

TRAVEL



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San Francisco residents Heather and Craig Sinclair drink in the Tomales Bay scenery while lunching at Nick's Cove in the Marin County town of Marshall.

A sleepy Tomales Bay outpost goes upscale

By Allen Pierleoni
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As a home base for day-tripping excursions, Sacramento is geographically gifted. To paraphrase the Cheshire Cat's conversation with Alice in the Lewis Carroll classic, "You're sure to get somewhere if only you drive long enough."

We recently tested that philosophy once again, this time taking off for the two-hour ride to the coastal estuary of Tomales Bay - which is oyster-farming country - meandering through the idyllic rolling countryside of western Marin County. The two-lane blacktop

wound past old farmhouses and barns, herds of grazing cattle, stands of eucalyptus and pine, and fields of bright-yellow mustard. We spotted wild turkeys, hawks, gulls, geese and egrets. It's a great scenic drive.

The road joined Highway 1, and we headed north toward our main destination of Nick's Cove (23240 Highway 1, Marshall; 415-663-1033; www.nickscove.com). The bayside outpost-turned-showplace was officially opened in 1931 by Slovenian immigrants Nick and Frances Kojich, and changed ownership several times over the decades.

Despite its incarnations, it always has been primarily a restaurant-bar-fish camp with cabins for rent, a funky hangout for locals and a "real find" for tourists who chanced upon it.

That was then - this is now. In 1999, the property was purchased by acclaimed designer-restaurateur-vintner Pat Kuleto and business partner Mark Franz, a longtime Bay Area chef.

They spent the next few years dealing with governmental agencies and "special-interest groups that came out of the woodwork, nearly 50 of them," Kuleto said on the phone Monday. "Finally, we

got the major approvals (for construction), and then I brought in around 40 investors."

Kuleto and company spent more than \$10 million to renovate and/or rebuild the cabins, the restaurant-bar and the 400-foot-long pier. The new Nick's Cove opened last July, and stories soon appeared in such prestige periodicals as *Travel + Leisure*, *Bon Appétit*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *Food & Wine*, *Town & Country* and *Wine Spectator*.

Is the finished product what Kuleto envisioned?

"I wanted to bring it back
► NICK'S COVE, Page M4

Nick's Cove: Locals Nights, events keep place hopping

► FROM PAGE M1

and keep it historically accurate," he said. "The beauty of it is that people from any walk of life – whether they're in a Bentley or on a Harley – can walk in and feel at home. They're disarmed."

Unless you're renting one of the 12 *uniquely themed cabins* (five on the water, seven more on landscaped property across the street), you're not likely to see their insides, but they are spectacular. No surprise that now is the time to book for an overnigher this summer (prices range from \$225 to \$695 per night).

Cabins with class

If Nick's Cove has a theme, it is nautical nostalgia, both inside and outside. Which is fitting, given its history and locale. Further, given Kuleto's expertise and fastidiousness as a designer, the emphasis is on quality and attention to detail. The plentiful decor may be playful, but the underlying message is clear: We went to a lot of trouble and expense to make this look casual. The feel around the edges is quasi-rustic, but the surface has a glossy veneer of class.

Inside the two-bedroom Big Rock cabin, for instance, we admired the wood floors (the floors in all the cabins are heated), leather-upholstered chairs, functional fireplace and wood-burning stove, antique lamps, a handcrafted rocking chair and a copper claw-foot bathtub topped with a rainforest shower head. Artistic touches abound, from an old wicker creel and a toothy sawfish bill propped in a corner, to a ship's wheel and fishing nets decorating the back bedroom. Stone and tile are dominant themes in the two baths.

The nearby Nicolina is an old rail car turned houseboat turned cabin, with skylights, portholes and, like the other bayside cabins, a deck overlooking Tomales Bay. The varnished wood and custom-built bed frame work well with decorations that include seashells, a basket made from an armadillo shell and a bedside lamp that was once a ship's stern light.

Nautical chic

Inside the restaurant are two dining rooms. The casual outdoor-indoor one has wood floors and Adirondack chairs, and seats 60. The more formal indoor space has tile floors and is dominated by a stone fireplace, a comfortable cocktail bar and a marble-topped oyster bar, and seats 80.

Both are jammed with atmospheric



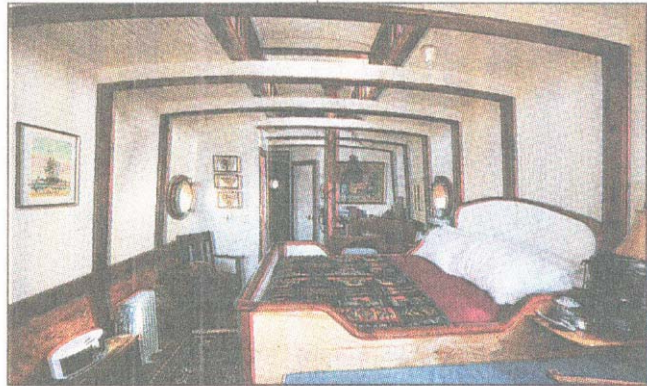
eye candy – nautical bric-a-brac and antiques, shiny abalone shells, cute signage, taxidermic fish, trophy antlers and animal heads – deer, moose, ram, antelope.

