



Coastal Charmer

*Wine, waves, and world-class cuisine—
Northern California's Mendocino County has it all*

Magical Mendocino County lies just to the north of Napa and Sonoma counties. But while its neighbors reap worldwide renown, it has managed to remain somewhat off the beaten path. With dozens of its own successful vineyards, the large coastal region is in many ways like a wilder, more beautiful cousin to the better known Napa and Sonoma areas.

She wears thousands upon thousands of rolling acres of pinot noir, chardonnay, and zinfandel grapes and is notable for the sparkling wines produced within her borders. Her merits hardly stop there, however; they also include a stunning coastline, redwood forests, and residents keenly interested in slow food, organic farming, and low-impact living. In

addition, Mendocino County is brimming with artists, and her namesake village lures affluent baby boomers seeking a halcyon respite from their lives.

The county has eleven different appellations, or districts with protected names in which its grapes are grown. A quick check of the bottles in your own wine collection might reveal some of them, like Ukiah, Potter, McDowell, Sanel, and Redwood valleys; Mendocino Ridge; Cole Ranch; Dos Rios; and Covelo. Mendocino is classified as a “Region 1” growing area, the coolest climate in which grapes can be commercially grown. Cool morning fog rolls in from the coast but is quickly burned off by the day’s heat in summer. The pairing of cold air and hot sun during growing season allows grapes to mature slowly.

by Libby Boren McMillan

Mendocino County is classified as a “Region 1” growing area, the coolest climate in which grapes can be commercially grown; in addition to its wine, the county is also known for its dramatic natural beauty and top-notch restaurants (opposite).

TOP PHOTO COURTESY OF ERIC FOLTZ; BOTTOM PHOTO BY BRIAN STROMLUND

Mendocino's fertile Anderson Valley appellation, located in the lower half of the county along the Navarro River watershed that leads to the coast, is so well suited to viticulture that today many Napa Valley winemakers are turning to its vineyards for their grapes. Wine enthusiasts visit the many tasting rooms to form their own opinions, choosing among Toulouse Vineyard, Greenwood Ridge Vineyards, Standish, Roederer Estate, Husch Vineyards, Handley Cellars, and many other vintners along scenic Highway 128.

Many Anderson Valley wineries are small, family-run businesses, producing only a few thousand cases per year. Tasting rooms are as varied as the wines themselves, and winemakers offer nice on-site discounts for their products. Wine is only available on-site from some smaller, more popular vineyards and sells out quickly. Thankfully, laws have changed to make shipping more affordable, and many visitors arrange for a case or more to be sent home.

Roederer Estate is one of the nicer stops in the Anderson Valley for those who like bubbles. The charming Rita Goforth, a young microbiologist by trade who now runs the Roederer tasting room when not consulting for area winemakers, offers tastes of several sparkling wines and one delicious pinot noir. Another worthwhile stop is the tiny Scharffenberger Cellars tasting room in Philo, with its world music, fine art, and a regional history lesson courtesy of Eva Johnson, a local since 1943. Anderson Valley's bucolic roads also wind past lush orchards, eucalyptus trees, lavender plants, olive groves, organic farms, fresh fruit stands, and more than a few sheep.

Mendocino's agricultural abundance fuels appetites already whetted by wine tastings, crisp air, and the occasional hike. Try to arrive hungry in Boonville and stop for lunch at the popular Mosswood Market. Sharon Hurley's memorable salads are topped with regional berries, and an olive oil bar replete with empty mason jars allows customized purchases of local Stella Cadente oils, each infused with various herbs or fruits.

A Different Way

It's important to note that with the passage of "Measure H" in 2004, Mendocino County became the first county in the United States to ban cultivation of genetically modified plants and animals. Several vineyards in this health-conscious area are successfully growing organic grapes and find their products well received.

Edward and Deborah Wallo, owners of Yorkville Cellars, the premier organic vineyard in Mendocino County, have consistently surprised doubters with their delicious organic wines. Deborah, a Brit, and her Italian husband have developed quite the business and own one of the prettiest acreages in the Anderson Valley, with towering oak trees shading their tasting room and front porch. Visitors often sit and enjoy a picnic of cheese, local fruit, and Yorkville Cellars wine on the front porch. "To me, the vineyard still holds romance," says Deborah. "You're out of control; the vines lead you. That's where the excitement is."

BOTTOM LEFT PHOTO COURTESY OF GEORGE ARGYROPOULOS; OTHER PHOTOS COURTESY OF ARTHUR KWIAKOSK





Village Voice

The oceanfront village of Mendocino is, without doubt, the region's prime destination for dining or overnight stays. Foodies migrate here to feast on regional produce, fresh seafood, organic delicacies, and, of course, local wines. The evening meal is usually preceded by a nice walk about town. White clapboard cottages are luminous in the crisp late-day light, each contrasting with the colorful gardens beyond their picket fences. Those unused to seeing the oddball echium plant are in for a surprise; its Dr. Seuss-like qualities are sure to titillate.

