

Dining Out < By Michael Bauer >



Pat Kuleto's newly revamped Nick's Cove on Tomales Bay in Marshall.

PAINSTAKINGLY RE-CREATED NICK'S COVE WORTH THE WAIT

Driving to Nick's Cove is a winding haul from just about anywhere, but navigating through the redwoods, snaking around and over the jagged hills around Nicasio and along Tomales Bay is like traveling through a time tunnel to an era before the Internet and cell phones. (Perfect irony: You won't be able to get reception, either.)

Nick's, just south of Bodega Bay, north of Marshall — population 50, according to the sign — feels like a time warp, except for the valet parking attendants.

It's easy to fantasize that this plaster and shiplap-sided building is as it was in the 1930s. In fact, it's been painstakingly re-created. The property was purchased in 1999 by restaurateur Pat Kuleto and chef Mark Franz, the duo behind Farallon in San Francisco. It took eight frustrating years of red tape to re-

store and rebuild the restaurant and 12 guest cottages in a style that looks as if the place had never closed.

Kuleto — who has designed nearly 200 restaurants and also owns Jardiniere and Boulevard in San Francisco and Martini House in Napa — vetted the project through governmental agencies and environmentalists who threatened to derail the \$10 million project. He pays tribute to that fight with the populist American seafood menu that, along with oysters, burgers and local seafood, lists “Nick's Cove Red Legged Frog, served with lots of sticky red tape: \$2,000,000.”

Yet for all the cash and nail biting that must have gone into the place, it looks as if it has been simply cleaned up and refurbished. Kuleto's genius shows in his dogged attention to details, including a long mahogany bar fronted with thick ropes, and rustic walls filled with trophy game and fish, many left over from the original restaurant.

But the sleek open kitchen, fronted by counter seating and a large communal table, is 21st century. A large fireplace near the entrance lends coziness. On nicer days, there's also a covered 50-seat patio.

Kuleto design touches are everywhere in the 90-seat restaurant, from commissioned oval paintings that illustrate 200 years of the area's

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history to found objects such as the weathered 7Up sign on the patio, and the boxy red Coke machine and old phone booth outside. Yet, for all the meticulous attention to detail, most people's attention is focused outside the large picture windows that frame the steely vistas of Tomales Bay.

The menu, too, is thoroughly approachable. The selection includes hamburgers, some of the best fish

tacos I've tasted, local seafood and steak. While Franz may be the mastermind, the menu is orchestrated by the husband-and-wife team of Heather Ames and Matt Weinberger. Diners can also get a great cocktail and good bottles of wine, many from Marin.

Franz couldn't get away without offering barbecued oysters (\$13), a specialty of the restaurants in the area. At one time or another I've tried them all, and Nick's are the best. It's a place where oysters taste like oysters, rather than being masked by a heavy sauce. The briny Preston Points are topped with the sauce and warmed for 30 to 45 seconds to release their juices and impart a faint smokiness.

If you like your oysters fried, Nick's versions are coated in cornmeal and served with a pile of dressed arugula and three chunks of balsamic braised bacon.

The raw presentations are equally impressive; generally all five oyster producers in the area are represented on the menu. The shells are arranged on a tray of shaved ice with fresh sprigs of seaweed, cock-



FOR A 360-DEGREE view of the restaurant, visit sfgate.com/food

FOR A STORY on the cottages at Nick's Cove, check our today's Travel section at sfgate.com/travel.

tail forks skewered with wedges of lemon and lime, and two mignonette sauces: one with rice wine vinegar, shallot, cilantro and jalapeno; and a more traditional one.

New England clam chowder (\$9) is distinctive in its simplicity and makes such a statement it should be renamed Tomales Bay clam chowder, with meaty clams that taste as if they were alive only minutes ago, bits of leeks and diced potatoes in a rich, creamlike broth.

There is also an excellent Bodega Bay Dungeness crab cake (\$16), a thick, meaty patty that has a crisp crust from deep-frying and undercurrents of licorice from fennel and herbs. Crab also comes steamed and in a stellar version of Louis (\$17) with butter lettuce, sweet cherry tomatoes and loads of lump-meat crab on top.

Local seafood includes petrale sole, which we had two ways — once topped with crab meat (\$23) encircled by green beans and roasted fingerling potatoes, another time with a warm potato salad with tarragon butter and

frisee (\$22).

