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Food for All

Chef Thomas Keller is celebrating the 20 year anniversary of the opening of the French Laundry restaurant

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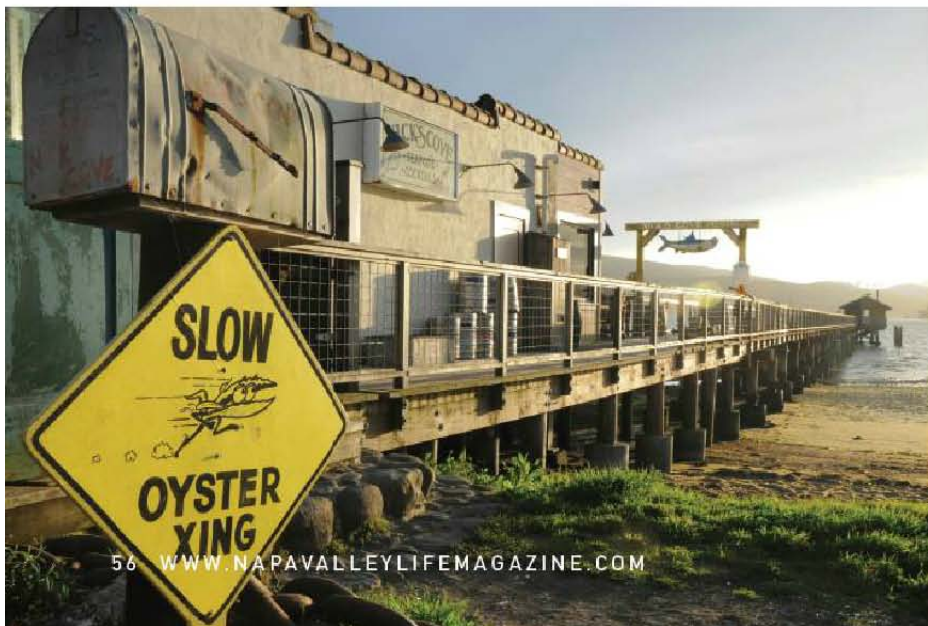
September-October 2014

NICK'S COVE

Food Times
for All

Take a waterfront break on the Tomales Bay

Article and photos by ROBERT KAUFMAN, NVL Travel Editor

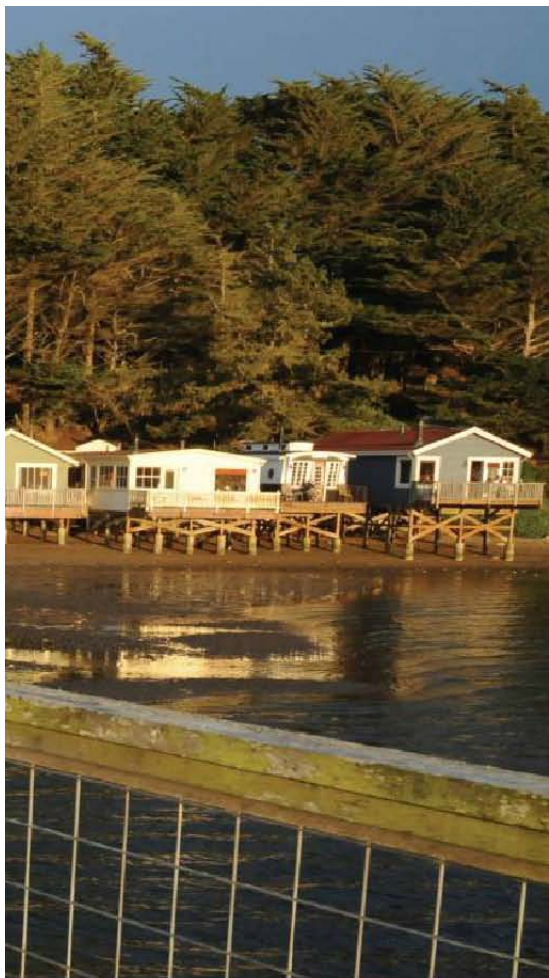


I must admit having been told more than once to take a long walk on a short pier. Finally, I was more than happy to honor that request but for reasons other than what may have been intended.

In reality, that long walk was akin to a euphoric stroll in the company of my companion along a 400-foot wooden-planked promenade at Nick's Cove Restaurant, Oyster Bar & Cottages to reach the pier-end boat shack, complete with a wood-burning stove. There the perfectly timed diminishing golden glow was only enhanced by the aphrodisiac powers of oysters and a bottle of vino. At that point, there was no need to take a step any further.

