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General Praise

Take me home, country store

By Clark Wolf

Splitting his time between Guerneville and Manhattan, Clark Wolf graces these pages with the occasional diatribe--and love note--of the periodic local.

They're a hybrid *and* they're indigenous. I'm talking about the Northern California variety of all-American wine country general stores--and I love them. They are one of the great pleasures of spending gobs of time in the region. Mind you, I enjoy the retro Euro-chiec of Berkeley's Fourth Street and the Shattuck Avenue *ghettos des gourmet*--the passion, the dedication to history and to aesthetic detail. But up our way, it's more like that kid in high school who just didn't know the effect those long lashes and firm curves had on the general world, so was nice to everybody. You know the one.



General excellence: Carrie Brown's Jimtown Store is remarkable.

We pulled up to the old Jimtown Store (6706 Hwy. 128, Healdsburg; 707.433.1212) one day and switched off the engine of our spiffy red convertible. The car was so totally rental at that point--this was long before we settled in and went all auto-granola with a proper Ford Escape Hybrid. (Again with that word.) It was a gently but clearly acquisitive period in our lives (is there a vaccine yet?), so when we began ambling around inside, anything with a price tag, anything that might go perfectly in our new little 100-year-old cabin in the woods, seemed to twinkle and glow in our direction.

Perched quietly on the sturdy counter was a newly buffed Hobart coffee grinder from some time in the early 20th century, the original decal still sporting the customer-service phone number: Garfield 6738. The price tag was in the low two hundreds, so we snapped out the plastic and scooped up what we were later told was lovingly known as "Big Red." You should have seen what we found Red's sister's going for on eBay.

These general stores are often reeking with family history, a change-of-life (careerwise) labor of love or a rescue mission for someone of means with a love of the community. Jimtown is a couple of those, guided lovingly by the magical Carrie Brown, with her "put-up" treats and all manner of catering and takeout, not to mention a classic, timeless cookbook.

Way down at the bottom of the county in the town of Sonoma, a few blocks off the square, is the recently opened fig pantry (1190 E. Napa St., Sonoma; 707.933.3000), the thoughtful handiwork of another local hero, Sondra Bernstein and her chef John Toulze. This throwback of a new venture is the latest in a series of Bernstein's tasty fig-related ventures.

Way out in our very own rainforest--there was something like a record 108 inches of wet this last soggy winter--is the slightly loopy, odd and endearing Cazadero General Store (6125 Cazadero Hwy., Cazadero; 707.632.5287). Homey, local fresh foods and a rare bottle from the north-of-Jenner Flowers Vineyard or just some Band-Aids and soap--it's mostly there, or you may not really need it after all.

One of our favorite early adventure stories includes a swing out toward Bodega that took us past a sweet old building that had the single word "Store" painted on the side. The New Yorker in me loved the minimalism, the California foodie loved the core simplicity of this homely country sign.

After a quick touchstone visit to the wild coast, we wandered back in the same direction, hoping to get another thrill from the rustic simplicity of that powerfully direct one word when we saw the "Fresh Paint" sign and that the rest of the lettering had been temporarily removed while the front got freshened at what was now clearly the Freestone Country Store (500 Bohemian Hwy., Freestone; 707.874.1417). Silly urbanites.

There are plenty of others--in Geyserville, in Kenwood. There's the wonderful Dry Creek General Store (3495 Dry Creek Road, Healdsburg; 707.433.4171), rescued a few years ago by Gina Gallo and now getting some careful nips and tucks (OK, a new hip, a little transplant) designed to preserve the charm--and the funky, dark bar in the back--while surgically

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removing the stained linoleum. As with many of these stores, this one is the town's true gathering spot for a glass of wine, a tall, juicy sandwich, a little gossip and some potato salad.

It's always with a slight vestigial tingle that I hear that soft, deep rumble--like a prop jet, low over the vineyards--from Big Red, in preparation for some morning brew, fortunate in the connection we have with every sip and nibble.

Clark Wolf is the president of the Clark Wolf Company, specializing in food, restaurant and hospitality consulting.

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