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Tomales Bay ²⁸

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The buzz on honey ¹⁴

Taco revolution! ²²

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Japanese pub food **48** Wine, dine, and surf in Santa Barbara **14**
Salami, pasta, and espresso in San Francisco **25**
Don't drive without it **12**

Tasty Bay Tomales

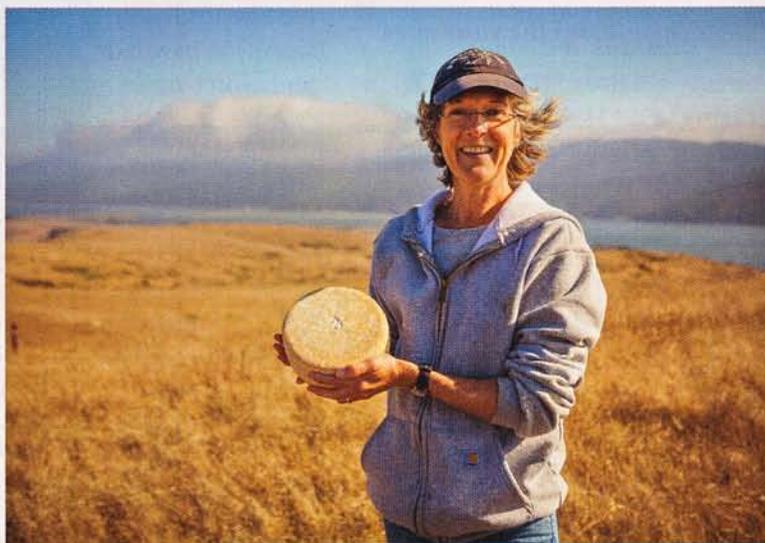
An hour north of the Golden Gate, amid some of California's sweetest sights, find briny oysters, buttery pastries, and savory cheeses.

It's a good thing rich scenery is easy on your waistline because Tomales Bay, California's largest unspoiled coastal inlet, unfolds in an endless feast for the eyes. Along Highway 1 and nearby rural roads, the view reveals itself in bites: genial towns, hillsides draped in dark forest or pale pasture, and a 15-mile-long finger of gentle water peppered with sailboats and the white posts of oyster farms. Were the vistas any more filling, visitors would step from their cars too full to enjoy the area's fine produce, with no energy left to stroll or paddle in the gracious parks along the bay.

It's something of a miracle that this Marin County spot remains so bucolic.

In the 1960s, developers plotted a city of 150,000; instead, the county enshrined much of the bay's east shore as agricultural preserve, strengthening its ranches and farms. The west side became part of Point Reyes National Seashore, now a 50-year-old park that embraces most of a vast wedge of grassland, forest, and sea cliff, from tiny Bolinas in the south to windswept Tomales Point in the north. The bay's tides ebb and flood in a gash in the earth's crust carved out over eons by the restless San Andreas Fault.

Farms have bordered the bay since the 1800s, when the quickest way to get dairy products to market was by boat. The national seashore incorporates heritage dairies and maintains



Marcia Barinaga holds a wheel of sheep cheese. Right, honey, cheese, and bread make a local treat.





Braised goat with greens wins raves at Osteria Stellina. **Below**, Barinaga's sheep graze above the bay.



the historic Pierce Point Ranch, where workers once hand-milked up to 300 cows twice a day. Nearby, a bluff-top trail leads into the Tule Elk Preserve, home to herds of tall, tan beasts, many with impressive antlers, that look like they've escaped from Santa's team but are in fact native to California.

While the elk refuge offers a meadowy, salt-scented ambience, nearby Tomales Bay State Park has a different feel. Here, storm clouds off the Pacific drop rain on lofty Inverness Ridge, watering forests of bishop pine and moss-hung oak and alder. On clear days, the park's sheltered Heart's Desire Beach makes a good spot to gaze at dew gathered on grass and ferns and to picnic on locally made bread and cheese procured on the way in Inverness.