Framed in between Tomales Bay and rolling hillsides along the twisty Highway One running through Marshall, the only town where the population of 50 (according to the road sign) minus the 15-foot elevation equals the 35-mile speed limit, Nick's Cove provides the perfect opportunity to come to a complete stop. Especially at the "OYSTER XING" sign.

In our 24/7 plugged-in, tuned-in, tech-driven



world, this Bay Area retreat, an hour north of San Francisco and close to Pt. Reyes National Seashore, is a secluded hideaway—even from cell service—on the West Marin County coastline, where you too can take advantage of the seductive mollusks (no sunset required) or indulge in the diversity of outdoor activities ranging from kayaking to fishing to hiking to biking. Or perhaps go shuck and smoke some of your own oysters down the road at Hog Island Oyster Farm, topped off with artisan cheeses at the nearby Cowgirl Creamery.

As far back as the 1930s, when Nick's Cove was first constructed with several houses along the beach and a seafood restaurant, this roadside haven has proven to be a popular getaway for guests coming from all around the Bay Area. Following a variety of owners and challenges to "get it right," the current proprietor (since 2011) of Nick's Cove has gone to great lengths to preserve the integrity of its traditional architecture, while at the same time upgrading the décor of the twelve luxury cozy cottages, five of which are built on stilts over the water and the other seven across Highway One.

To the owner's credit, the day-to-day

operations of the property were placed in the hands of the very passionate and energetic General Manager, Dena Grunt, who was rewarded with the opportunity to run the company after getting her feet wet for a year under the prior owner, renowned San Francisco restaurateur Pat Kuleto.

"My mantra is 'Yes is the answer, what is the question?'" says Grunt. "Whenever I can, my preference is to say yes, since it opens everything up to a better experience with the guests."

This attention to hospitality exudes from every rank of employee, and it even applies to canine guests at pet-friendly Nick's Cove, where they are the benefactors of healthy dog treats baked fresh in the kitchen, dog towels in the rooms and plenty of water bowls scattered around the property.

Every overnight human guest benefits as well. Regardless of which cottage you commandeer (each has a personalized name), all the lavish comforts and amenities one would expect at an upscale property are provided – and with no hidden resort fees. If not for my desire to experience the outdoor lifestyle, there was no reason to leave the room.

The spacious Fly Fisherman's Cottage we occupied was charmingly decorated in shipshape fashion with tasteful hunting lodge touches, including some extra eyes from a stuffed tule elk head on the wall, staring at me as I watched TV. (Luckily it was in the separate living room and not hovering over the bed.) Also included is a deep clawfoot soaking tub resting on a heated marble floor, wood-burning stove, mini-fridge, complimentary beverages and wi-fi (if you really must!). In the morning, delivered right to your door, is a tray of fresh pastries, fruit, coffee, teas and juices that you are more than welcome to enjoy in the privacy of your room or carry up to

the on-site farm and garden known as the Croft.

Set on the hill across Highway One overlooking Tomales Bay, the Croft (from the Scottish practice of crofting, a form of land tenure and small-scale food production) is Grunt's newest pet project. After its first year it is already producing many of the restaurant's leafy greens and herbs.

"Each year I give myself a project, and the rehabilitation of the Croft has definitely been the one project I have been most proud of accomplishing since I've taken over," says Grunt. "We hired a Master Gardener and organic farmer, Ross Barlow, and during the first year, he has cleared out an overgrown, unused two-acre piece of land, fixed the terracing, created paths, constructed a greenhouse, and built a chicken coop that is currently housing 35 egg-laying birds. As a result, we are now harvesting about 75 percent of all the vegetables that wind up on the plates in our dining room."

With the Croft situated just across the highway from the restaurant, Chef Austin Perkins, a native of the West Marin coast, never has to wait very long. With the added bonus of being able to take full advantage of the finest seasonal, sustainable foods sourced from the area's abundant local farms, fresh seafood and Tomales Bay oysters year-round, Perkins serves up as good a farm-to-table menu as I've yet to encounter. His signature crab mac 'n cheese side dish and water buffalo milk gelato for dessert certainly didn't do anything to contain the calorie count.

Whether visiting for the day or splurging on a staycation in a world detached from metropolis mayhem, don't plan on arriving in Marshall to rush around. At Nick's Cove, the world is your oyster!