The setting for more than fifty films, including *East of Eden* and *Summer of '42*, Mendocino perches on a dramatic plateau twenty to thirty feet above the sea. As if a painter had imagined it, Mendocino's coastline is a panoply of color: grassy headlands in gleaming yellows, brilliant blue skies, and sapphire seas. Brisk mornings find many enjoying a ritual walk along the village headland trails, with views down to rocky inlets and crashing waves.

A lucky few hike back to the hearty breakfast awaiting guests of innkeeper Richard Strom at the charming circa-1883 Whitegate Inn. The relaxed travelers assembled in the inn's Victorian dining room compare notes on the previous evening's dinner, favorite wineries and galleries, and what the day holds as each enjoys

artfully prepared vegetable soufflés, fresh baked muffins, and steaming hot coffee. Strom, a New York lawyer who opted for a new career, serves as mentor to those Whitegate couples also pursuing a similar change. He speaks lovingly of his hometown while helpfully divulging the challenges of the innkeeper lifestyle.

The picturesque twenty-five-mile drive northwest from Yorkville to Navarro elates visitors and changes abruptly when the drive deposits them deep in a redwood forest. For another fifteen miles, sunlight barely filters through thick, towering trees that still harbor morning fog on its way to inland vineyards. Once you've burst back into sunlight at the forest's western edge, you've only a short wait until the rugged beauty of the California coastline appears.

Clockwise from above: Roederer Estate specializes in sparkling wines; Deborah Wallo and her husband produce organic wines at Yorkville Cellars; Mendocino Village sits on a plateau above the Pacific Ocean; grapes from Mendocino County are even being used by some Napa Valley winemakers.



ALL PHOTOS, EXCEPT FOR WINE GLASS, BY LIBBY BOREN MCMILLAN





Mendocino would, for many, be a lovely choice of “new place.” Isolated enough to remain small, the town attracts those who are moved by beauty and nature, always a nice start. As on Sanibel and Captiva, the income levels of current residents assure a wealth of seasonal cultural offerings, and, in fact, this northern California village of 2,200 has more than its share of four-star restaurants, a world-class bookstore, numerous fine art galleries, a theater company, outdoor opera, a symphony, and a block-long community art center that offers classes, exhibits, and more.

Legions of painters, sculptors, ceramicists, and craftsmen show their work in Mendocino. A few, like photographer Lisa Kristine, who specializes in images of remote indigenous peoples, have their own storefronts. Artist Kevin

Milligan, who owns Coastside Gallery, is an avocational historian and explains that the town’s many odd buildings—tall and square, but without windows—are water towers that used to have windmills. Architecture buffs will find quaint village homes in Victorian, salt-box, cottage, Queen Anne, Italianate, and Gothic Revival styles.

Spring brings a special treat to those who appreciate or collect hand-crafted furniture. College of the Redwoods, known for its fine woodworking program, presents a May show of works by recent graduates at Mendocino’s Highlight Gallery. “The college is the foundation for all the woodworking that goes on in this town,” says regional artist Clark Renfort, whose hand-crafted lamps are coveted by collectors. “People moved here in the ’70s to make furniture. There was low rent and quiet. And some of the draw was the history of the redwoods.” As a result, the former lumber town of Mendocino boasts a stunning assortment of highly collectible, one-of-a-kind furnishings in its galleries.

July sees the raising of the annual Music Festival tent, which crowns the village highlands. Music lovers picnic outdoors before each show, and regional vintages are, of course, readily poured. Pure Mendocino Celebration happens in August, “the premier organic food and wine adventure in the known world.” Participants can enjoy an organic dinner, organic wine and food tastings, and organic farm tours. September’s annual Winesong tasting and auction kicks off

Visitors can create custom olive oils at Mosswood Market (above); Mendocino County boasts eleven different appellations, or districts with protected names in which grapes are grown (bottom left); the Anderson Valley appellation is situated in the lower half of the county along the Navarro River watershed (bottom right).

