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## restaurants North Bay

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## What's in a Name?

### The North Bay's many pleasures are not limited solely to wine

By Clark Wolf

*Splitting his time between Guerneville and Manhattan, acclaimed consultant Clark Wolf graces these pages with the occasional diatribe from the periodic local.*

A well-intended, self-described "celebrity" chef was attempting to build enthusiasm for his new project in Sebastopol. "We think it's the gateway to wine country," he purred.

What? Huh?

How about the Crossroads of Farm Country? This is, after all, where Luther Burbank did all that experimenting to develop some of the 900 varieties of edible, sniffable goodness he created before showing it all off around his aptly named "show" home and gardens in Santa Rosa. How 'bout Last Stand in Apple Country? This is where we fight to preserve those heirloom Gravensteins. Maybe call it Gateway to Christmas Tree and Redwood Country. Or Salmon Spawning River Region, Land of Flooding Creeks or even Gravel-Pit Central. But to simplify it to yet another vino appellation tells so little of a deep, broad and delicious story.

This is also now a place that sports some world-class and wonderful bakeries, first-rate and fair trade organic coffee roasters, transcendent chocolatiers, major antique malls and way much more.

Don't get me wrong. I love wine and am thrilled by the often world-class and truly transporting vintages regularly coming out of the nooks and crannies from all over the North Bay. But please don't call this just wine country. That term so understates the unique and glorious mix of magic we have here and is getting to be as overused as "homemade," "home-style" or "family-friendly." These days, Lodi is wine country, Alameda is wine country, Livermore Valley is wine country. The third aisle on the left at Safeway is wine country, with AVAs popping out all over like poison oak on a rapidly warming earth.

Don't get me wrong about that chef. I'm fond of him--he really can cook when he wants to--and I appreciate anyone who makes a sincere effort to contribute and participate in this glorious region. His restaurant will get better, perhaps even good, if they all just stick to it.

In fact, that's what a lot of folks in this region have in common: sticking to it. Wine grape growers and the vintners themselves can wait years to get the first, right crop. Olive growers wait longer still. The luminescent Laura Chenel toiled at goat-herding and cheese-making for some 27 years before she was able to put her creamery into some one else's devoted hands and take a few days off. But even so, she's still right next door tending the goats.

Speaking of which, for a lot of folks, the North Bay is very much Dairy Country--great milk, cheese, butter--or, more specifically, Grass Country. From Northern Marin on up to Eureka, this has long been known as the Pastoral Region, which is why we get great California fromage, wonderful, tasty birds (hello, Petaluma!), delicious lamb and grass-fed beef. Even those pesky wild pigs and boars love what grows here. Let's face it, if it weren't for our lovely grasses, flowers, acorns and clover, Michael Pollan's bestselling book *The Omnivore's Dilemma* would have been less of a challenge and life-changing story.

Recently, I was pleased to be part of the celebration of the 31st annual Environmental Achievement Awards in Sebastopol. In a world suddenly going all green, ethical, hybrid and solar on us, they've been at it for over 30 years! Suddenly, they're spitting *with* the wind. That's devotion and history. That's Sonoma County.

In fact, we could easily call this Flower and Fragrance Country. We're well-known for Mr. Burbank's Gerber daisies, but we're also lousy (in a good way) with lavender and roses and so many herbs that we may as well have a couple of villages called Fines Herbes and Potpourri.

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A lot of us think of this as Land Preservation Country. The land trusts of the North Bay (Sonoma, Marin Agricultural, Napa) are among the amazing efforts that have resulted in the supposedly eternal protection of hundreds of thousands of acres of woodlands, marsh, wetlands and all sorts of rural and other natural landscapes. We're blessed with watersheds (like the right-there-in-the-middle-of-it-all Laguna de Santa Rosa), those critical eco-systems we're just beginning to realize we've got to protect (hello, Katrina!), so maybe we could even call this Eco-Education Country.

Then there's what might be called Pergola to Garden Country, because we've got us some doozies. This region has lovely, productive and magical gardens, both personal and public, and for many a unique and critical part of life, from the lovely Food for Thought sustaining patch in Forestville to Blanche Lennie Cruz's crowd-pleasing garden at Zazu restaurant to the jewel of Armstrong Woods--a private treasure chock-a-block with all manner of bursting, fruiting, blooming splendor called Nathan's Garden--to some mainly artistic and otherwise unique Edens like the Wildwood Farm Nursery and Sculpture Garden, Kruse Rhododendron State Reserve, Bouverie Preserve, Garden Valley Ranch and Bamboo Soucery (see Sidebar).