Nick's isn't exclusively a seafood house. There's a burger (\$12), and entrees including wild mushroom fettuccine with shaved summer truffles (\$18), an oak wood-grilled pork chop (\$23) with yellow peach chutney and cornbread and dandelion greens and a rib-eye steak (\$32) heaped on top of grilled levain, next to a huge pile of watercress, sliced tomatoes and a pool of Point Reyes blue cheese dressing. As much as I liked the salad, it turned out to be too much of a good thing because it ended up taking over the entire plate.

In fact, while the appetizers were beyond reproach, the main courses, at least on my three visits, relied too heavily on greens to fill out the plate. Arugula dotted with cherry tomatoes threatened to overtake the pristine line-caught halibut (\$22), so fresh I could imagine a fisherman hooking it that morning. The fillet of salmon was equally enticing, plated with creamed corn, chanterelles and a bed of arugula that was unnecessary and wilted underneath the hot fish.

On one visit, we ordered the main course fish tacos (\$13) as an appetizer along with two other starters. Even though I knew there was more to come, I couldn't stop eating the delicate soft taco, filled with chunks of sauteed lingcod, tangy shredded slaw and salsa that tasted as if it was made

with just-picked heirloom tomatoes.

I finished everything at that meal, and then turned to the desserts (all \$7), which are slightly easier to give up than the savory courses. However, the Sebastopol Berry Farm fruits are a great illustration of why we should eat locally; the strawberries, blueberries and blackberries needed nothing more than a Champagne sabayon to make them memorable.

I also warmed to the Straus Creamery vanilla ice cream that topped the warm plum crisp. The ranger cookie ice cream sundae was great for the toasted pecans and crisp cookies in the sundae glass, but disappointing for the small amount of chocolate, which disappeared after two bites. The bittersweet chocolate cake was overdone and the pistachio creme brulee had a gooey, unattractive top and grainy custard.

Service for the most part was really good, although diners do get glimmers of how things could slide if management becomes complacent. On our first visit, for example, the waiter was off on the timing and couldn't quite remember the order or the utensils needed without being reminded. At other times, the staff was able to describe the oysters and the differences between the local wines. Our waiter flawlessly orchestrated the pacing and timing when we mixed and matched our order and shared many items.

Most missteps were on my first visit, so it gives me hope that Nick's won't succumb to the tourist-view virus that compromises most restaurants along the coast. Nick's is a very special place that honors and respects the area, giving visitors a glimmer of an agrarian life that's so near but really so far from the city consciousness. It seems impossible to believe it's still in the 415 area code.

Michael Bauer is The Chronicle's restaurant critic. E-mail him at mbauer@sfgate.com. Read his blog on SFGate.com and visit sfgate.com/food for comprehensive Bay Area restaurant reviews and listings.

The Wine List

Marin wines are in their own place of honor on the well-selected wine list at Nick's Cove, labeled the "Epicenter." There are eight wines with the promise of "lots more Marin County wines coming soon."

The 100 selections cover the world, but concentrate on food-friendly selections that start in the \$30 range. Markups are a bit high.

Aside from the 17 wines by the glass (\$7-\$14.50), there's an impressive list of spirits and a very well-stocked bar. The egalitarian beer list ranges from Anchor Steam (\$5) to Pabst Blue Ribbon (\$4.50).

On two visits, the bartenders were at the top of their game, creating a refreshing Salty Dog (\$8.50), Bait and Switch (\$8), Pineau des Charentes Blanc with a splash of soda and a twist of lemon, and a classic Negroni (\$8.50). However, on another visit, both the Negroni and the Manhattan (\$8.75) were off the mark.

If you bring your own wine, corkage is \$15. — M.B.

NICK'S COVE

23240 Highway 1, Marshall; (415) 663-1033.

Lunch, dinner 11:30 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday, Thursday, Friday; 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Saturday-Sunday. Dinner 5-9 p.m. Tuesday-Wednesday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Free parking lot; free valet on weekends.

Overall: ★★★

Food: ★★★

Service: ★★½

Atmosphere: ★★★

Prices: \$\$\$ Expensive (most entrees \$18-\$24)

Noise rating: 🗣️🗣️🗣️ Talking normally gets difficult (70-75 decibels)

Pluses: Simple but delicious treatment of local seafood. Wine list highlights Marin wines.

Minuses: On one visit, the service and the cocktails were a little sloppy.

★★★★ Extraordinary ★★★ Excellent
★★ Good ★ Fair □ Poor

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The subtly sauced barbequed oysters at Nick's Cove.