuleto bought Nick’s, a rundown watering hole and fishing village, the old friends thought he had finally bitten off more than he could chew. But after spending $1.5 million to modernize and upgrade the property and surviving eight years of bureaucratic song and dance, Kuleto is poised to make Nick’s one of the hottest destination restaurants and resorts north of San Francisco.

Standing on the end of a 400-foot pier, Kuleto looks out over Tomales Bay. It’s the middle of winter, but a warm sun reflects in the soft away of the water, and a seagull hangs on a cold breeze like a surfer on a wave. A small boat slips through the water toward the shore, where men wait to unload fresh oysters. Kuleto points toward the mouth of the bay. “The oyster farms are just over there. You’ll see bunches boats out there when it’s the right season,” he notes. “This is the most pristine bay on the entire Pacific Coast of the United States.”

Six feet tall and barrel-chested, Kuleto, 62, is difficult to overlook. His once dark beard has turned gray, and his hair is thin on the top but dangles in a ponytail in the back. He prefers Hawaiian shirts.

A native of Los Angeles, Kuleto is self-taught in the realm of design, but he hasn’t allowed his lack of a formal education to get in the way. “I’m a nosy artist,” Kuleto says. “I mean, I can’t draw flies, [but] I can see it all in my head, every detail. I guess I have the gift of vision.”

The Kuleto touch has set the style for trendy restaurants across the country. “Kuleto’s cover-to-cover, spectacular designs were so experimental and unprecedented in the Bay area that they made waves and quickly became icons of San Francisco culture,” says Zahid Sardar, design editor for the San Francisco Chronicle. “The highly crafted, imaginative aesthetics of spaces such as Farallon and Postrio... remain the gold standard of finely made restaurants that employ local talent and incorporate original art.”

Kuleto’s design style is a movie set. “It’s kind of a fantasy, a background for a good time,” he says. “People go in and get caught up.” According to Sonoma vintner Don Cattano, who hired Kuleto to design Ristorante Bolognese at Cattano’s Eldorado casino in Reno, Nev., “His restaurants are creative and there’s a real feeling of comfort...
Nick's Cove & Cottages, located on the shores of Tomales Bay, recently received a $12 million upgrade and is set to open this spring.
and warm. It's amazing what he has done without a major architectural education."

Not that there haven't been challenges along the way. In the late 1970s, Kuleto made a fortune in real-estate development in Northern California, but when interest rates soared in the early 1980s, he was forced to declare bankruptcy. His first stab at growing grapes literally went up in smoke in 1992, when a grass fire swept through his 60-acre ranch in Calaveras County, in the Sierra Nevada foothills. In recent years, Kuleto parted ways with his wife, Shoshano, but he remains close to their 11-year-old son, Daniel.

Back on shore at Nick's, the sound of power saws and hammers drown out the seagulls and lapping waves. Nick's is a small group of buildings that straddles Highway 1 on the eastern shore of the bay, about an hour's drive north of the Golden Gate in Marin County. With origins that date back to the early 20th century, it was once a thriving settlement, one of many that catered to tourists and fishermen on the bay. After the establishment of the Point Reyes National Seashore across the bay in the 1960s and the enactment of California's coastal protection legislation in the 1970s, development in the area was largely restricted, if not impossible. Gradually, the cottages and restaurant constituting Nick's fell into disrepair; Kuleto bought the property in 1999, before it went on the market.

So far, it's been quite the labor of love. "Talk about a long hang time," Kuleto quips. "We had no idea it was going to take eight years. We had more than 80 different governmental and special interest groups involved, and every one had its own agenda."

Nick's Cove will feature a casual approach. Mark Franz, Kuleto's partner in F Talon, will oversee the kitchen. The design of the 130-seat restaurant is a revisionist's old hunting lodge, with knotty pine paneling and stuffed animal heads on the wall. There will be a raw bar and a menu that focuses on local antifood, meat, cheese and produce. "Most of the food we buy for our restaurants comes from right around here," Kuleto notes. "There's duck and lamb from Snowana. Cogwell Creamery is just down the road, and Meffroy olive oil is just over that ridge."

The wine list will comprise a few hundred selections and focus extensively on Northern California producers. Peter Patner, wine director for F Talon, will oversee the list. Wine will be also available in the boat shack at the end of the pier, where oysters will be sold in buckets and a small menu will be offered. With only 12 cottages on the property, Kuleto knows he will have to attract a wide range of clients, locals and tourists alike. If customers do decide to stay, they'll spend their time in rustic luxury. Six of the cottages are on piers over the water and provide soothing views. All the cottages are done in early to mid-20th century decor, with lots of redwood and other raw timbers, country pine antiques and even on-ba lake furniture. Each has a fireplace, hot tub and private deck.