The many clear days of fall and winter also suggest another great activity: kayaking. "It's one of the best times to paddle," says Laurie Manarik, co-owner of the tour company Point Reyes Outdoors. "It's quiet, there's not as much wind, and it's just beautiful." The boats offer intimate access to Giacomini Wetland at the bay's south end, which attracts migrating ducks and geese as well as native shorebirds. Splayed at the mouth of Lagunitas Creek, these recently restored marshlands lure everything from river otters to pupping leopard sharks. Local people like it too, says John Dell'Osso, the seashore's chief of interpretation and resource education. "The day we celebrated the restoration, about 60 or so people were sitting up on a hillside," he says. "When we dropped the last levee and water started to flow, they all stood up and started cheering."

Residents and visitors applaud the bay's tasty oysters just as loudly. Buttery bivalves are tended carefully on the east shore at Tomales Bay Oyster Company and Hog Island Oyster Co. — that is, until hungry pic-

BY ERIC SMILLIE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
DAVID H. COLLIER

Kayakers paddle out into a welcoming bay. Below, a taste of the ocean awaits at Hog Island Oyster Co.



nickers pry them open at outdoor tables. Toppings range from chipotle chile butter to Hog Island's Hog Wash—vinegar seasoned with shallots, jalapeño, and cilantro. "Some people love it more than the oysters," says Hog Island's Garret Hamner. "But these ones are so fresh you can eat them with nothing on them." Those who'd rather let expert hands do the shucking can stop at the Marshall Store or at Nick's Cove, where the shellfish can be ordered raw, baked, barbecued, or grilled.

Perched on a hilltop in Marshall, Barinaga Ranch might have ended up urban. "Fifty years ago this was all going to be subdivisions," says owner Marcia Barinaga with a sweep of her arm. Instead, guests on her monthly tour get views of rolling fields above glittering water, face time with friendly sheep, and tastes of her Baserri, a nutty Basque cheese made from sheep's milk.

There's no need to stop at a single farm, however, because all of what's best comes through "town," aka Point Reyes Station, at the base of the bay. Cowgirl Creamery offers many of the area's cheeses and also cultures its own, including the meaty Red Hawk. Local butter goes into Bovine Bakery's moist morning buns. And the menu at Osteria Stellina sings of the region: Marin Roots frisée salad. Marshall's Farm honey on crostini with Bellwether Farms sheep ricotta. Rossotti Ranch braised goat shoulder with polenta and Fresh Run Farm Swiss chard.

No matter that the sun sets early; dinner guests here get to go right on devouring the scenery. ●

ERIC SMILLIE is a *VIA* contributing editor.

IF YOU'RE GOING . . .

Request the *Northern California TourBook* and *Central California* map at AAA.com or any AAA branch. For more information, contact the **West Marin Chamber of Commerce**: (415) 663-9232, pointreyes.org. Area code is 415.

TO DO AND SEE Barinaga Ranch

barinagaranch.com. **Point Reyes National Seashore** 1 Bear Valley Rd., Point Reyes Station, 464-5100, nps.gov/pore. **Point Reyes Outdoors** 11401 Hwy. 1, Point Reyes Station, 663-8192, pointreyesoutdoors.com. **Tomales Bay State Park** 1208 Pierce Point Rd., Inverness, 669-1140, parks.ca.gov.

EATS Bovine Bakery

11315 Hwy. 1, Point Reyes Station, 663-9420, thebovinebakery.com. **Cowgirl Creamery** 80 Fourth St., Point Reyes Station, 663-9335, cowgirlcreamery.com. **Hog Island Oyster Co.** 20215 Hwy. 1, Marshall, 663-9218, hogislandoysters.com. **Inverness Store** 12784 Sir Francis Drake Blvd., Inverness, 669-1041. **Marshall Store** 19225 Hwy. 1, Marshall, 663-1339, themarshallstore.com. **Nick's Cove** 23240 Hwy. 1, Marshall, 663-1033, nickscove.com. **Osteria Stellina** 11285 Hwy. 1, Point Reyes Station, 663-9988, osteriastellina.com. **Tomales Bay Oyster Company** 15479 Hwy. 1, Marshall, 663-1242, tomalesbayoysters.com.