If You Go

Accommodations

- **Albion River Inn**, 3790 N. Hwy. 1, Albion, 800-479-7944, www.albionriverinn.com
- **Auberge Mendocino**, 8200 N. Hwy. 1, Little River, 707-937-0088, www.aubergemendocino.com
- **Lawson’s Station**, 13441 S. Hwy. 101, Hopland, 866-744-1977, www.lawsonstation.com
- **Little River Inn Resort & Spa**, 7901 N. Hwy. 1, Little River, 888-466-5683, www.littleriverinn.com
- **Whitegate Inn**, 499 Howard St., Mendocino, 800-531-7282, www.whitegateinn.com

Dining

- **Albion River Inn**, 3790 N. Hwy. 1, Albion, 707-937-1919, www.albionriverinn.com
- **Café Beaujolais**, 961 Ukiah St., Mendocino, 707-937-5614, www.cafebeaujolais.com
- **MacCallum House**, 45020 Albion St., Mendocino, 707-937-0289, www.maccallumhouse.com
- **Mendocino Café**, 10451 Lansing St., Mendocino, 707-937-2422
- **Mosswood Market & Café**, 14111 Hwy. 128, Boonville, 707-895-3635, www.mosswoodmarket.com
- **Shotgun Restaurant**, Lawson’s Station, 13441 S. Hwy. 101, Hopland, 866-744-1977, www.lawsonstation.com

TOP PHOTO BY LIBBY BOREN MCMILLAN; OTHER PHOTOS COURTESY OF S. GREG PANOSIAN





Journey to the Coast

How one gets to Mendocino Village, located in about the middle of the county, is part of the fun. From the San Francisco area, an easy first stop is Hopland, just off Highway 101. Hopland is the gateway to the eastern appellations and the many Italian-owned vineyards concentrated there. Observers will notice the names Giuseppe, Barra, Chiarito, Brutocao, Milano, and Graziano as well as towering Italian cypress trees, an ode to home planted long ago. The presence of grapes has also generated a plethora of Italian restaurants and a rapidly expanding olive oil industry.

Dominating Hopland is the Solar Living Institute by Real Goods (like the catalog), which promotes sustainable living through inspirational environmental education. Its gorgeous grounds are worth an hour or two; many come for workshops and/or shopping.

Hopland is also home to a luxuriously constructed and furnished hotel with a rather nondescript exterior, built by Jim Lawson, a Texas bison rancher. As of this writing, his property, Lawson's Station, was for sale. But when you're ready to rejuvenate after tastings or travel, keep an eye out for this surprisingly spectacular lodging option, located next to the historic Hopland Hotel.

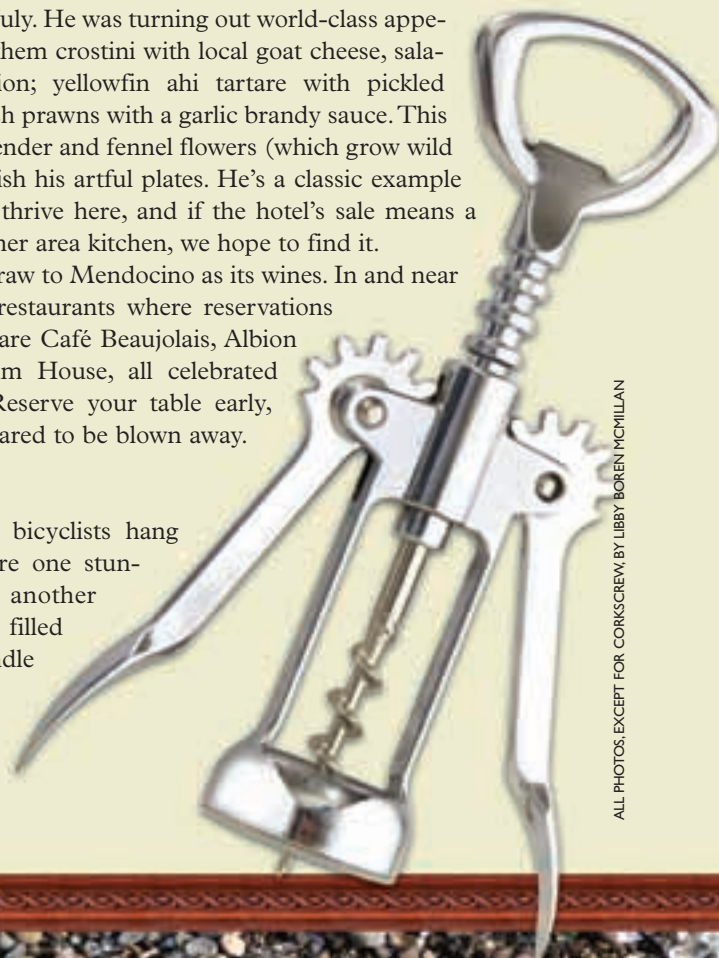
Foodies will be thrilled at the abundance of talented chefs in the county. We came across a young resident talent named Taj McMinn, whose notable culinary skills were behind the relatively unknown but amazing restaurant at Lawson's Station this past July. He was turning out world-class appetizers and entrées, among them crostini with local goat cheese, salami, and balsamic reduction; yellowfin ahi tartare with pickled pineapple salsa; and Spanish prawns with a garlic brandy sauce. This young chef used edible lavender and fennel flowers (which grow wild near the property) to garnish his artful plates. He's a classic example of the inspired chefs who thrive here, and if the hotel's sale means a move for McMinn to another area kitchen, we hope to find it.

