

San Francisco

CRITIC'S TABLE

Paradise cost

Pat Kuleto emptied his wallet to restore **Nick's Cove** and preserve the beauty of Tomales Bay.

BY JOSH SENS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ED ANDERSON

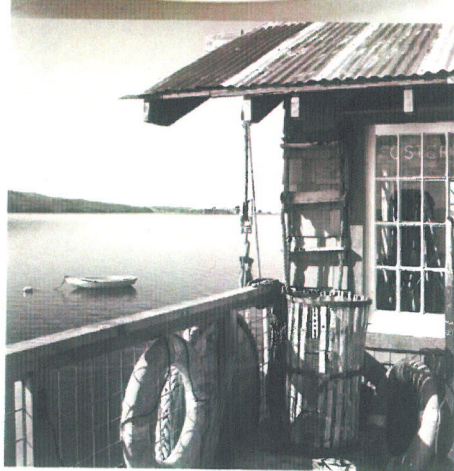
Even by the spendy standards of Marin County, \$2 million for an entrée qualifies as steep. But that's the price tag affixed to red-legged frog "with mounds of sticky red tape," offered on the menu at Nick's Cove—tongue inserted firmly into cheek. Pat Kuleto, the noted restaurant owner and designer (Farallon, Boulevard, Martini House, and others) with a fondness for nod-and-wink decor, added the item as a snarky allusion to the cost and the wrangling he went through to reopen the historic spot, a renovation project that dragged on for eight years. But when you pull up to the restaurant, on a bend in Highway 1 along Tomales Bay, you don't feel sympathy for the long-suffering Kuleto—just gratitude for the red tape-dispensing bureaucrats who keep such a close watch on this spectacular coast.

If there's a more beautiful setting for a meal, it probably exists on another planet, or along a lovely stretch with even tighter restrictions on development. That the original Nick's Cove could never be built today is a good thing; this is a location that deserves obsessive oversight. The restaurant is part of a small settlement that has stood on a now protected patch of land since the 1930s, when the cove (population 50, according to a sign) became terra firma for weary fishermen and, in later decades, a stopping point for motorists. The property then sat dormant from 1999 to 2000, when it was purchased by Kuleto, who set about refurbishing the restaurant and the collection of cottages that straddles it.

Perched on the water and adorned with seafaring memorabilia, Nick's Cove has the air of a nautical time capsule, replete with moody fog blowing off the bay. Squint out the window, and you'll see a salty dog stepping off his trawler. Then rub your eyes and look again—it turns out to be a city slicker springing from his SUV. The space itself also has a split persona. There's a covered, weathered deck that smacks of a New England lobster shack, as well as a more formal dining room with white tablecloths and a gleaming raw bar. Ironic touches throughout, like the glassed-in display of vintage condoms (mercifully still in their wrappers) in the men's room, make it clear you're in the hands of an urban hipster. Yet no amount of nudging ultimately distracts from the stunning surroundings: the views of slate-gray waters, the roadside redwoods



A carved wood sign reflects the spirit of the original Nick's Cove (top), while dishes like line-caught halibut with Yukon potato hash signal its current incarnation (middle). The deck off the side (bottom) remains unchanged.



NICK'S COVE
23240 HWY. 1,
MARSHALL
415.663.1033,
RESERVATIONS
RE.COMME.NDE.D,
WHEELCHAIR
ACCESSIBLE
\$\$\$ ★★

SAN FRANCISCO JANUARY 2008



As a marketer might put it, you're only an hour from Fisherman's Wharf, but a world away.

Oysters harvested from the waters just off the deck (top), wine from a nearby vineyard (middle), and chowder made with local littlenecks (bottom) are all hallmarks of a meal at Nick's Cove.

stretching their phantom limbs into the mist. Nick's Cove is a well-conceived escape for day-trippers. As a marketer might put it, you're only an hour from Fisherman's Wharf, but a world away.

The menu pays homage to far-apart eras. Throw-back recipes, like the lemon sole with capers you once saw in your grandma's scrapbook, share space with more contemporary adaptations, such as Maine scallops, grilled and smoky from mesquite, embedded in a bank of sweet squash risotto, escarole, and caramelized onion gastrique. Shrimp and crab Louie, drenched in a lovely dressing, are classics that taste of an age when not every diner cared if the halibut was line-caught.

It is line-caught (and served with Yukon potato hash and basil pesto) at Nick's Cove, where a seasonal sensibility and simple, local dishes turn out to be the restaurant's greatest strength. Not surprisingly, oysters shine here: kumamotos and miyagis are plucked from the waters just outside the door. Served with lemon and mignonette, each of these plump vessels has a unique consistency, with varied intensities of salt and sweet. Barbecued oysters, a specialty since the Cove's early days, are also delivered adroitly. Their warm, briny bodies, heated for just a short time, are bathed in parsley butter, then freshened with a dash of tangy BBQ sauce.

Other rudimentary dishes, though far from worthy of destination dining, do deserve a turn off Highway 1. Nick's Cove does a soundly prepared burger, with tart cheddar cheese and pickled onions, and a creamy, bacon-studded chowder generously stocked with clams. Dungeness crab cakes, unlike many addled versions of the appetizer, draw their flavor straight from the source. They're rich and moist with fresh, white meat, not dragged down by an overdose of breadcrumbs or transubstantiated into gobs of grease.

Seafood this fresh is often best left unadorned, and Nick's Cove serves up a reminder in the form of another halibut entrée, with toasted farro, cherry tomatoes, and basil-walnut pesto. Though it falls short of elaborate, the dish tries so hard that it winds up tasting muddled. The flavor of the wonderful fish is muted, and the diner is presented with still further proof of the culinary paradox that less is more.

To its credit, though, the restaurant is rigged mostly for straightforward sailing. Service takes a casual, chowder-house tack—so much so that on my first visit, no one came to my table until I called them. The sharp, smart wine list includes a small collection of bright whites, priced reasonably for a mariner who just wants his grog. There's no compelling argument for dessert, unless your belly calls out for a bludgeoningly sweet butterscotch sundae or banana cream pie.

At any rate, this is not a restaurant to linger in after dark. It's a place to see as daylight wanes, mist begins to whisper on the water, and shadows push their fingers through the trees. There by the bay, you can sip champagne, slurp oysters, and toast a welcome act of preservation. And sure, it's also nice that they saved the red-legged frog. ■