Kuleto has designed Nick's to appeal to guests who appreciate the outdoors. Point Reyes, home to a classic lighthouse, has 70,000 acres that serve as a haven for hiking and biking. Tomales Bay is popular with kayakers, sailors and bird-watchers, and there's salmon and other sport fishing in nearby Bodega Bay.

At one point about three years ago, when the plans for Nick's were stalled, Kuleto began work on his San Francisco projects. The restaurants, Waterbar and Epic Roundhouse are now under construction in the Rincon Park area, which encompasses about 2 acres on the Embarcadero. Kuleto took inspiration for the restaurant designs from the refurbished industrial buildings that line the waterfront, using lots of brick, limestone and exposed steel. Waterbar, which will specialize in seafood, will have two-story fish tanks. "It will be like eating at the Monterey Bay Aquarium," Kuleto says. Franz will

While he can't hope but always have a project in the works, Kuleto aims to slow down a bit to spend more time with his son, Daniel.
run the kitchen here as well. Epic Roasthouse will specialize in steaks and chops, and chef Jim Beamboon, late of Carbohydrate in Napa Valley, will handle the menu.

About 50 miles north of the waterfront, but a world away from its hustle and bustle, Kuleto lives on an 800-acre ranch with million-dollar views of Napa Valley. It’s remote, and Kuleto likes it that way. From the gate on Sage Canyon Road, it’s a harrowing 10-minute drive to the top. His neighbors on the next ridge over include Bryant Family, Colgan and Chappellet.

It’s a vastly different view from the one he had growing up in what is now the Silver Lake neighborhood of Los Angeles. Kuleto’s father installed fire sprinklers and wanted him to follow in the business, but Kuleto wasn’t interested. “The day I got my driver’s license, I left town,” he says, “I was going to live like a duck—go north in the summer and south in the winter.” At times in his life, Kuleto has been a vagabond. More than once he has set out to sail around the world, but the money always ran out. But while he may have rejected his father’s way of life, Kuleto is a natural-born builder. “I’ve just been compulsive about it,” he says. He helped build his first house when he was just 14. A turning point in his life came when he was working in Lake Tahoe in 1964. Fresh out of high school, Kuleto fancied himself a musician and was playing bass in a local band while supporting himself by working in construction. One day at a job site, he stumbled and fell on a power saw. He lost two fingertips on his left hand, and while the accident ended his musical career, it propelled him toward other aspirations.

“I went to Europe for a year on the insurance money,” Kuleto relates. Sailing across the Atlantic on the Queen Elizabeth, he got his first taste of the good life, and then he traveled all over, taking odd jobs where the money ran out. The trip left a lasting impression—of the food and the wine, of course, but also of the classic architecture of the Old World.

Kuleto settled in San Francisco after Europe and became a carpenter and contractor. It was almost by accident that he got into restaurant design. He decided to change a design at one of his jobs, and the owner liked it and asked him to do more. Kuleto went on to design and build dozens of low-budget theme restaurants along the West Coast. Soon he was developing and building a hotel in the Bay area, but when the market tanked and he went broke, he refocused on restaurants.

By 1984, he had honed his vision and taken on a job that would capture the design worlds attention: Fog City Diner. “It was the first restaurant where my design concept came together,” Kuleto says. “I had studied classic restaurants like Tadich Grill in San Francisco and I asked myself, ‘What makes them last forever?’ I decided that they had to be real. They had to be in context. The architecture had to work with the menu and even the server’s uniforms.’ With Fog City, Kuleto rethought the diner concept, retaining classic features such as neon and chrome and comfortable booths, but taking everything else upscale. It was a novel idea for its time.

With Boulevard, which followed in 1993, Kuleto took his inspiration from the Belle Epoque period in France. Guests enter through an antique revolving door, and the interior includes handmade wrought iron chandeliers, pressed tin and steel grinders. An even more fanciful creation is Farallon, a Union Square seafood restaurant that opened in 1997. The site, which had once been an indoor pool, inspired Kuleto’s underwater design. He preserved the vaulted ceiling, with its historic mosaic of bathing beauties, and added octopus stools, kelp-covered columns that light from within, and light fixtures that resemble jellyfish and sea urchins.
Pat Kuleto's Empire

Pat Kuleto has designed more than 185 restaurants around the world, the majority of them in California. Many are high-profile. Others, particularly those created during his early days as a designer, are more obscure, and some, victims of the volatility of the restaurant business, have closed over the course of Kuleto's lengthy career. In addition to the restaurants he owns, the designer's best-known works include Splendido (now closed), Fog City Diner and Postrio, all in San Francisco, Buckhead Diner in Atlanta, and McCormick's Fish House in Seattle.

Kuleto Estate Winery
Founded in 1993 and located just east of St. Helena, in Napa Valley, this winery made its first vintage in 1999 and now produces about 8,000 cases annually, from 120 acres of vines. Varietals include Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel, Syrah, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and Sangiovese.

