

**THREE
TASTE TRAILS
IN THE
FOODIE-EST
PLACE
ON EARTH**

BY ANDREW NELSON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
LEAH NASH AND CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT

Southern Sonoma



“Life is about the dinner table.”

Ridgely Evers says this as he and I survey DaVero Farms & Winery, 67 acres of olive groves, orchards, and vineyards in California’s Sonoma County that Evers owns with his wife, Colleen McGlynn. “And you won’t sit at a table like this,” he declares, “anywhere else in America.” Evers clearly is partial to this land of tawny hills and lofty redwoods bordering the more fame-conscious Napa County, yet his words ring true.

Sit at a table in Napa, and chances are it’ll be set with fancy china and polished silver, in the great hall of a mansion. In Sonoma, your dinner may well be served under the stars on a simple wood plank set with mismatched cutlery and candles stuck in old wine bottles. Goats may bleat in the background and chickens may cluck underfoot, but the meal will be magnificent.

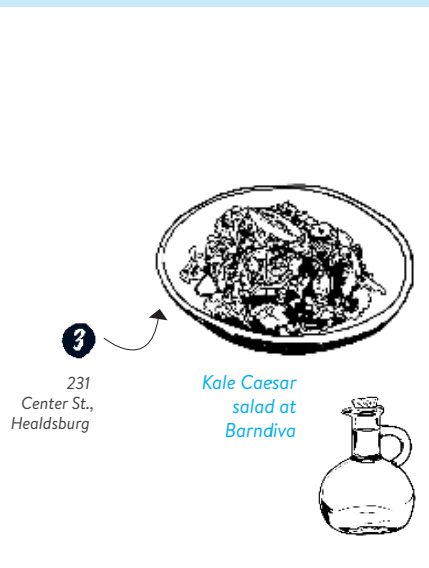
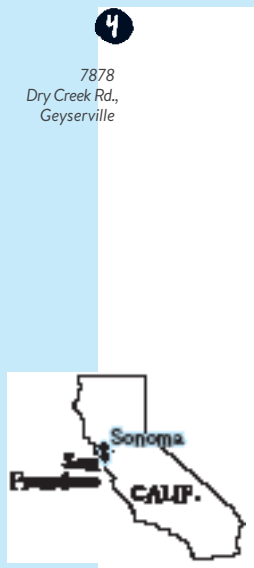
Dusty and down-to-earth, Sonoma reaps its star power from its affable authenticity. Here, an hour north of San Francisco, soil is valued more than silicon. The seduction is subtle, lingering in the flavors of home-cured pork *salumi*, the intense aroma of a goat brie, the blackberry bouquet of an Alexander Valley Pinot Noir.

Napa can have its super chefs; in Sonoma, celebrity comes from being one of the cheesemongers, olive pickers, pig farmers, and grape growers who have turned this county’s 1,768 square miles into what may be America’s best test kitchen.

A hundred years ago, Sonoma resident and *The Call of the Wild* author Jack London gazed out at the landscape around his ranch and wrote, “I am all sun and air and sparkle.” Sonoma will have the same effect on you on the taste trails that follow.



A platter of plenty at Valette restaurant, in Healdsburg. Opening pages: Dining takes an outdoor turn in Sonoma County, here at DaVero Farms & Winery.



231
Center St.,
Healdsburg

Kale Caesar
salad at
Barndiva

7871
River Rd.,
Forestville

5

**ABOUT
80 MILES**
Roughly an hour
and 45 minutes
driving time

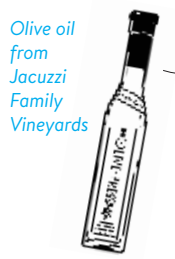
The history of Sonoma's gnarled olive trees intertwines with that of the Golden State. Spanish missionaries brought the first olive cuttings to California in the 1700s, planting them on the grounds of the 21 Franciscan missions that they established along the Camino Real, a route that extended from San Diego to the town of Sonoma. Fast-forward to the 1990s, and the growing sophistication of American palates clamors for this nutritional condiment. Local output of olive oil expands. California now presses 99 percent of the nation's olive oil, with Sonoma County—focused on distilling the most refined grades of extra-virgin oil—one of the state's biggest producers.

