

## Marin County: More Than Napa's Opening Act

*Written by Kisanne Fordham · Photography by Demetrius Fordham · August 04, 2015*



Demetrius Fordham  
The Muir Woods National Monument, a coastal redwood forest in Marin County.

**With its towering redwoods, golden hills, and 72-mile coastline, Marin County is home to some of Northern California's most enchanting landscapes. Yet only in recent years has the region evolved from being wine country's opening act into a true travel destination in its own right.**

If you've ever driven up to Napa Valley from San Francisco, chances are you've already been in Marin County—you arrive in Marin before you're even done crossing the Golden Gate Bridge. Farther north, cattle ranches and chaparral-cloaked peaks share the landscape with towering redwood forests; to the east, a sun-drenched, 72-mile coastline is lined with oyster shacks and beach towns. Not long ago, Marin was considered wine country's opening act, but that's all changing: In recent years, the county has established itself as a destination in its own right, with new hotels, bars, and restaurants so alluring, you may get "lost" on the way to Napa and Sonoma.

"People have often passed right by Marin to go to Napa, but Marin has definitely been discovered in the last few years," says Vivien Straus, a local small farm advocate who created the [Marin-Sonoma Cheese Trail Map](#). "There's been a lot of entrepreneurship in the area, great new places to stay, Zagat-rated restaurants."

In the past three years alone, an unprecedented number of new establishments have cropped up across the region: music venues like San Rafael's [Terrapin Crossroads](#), owned by the Grateful Dead's Phil Lesh; the upscale [Molina](#) in Mill Valley, with its wine-paired small plates like halibut crudo and sage-roasted quail; even a Kickstarter-funded bakery in Fairfax, [Taste Kitchen & Table](#), specializing in seasonal, organic fare —think hearty salads and sandwiches made with fresh-baked bread and local veggies. Formerly sleepy cities throughout the county have also blossomed into foodie destinations; you'll find everything from *mofongo* and *chuletas fritas* (at [Sol Food](#) in San Rafael) to some of the finest beignets outside of New Orleans (at [Hummingbird](#), opened in Fairfax by a NOLA chef-restaurateur couple displaced by Hurricane Katrina).

"A new generation of high-skilled chefs set foot in Marin in the past few years, and they set the trend," says Sietse Nabben, general manager of the newly opened [Mansion at Casa Madrona](#) in Sausalito, a modern boutique hotel housed in a restored 1885 mansion. "[Barrel House](#) followed in 2013 with elevated, farm-fresh, seasonal offerings and a great focus on design. [Bar Bocce](#) also opened a few years ago, and has fantastic pizza and a bocce court right on the water. Marin's culinary scene is definitely getting more attention."



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Left: view of the Golden Gate Bridge from Marin Headlands; right: the newly opened Mansion at Casa Madrona.

Marin's southernmost cities like Sausalito and Mill Valley have witnessed the most growth, says Nabben, thanks to visitors seeking an easy escape from the chaos and congestion in the nearby Bay Area. "The city has been forced to modify logistics to accommodate all the visitors coming across the Golden Gate Bridge; for example, bike rental and parking has been set up differently to handle the influx of bikers coming from the bridge or ferry. [Vehicle] parking is also in high demand, and pricing has gone up. It's a sign that Sausalito and Marin at large are finally getting the attention they deserve."

Now, Sausalito and Mill Valley aren't unknowns by any stretch of the imagination. Locals have considered them well toured for years. But to develop a food scene that even they eye with curiosity? That's the barometer of success. The numbers back Nabben's sentiments: A recent report released by the [Marin Convention and Visitors Bureau \(MCVB\)](#) revealed that Marin saw approximately 13 million tourists last year—a 15 percent increase since 2013. "Interest and tourism has definitely grown in Marin County, mostly because it had never been branded as a visitor destination [until recent years]," says Gina Marr, vice president of the MCVB. "The music scene and culinary scene are thriving." The growing interest might also signal a shift away from the commercialization and overdevelopment of Napa Valley, which famously attracts more annual tourists than Disneyland, to experiences that visitors perceive as more authentic and off the beaten path.



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Left: Oysters are ready to be shucked at the Marshall Store; right: the view over Richardson Bay in Sausalito.

Locals, however, reject the notion that Marin is Napa's more "authentic" alternative; on the contrary, they argue Marin exists in a league of its own. "We're not in competition with Napa—we offer a completely different kind of experience and attract a completely different type of visitor," says Straus, whose mother co-founded the [Marin Agricultural Land Trust \(MALT\)](#) in 1980, which continues to compensate local farmers to stay in agriculture. "It's the small community feel, the hidden gems of restaurants, the cheese (more than 100 are made in this region alone), the redwoods, the ocean, the oysters, and the farms."

Ironically, that is Marin's main draw: its focus on nature, agriculture, and conservation above tourism. The majority of its restaurants source exclusively or predominantly local ingredients, and recent tourism initiatives like the cheese trail serve principally to support local farmers and artisans (some of which have been in business since the 1800s). Fearing suburban sprawl and overdevelopment, the county invested early in conservation, and thanks to MALT and the ongoing efforts of environmentalists and activists since the 1950s, most of Marin remains refreshingly rural. Regardless of future tourism growth, Marin's landscape will remain largely unchanged: a patchwork of redwood forests, organic farmland, and golden hills, bordered by unspoiled coastline, and interspersed with small, bustling hubs of culture and gastronomy.

"Marin County is a heavenly place because of our great respect for nature—we were small family farms back then, and we are small family farms now," says Elizabeth Hill, founder of [West Marin Food & Farm Tours](#), a guided tour company based in Point Reyes. "Tourism is not our first priority—the land is."

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