Off the restaurant's back deck is a 400-foot rebuilt dock that shoots into the bay; a public boat launch is nearby. The dock has four "fingers" sticking out from it, allowing boats to pull up and tie off, in case somebody gets hungry for lunch or thirsty for a beer.

At dock's end is the Boat Shack, a little wooden house (with yet more nautical paraphernalia) whose use is still being discussed. The shack opens on to an adjoining deck; as a unit, the space could function as a site for receptions and other private parties, as the central meeting room for a corporate retreat, or as a place where lodgers can gather for cocktails and hors d'oeuvres before dinner. Or it might multitask.

The Nick's Cove management team sees the wisdom in keeping things hopping. For instance, Tuesday evenings are Locals Nights (though anyone can attend, of course), with food and drink specials and live music. Special events this summer will include winemakers' and artisan cheesemakers' dinners and perhaps an oyster festival or two. Kuleto even foresees a fly-fishing operation, in which boats would take anglers onto Tomales Bay. "There are a lot of fish out there – striped bass, halibut, sturgeon, salmon, several species of perch," he said. "You'd be amazed."

We couldn't leave without sampling the menu, and walked out feeling satisfied and impressed. We particularly liked the grilled hearts of romaine with



Each of Nick's Cove's five bayside cottages sports a distinguished look. The Nicolina, left, began as an old rail car before it was turned into a houseboat, then a cabin.

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lemon-anchovy vinaigrette, briny clam chowder and succulent pan-roasted sea bass (lunch prices range from \$9 to \$24). The raw oysters from the bay were a given, naturally. Also, the wine list is top-of-the-line.

And while you're in the area ...

Nick's Cove is a great stop, but let's not forget a few other area attractions:

- Head south from Nick's Cove – toward tiny Point Reyes Station – and you'll come to Blue Waters Kayaking. It has two locations – one in Marshall (19225 Highway 1) and one in Inverness (12938 Sir Francis Drake Blvd.). The company offers a variety of kayak rentals and guided tours for paddlers of all skill levels. For reservations at both sites: (415) 669-2600, www.bwkayak.com.

- Farther along is the Tomales Bay Oyster Co. (415-663-1242, www.tomalesbayoysters.com). We stood at an outdoor counter while owner Drew Alden shucked oysters that were harvested out of the bay that morning. We splashed hot sauce and

squeezed lime juice on the sliders and let 'em go. It's surprising how fast two dozen can disappear. Buy a sack of 50 and fire up one of the charcoal-fueled barbecue stands for a messy but memorable experience.

- Follow the signs on Highway 1 to Point Reyes Station, a mecca of regionally produced foods. It's home to one of Northern California's best bakeries, the Bovine (415-663-9420). Drop by the Cowgirl Creamery for outstanding artisan cheeses (415-362-9354; it buys its organic milk from the nearby Straus Family Creamery). Toby's Feed Barn sells an array of unusual organic food products and, yes, feed (415-663-1223).

- Finally, if you visit the Point Reyes Vineyards Winery for a bottle of its outstanding sparkling wine, you'll have all you need for a picnic – bread, cheese, fruit and vino (12700 Highway 1, 415-663-1011). For a picnic site, you're on your own.



Call The Bee's Allen Pierleoni,
(916) 321-1128.



IF YOU GO: NICK'S COVE

Where: Nick's Cove sits on Tomales Bay at 23240 Highway 1, Marshall; (415) 663-1033; www.nicks Cove.com.

One way to get there: Take Interstate 80 toward San Francisco to the Highway 37 exit in Vallejo (the same exit as for the Six Flags Discovery Kingdom theme park). On 37, go past Infineon Raceway to the next traffic light, which is Lakeville Road. Turn right and take it into Petaluma. Turn left on East D Street, before the old train station. Take note of the homes on both sides of this residential street; the classic architecture is amazing. Stay on this road into the countryside, pass the Marin French Cheese Co. and follow the signs to Highway 1. At one point, you will cross a small bridge painted light purple. When the road intersects with Highway 1, turn right. Nick's Cove is a few miles up the road.

– Allen Pierleoni



IN TASTE WEDNESDAY

If your day-trip travels take you to the Tomales Bay Oyster Co., you need to brush up on your oyster-shucking technique. Watch a video of Ed Jayousi, owner of Fins Seafood Market & Grill, shucking oysters at www.sacbee.com/taste. Jayousi shares his tips with The Bee's Gwen Schoen for her column in Wednesday's Taste section.