This renaissance is due in part to Ridgely Evers, who journeyed to Tuscany to find the perfect olive trees to plant on his Da Vero land. Today Evers and his wife, Colleen McGlynn, cultivate more than 5,000 trees on their spread in the Dry Creek Valley. Add those to the 18,000 Tuscan olive trees the Kendall-Jackson wineries have planted, mostly in the Alexander and Bennett Valleys, and Sonoma is a promising new branch for a fruit with an ancient lineage—as attested here by our olive trail.

1 Begin at **MISSION SAN FRANCISCO SOLANO**, in the town of Sonoma; highlights include a small museum that displays an olive millstone. Northernmost of California's Franciscan religious centers and the only one built during Mexican rule, this mission sits just off Sonoma's town plaza. Don't miss the series of watercolors painted by the early 20th-century artist Chris Jorgensen.

2 Sonoma's oils come in many flavors, lime to jalapeño. Stop by the Olive Press, on the grounds of the **JACUZZI FAMILY VINEYARDS**, south of downtown Sonoma, to tour the plant where olives are crushed and their oil infused with flavors. "It takes a thousand pounds of grapes to make 60 gallons of wine," says Vicki Zancanella, a biologist on staff, "and the same number of olives for 15 gallons of oil."

3 Roll an hour north to Healdsburg for lunch at **BARNDIVA**, an airy locale with a courtyard shaded by mulberry trees. The pea-gravel ground cover evokes a Parisian park. Barndiva serves such fresh-on-the-fork specialties as a kale Caesar salad accompanied by olive crostini and pecorino dressing.



Olive oil
from
Jacuzzi
Family
Vineyards

4

You'll find a tasting room with a view at **TRATTORE FARMS**, 10 miles northwest of Healdsburg: The patio offers an expansive vista of the Dry Creek Valley. Trattore specializes both in wines (try its Zinfandel) and olive oils, for which it uses two giant granite wheels to crush the olives into a mash that is then pressed and refined into oil you can sample.



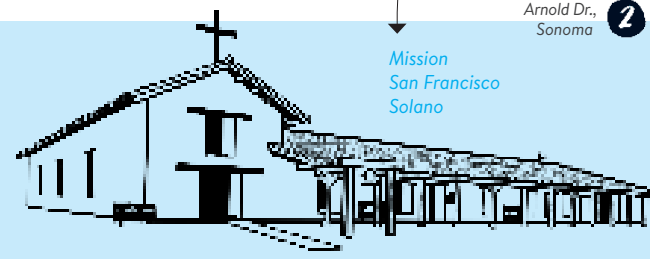
Olive oil
from Trattore
Farms

114
E. Spain St.,
Sonoma

1

24724
Arnold Dr.,
Sonoma

2



Mission
San Francisco
Solano



ILLUSTRATIONS: CLAIRE MCCrackEN; ING MAPS



Guitarist Jordan Colby performs in Healdsburg's town square (top). Elizabeth Pacheco cuddles a kid (above) at her family's Achadinha Cheese Company farm.

CHEESE TRAIL

ABOUT 70 MILES
Roughly an hour and 40 minutes driving time

1 380 Bohemian Hwy., Freestone



Freestone Artisan Cheese Store



Western Sonoma County traditionally has supported many family dairies and creameries, thanks to a temperate climate that nurtures plenty of sweet clover for livestock to graze on. More recently, a number of farmers have diversified by crafting all manner of artisan cheeses, buttery to sharp to crumbly. "It's a multigenerational obsession, with families working together to sustain the old business and the land," says Sheana Davis, a noted cheesemaker in the town of Sonoma who consults for other *fromage* start-ups. Today these family enterprises are found throughout the county, turning milk into wheels of cheddars and blues.