Food is nearly as big a draw to Mendocino as its wines. In and near the village are numerous restaurants where reservations are coveted. Among them are Café Beaujolais, Albion River Inn, and MacCallum House, all celebrated eateries of wide repute. Reserve your table early, arrive hungry, and be prepared to be blown away.

Natural Wonders

Paddlers, hikers, and bicyclists hang near the coast, where one stunning beach after another awaits and state parks are filled with hiking trails. Jug Handle

Lush gardens surround the circa-1883 Whitegate Inn in Mendocino Village (above); boaters and hikers enjoy the region's rugged coastline (bottom left); the remains of castoffs in a 1930s ocean-side city dump now wash ashore at Glass Beach in Fort Bragg (bottom right).



ALL PHOTOS, EXCEPT FOR CORKSCREW, BY LIBBY BOREN MCMILLAN





State Reserve, between Fort Bragg and Mendocino, is one of many must-see beaches and well worth the short hike to get down to it.

Fort Bragg, which shares its moniker with a North Carolina military base, is a working man's town only fifteen minutes up the coast from Mendocino. Here you'll discover mesmerizing Glass Beach, named for the sparkling bits of history that decorate it. Like jewels from a shipwreck, tiny pieces of emerald green, brilliant blue, and topaz glass have tumbled themselves smooth, the remains of castoffs in what was, surprisingly, a 1930s ocean-side city dump. The craggy coastline, crashing waves, and a dis-

tant lighthouse enhance the drama, while six-foot lengths of kelp trapped in tidal pools undulate with the ebb and flow of the sea.

The main draw for Fort Bragg visitors is its forty-seven-acre Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens, unique in its oceanfront location. This beloved spot entices people of all ages to meander down curving pathways from one garden to the next, finding inspiration, beauty, or simply peace. Deer roam the portion of the gardens beyond an artistic gate that prevents them from foraging; it's here, nearer the sea, that guests pause to enjoy the still-life fireworks of the dahlia garden.

If you should work up an appetite during your garden stroll, you might want to make the short descending drive to Noyo Harbor, where a cluster of tiny cafés serve fried seafood that's fresh off the boats. Explorers can also arrange for sport-fishing, whale watching, or private boat charters. Find your favorite hideaway or simply park the car and hang out in Mendocino Village. The Mendocino Wine Company will entertain you with both its labels (Tusk'N Red, Zig Zag Zin) and its wines, without ever having to drive another mile. 🍷

Freelance writer Libby Boren McMillan is a frequent contributor to Times of the Islands.

Artist and avocational historian Kevin Milligan owns Coastside Gallery in Mendocino (above); beaches, state parks, and other scenic spots can be found all along the Mendocino County coastline (bottom left); colorful dahlias bloom in one of the gardens at the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens (bottom right).

If You Go

Wineries and Attractions

- **Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens**, 18220 N. Hwy. 1, Fort Bragg, 707-964-4352, www.gardenbythesea.org
- **Roederer Estate**, 4501 Hwy. 128, Philo, 707-895-2288, www.roedererestate.net
- **Scharffenberger Cellars**, 8501 Hwy. 128, Philo, 707-895-2957, www.scharffenbergercellars.com
- **Solar Living Institute**, 13771 S. Hwy. 101, Hopland, 707-744-2017, www.solarliving.org
- **Yorkville Cellars**, 25701 Hwy. 128, Yorkville, 707-894-9177, www.yorkvillecellars.com

Shopping

- **Coastside Gallery**, 45065 Albion St., Mendocino, 707-937-4960, www.coastsidegallery.com
- **Farmhouse Mercantile**, 14111 Hwy. 129, Boonville, 707-895-3996
- **Gallery Bookshop**, Main and Kasten sts., Mendocino, 707-937-2665, www.gallerybooks.com
- **Highlight Gallery**, 45052 Main St., Mendocino, 707-937-3132, www.thehighlightgallery.com
- **Mendocino Market**, 45051 Ukiah St., Mendocino, 707-937-3474
- **Mendocino Wine Company**, 45070 Main St., Mendocino, 707-937-6190, www.mendocinowineco.com
- **Old Gold**, 6 Albion St., Mendocino, 707-937-5005, www.oldgoldjewelry.com
- **Stella Cadente Olive Oil Bar**, Harvest Market, 171 Boatyard Dr., Fort Bragg, 800-305-1288, www.stellacadente.com

PHOTOS BY LIBBY BOREN MCMILLAN