And then there are the witty and engaging winery gardens like the ones at Kendall-Jackson, Ferrari-Carano and Matanzas Creek or out at the Vintner's Inn, where herbs, fruits, flowers and veggies mirror or complement the range of nuanced flavors hoped for from the wines made from the grape varieties planted nearby. Even at Korbel, where the grounds are usually more appealing than the wine, I heard a very, very tony old gal in silks and straw hat proclaim that "the gah-dens ah sue-pahb!"

(Who could forget that we're also Art Country? I recently came across a promotional card with a provocative headline: "There's more to Sonoma County than great food, great wines and great vistas." Apparently, this viewpoint is not mine alone.)

In fact, in a lot of regions where the food is really good (the greater Atlanta area comes to mind), much of the best cooking is done at home. That's so Sonoma County. There was a time where just about the only big-deal restaurants were John Ash, Bistro Ralph and that Girl with her Fig. Now, we've got Cyrus, the Farm House, Zazu, all of Graton (OK, Willowwood and Underwood), Stella's, Dry Creek Kitchen and three more every time you turn around or survive a flood.

So call it Wine Country if you must, but please don't forget the other subtleties and headlines. Don't forget the people and the produce, the joys and the challenges and the magic of a place worthy of a lifetime or two of exploration and serious digestion. Urp!

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

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## Pergola to Garden Country

Select spots that remind there's more to us than wine

**Bamboo Soucery** Over 300 varieties of the stuff. 666 Wagon Road, Sebastopol. 707.823.5866.

**Bouverie Preserve** This Audubon Canyon Ranch adjunct offers guided hikes fall, winter and spring. Six miles north of the town of Sonoma on Highway 12. Visit by appointment only. 707.938.4554.

**Ferrari-Carano Vineyards & Winery** Rhonda Carano took over a year just to plan, let alone plant, the fabled French and Italianate gardens surrounding her family's tasting center. The winery even has a tulip hotline (707.433.5349) for bulb fans to use as spring progresses and the winery's 10,000 tulips begin to break. 8761 Dry Creek Road, Healdsburg. 707.433.6700.

**Food for Thought/Sonoma County AIDS Food Bank** Mark the annual Calabash fundraiser held each autumn down on the calendar, this year scheduled for Sunday, Oct. 7. 6550 Railroad Ave., Forestville. 707.887.1647.

**Garden Valley Ranch Roses!** Roses! Roses! 498 Pepper Road, Petaluma. 707.795.0919.

**Kendall-Jackson Vineyard Estate** In addition to their acclaimed culinary and sensory gardens, K-J holds a hotly anticipated heirloom tomato festival featuring some 170 varieties of the love fruit, this year slated for Sept. 8. Even at \$65 per, this event sells out very quickly, so now is the time to act. 5007 Fulton Road, Santa Rosa. 707.571.8100. Tomato fest tickets, call 800.769.3649.

**Korbel Champagne Cellars** With over a thousand varieties in bloom, Korbel offers weekly Sunday garden tours, April–October. 13250 River Road, Guerneville. 707.824.7000.

**Kruse Rhododendron State Reserve** Lush displays of rhodies. On Highway 1 at Salt Point State Park, road marker 43. 707.847.3221.

**Matanzas Creek Winery** This estate is synonymous with lavender, as some 4,500 plants produce over 2 million fragrant stems a year. Early summer finds the fields surrounding the winery at their most purple glory. 6097 Bennett Valley Road, Santa Rosa. 707.528.6464.

**Wildwood Farm, Nursery and Sculpture Garden** Fabulous gardens and rotating outdoor art exhibits. 10300 Sonoma Hwy. (Highway 12), Kenwood. 707.833.1161.

**Zazu** Wander the gardens while you wait for your table. Zazu hopes to soon provide a full third of all its produce needs from its own plots. 3535 Guerneville Road, Santa Rosa. 707.523.4814.

--Gretchen Giles

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