Northern California Restaurants
BOULEVARD 1 Mission St., San Francisco; (415) 543-6084 Best of Award of Excellence
FARALLON 450 Post St., San Francisco; (415) 956-6969 Award of Excellence
JARDINIERE 300 Grove St., San Francisco; (415) 981-5555 Best of Award of Excellence
MARTINI HOUSE 1245 Spring St., St. Helena, Calif.; (707) 963-2233 Best of Award of Excellence

Restaurants Coming This Year
NICK'S COVE & COTTAGES
Located in the heart of Point Reyes National Seashore, Nick's Cove & Cottages is about an hour's drive north of San Francisco, on the shores of Tomales Bay. Kuleto has spent $1.5 million rehabilitating a bar and restaurant and its surrounding fishing village, and the result is a 130-seat restaurant on a quarter acre of beachfront, with 12 upscale cottages and a 400-foot pier with a boat-shack oyster bar. Nick's specializes in seafood, meats, cheeses and wine from Northern California producers. Opens this spring.

RINCON PARK RESTAURANTS
Situated on the waterfront near the Ferry Building, this project will feature two restaurants astride a large European-style piazza. Epic Roasthouse, which will specialize in steaks and chops, will be run by chef Jan Birnbaum, late of Catahoula in Napa Valley and Seastar in Seattle. Waterbar will be helmed by chef Mack Franz, formerly of Farallon and Star, and will focus on seafood. The restaurants' designs are inspired by the city's waterfront industrial buildings. Opens this fall.
continued from page 117

Design is just one of the keys to Kuleto's success with restaurants. He loves to top kitchens with the right mix of his partners. Nancy Cokes is his longtime partner at Boulevard, likewise Traci Des Jardins at Jardins, Todd Humphries at Martini House, Birnbaum at Epic Roasthouse, and Franz, first at Farallon and now at Nick's Cove and Waterbar.

Kuleto's passion for wine is almost as eclectic as his restaurant design. The 120 acres of vines at his Napa Valley ranch are planted to 11 grape varieties, with more than half the acreage in Cabernet Sauvignon: other grapes include Zinfandel, Chardonnay, Syrah, Sangiovese, Pinot Noir, and even Muscat.

"I couldn't believe it when they told me how much Pinot Noir is here," says Dave Lattin, Kuleto's winemaker since 2002. Kuleto, who once made a couple of hundred cases of Pinot a year, just laughs and says, "That's for me to drink." Sangiovese production has been trimmed considerably—domestic Sangiovese remains a hard sell—and many of the vineyards have been replanted through a sex change," as Kuleto puts it, "mostly to Cabernet."

Kuleto's vineyards are planted in 68 plots—a startlingly diverse range of exposures, soils and clones, at altitudes that range from 710 to 1,400 feet. With thin mountain soils, yields are limited to 2.5 tons or less per acre. Still, in 2006 the wines made about 8,000 cases, with Cabernet Sauvignon, Zinfandel and Syrah dominating production.

Of Kuleto's current releases, the best is the Syrah Napa Valley 2004 (90 points on Wine Spectator's 100-point scale, $45), a rich and concentrated red, with layers of wild berry and blueberry as well as a dash of oak on the finish. The Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley Reserve 2002 (88, $85) is elegant and rich, with fine-grained tannins and good length, and the Zinfandel Napa Valley 2004 (87, $36) is ripe and loaded with toasty oak, with aromas and flavors of blackberry and espresso.

"After 14 years we've finally got our vines wrapped around what this place is all about," Kuleto says. "We've learned what vineyards here produce the right fruit. We know what varieties to plant and what the market wants."

Wine is only part of what Kuleto does at the ranch. He has more than 3 acres of olives and makes his own olive oil. Bees are kept for honey. His kitchen is stocked with the beef, lamb, squid and goat raised on the property, and he also keeps mutton and caribou in a specially built pond.

Then there's Villa Cucina, his home that crowns the property. A comfortable lodge, it has the same feel as the nearby winery—rustic in an extravagant way. There's plenty of stone, rough-hewn beams and handcrafted details, such as chandeliers made of driftwood with lights that simulate flickering candles. Kuleto relies on a cadre of woodworkers, ironmiths and other artisans for all his projects. "When people put their heart and soul into something, I believe that energy truly comes through," he says.

"It feels real to people."

Kuleto certainly knows what it's like to put his heart and soul into something. It is a relief to him, after nearly a decade, to see Nick's become a reality. But once the San Francisco restaurants are completed, he would like to slow down—although he does admit to having another project in the works. "I can't talk about it. Not yet," he smiles.

His goal, for now, is to spend more time with his son and kick back at his Xanadu in the hills above Napa Valley. "Doing restaurants is my day job, but my head is really at the winery," he says. "I have to chill a bit more and find a little balance."