Their secret begins with the relatively small size of their farms; most support 200 to 250 animals. "A car is only as good as its engine—an idea we apply to our goats, sheep, and cows," says Lisa Gottreich, cheesemaker and owner of Sebastopol's Bohemian Creamery. "We have happy animals producing happy milk, which makes great cheese." Indeed. President Obama and the first lady nibbled on Gottreich's Boho Belle cheese while in San Francisco. This Cheese Trail proposes other places that will please your palate.

4 5007 Fulton Rd., Fulton



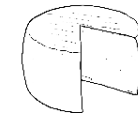
Kendall-Jackson Wine Estate and Gardens



Kenwood Inn and Spa



Wild Flour Bread Bakery



5 10400 Sonoma Hwy., Kenwood

2

Walk five minutes east on the two-lane Bohemian Highway to the **WILD FLOUR BREAD BAKERY**, for a loaf or two of brick-oven sourdough; the crusty breads will come in handy for the cheese you just bought. If you can, get there early enough to also score a loaf of Wild Flour's Gravenstein apple bread, made with an apple variety native to Denmark that now flourishes in the Sonoma area.

1

You'll find plenty of Sonoma cheeses, from dairies with such offbeat names as Bleating Heart and Pugs Leap, on the chalkboard at Omar Mueller's homey **FREESTONE ARTISAN CHEESE STORE**, an ideal place to swap stories with—and get cheese intel from—the genial cheesemonger and his neighbors in the cozy village of Freestone.

750 Chileno Valley Rd., Petaluma

3

3

Become a "curd nerd" by enrolling in a cheese class (offered a few times a year) at the **ACHADINHA CHEESE COMPANY**, run by Donna and Jim Pacheco on their 290-acre Petaluma dairy farm, 25 miles southeast of Freestone. Lessons are hands-on, as pupils plunge elbow deep into fresh curds and whey. Included: a boxed lunch and wine.

4

Before the sun sets, barrel north some 30 miles to the **KENDALL-JACKSON WINE ESTATE AND GARDENS** for elegant wine and cheese pairings. Spice up slices of Boho Belle with a Grand Reserve Chardonnay or balance a Jackson Estate Trace Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon with bites of Two Rock Valley Brie.

5

When you're ready to call it a night, drive 20 miles southeast to the **KENWOOD INN AND SPA**, a villa-style lodge that blends a Mediterranean feel (Italian furnishings and linens) with a north California sensibility. Among the frills: sunning terraces, a pool, and a guests-only restaurant serving local olives and Laura Chenel cheese.



"I am all
sun and
air and
sparkle:"

Green hills meet blue
waters in Sonoma
Coast State Park,
skirted by Highway 1.

A PERFECT PLACE FOR A PICNIC

Guerneville

Hit the Big Bottom Market for ready-to-go bag lunches and meander to nearby Austin Creek State Recreation Area, to lunch among rolling, tree-covered hills.

Bartholomew Park

Tucked between Petaluma and Napa, this private park (part of a winery by the same name) offers hiking trails with views of meadows, shaded woods, and, on clear days, San Francisco Bay.

Dry Creek Valley

Snap up picnic eats—cheeses, salamis—at the tasting room of the Truett Hurst Winery, then head over to its seating area by Dry Creek to eat and sip the winery's Petite Sirah as fish swim by.

1

The smoker starts early and puffs all day long at the **SCHELLVILLE GRILL**, three miles south of Sonoma. Get here for breakfast and your eggs come with homemade smoked paprika sausage. If you're a late riser, sally in for a lunch of pork ribs or the cooked-10-hours barbecue pork and grilled cheese.

2

Motor north to Santa Rosa to snag some sausage, bacon, and jerky at the roadside **SONOMA COUNTY MEAT CO. SHOP**, where you also can try your hand at carving. When he's not grinding grass-fed local beef into hamburger meat, co-owner and head butcher Rian Rinn teaches classes in sausagemaking and bacon curing.

3

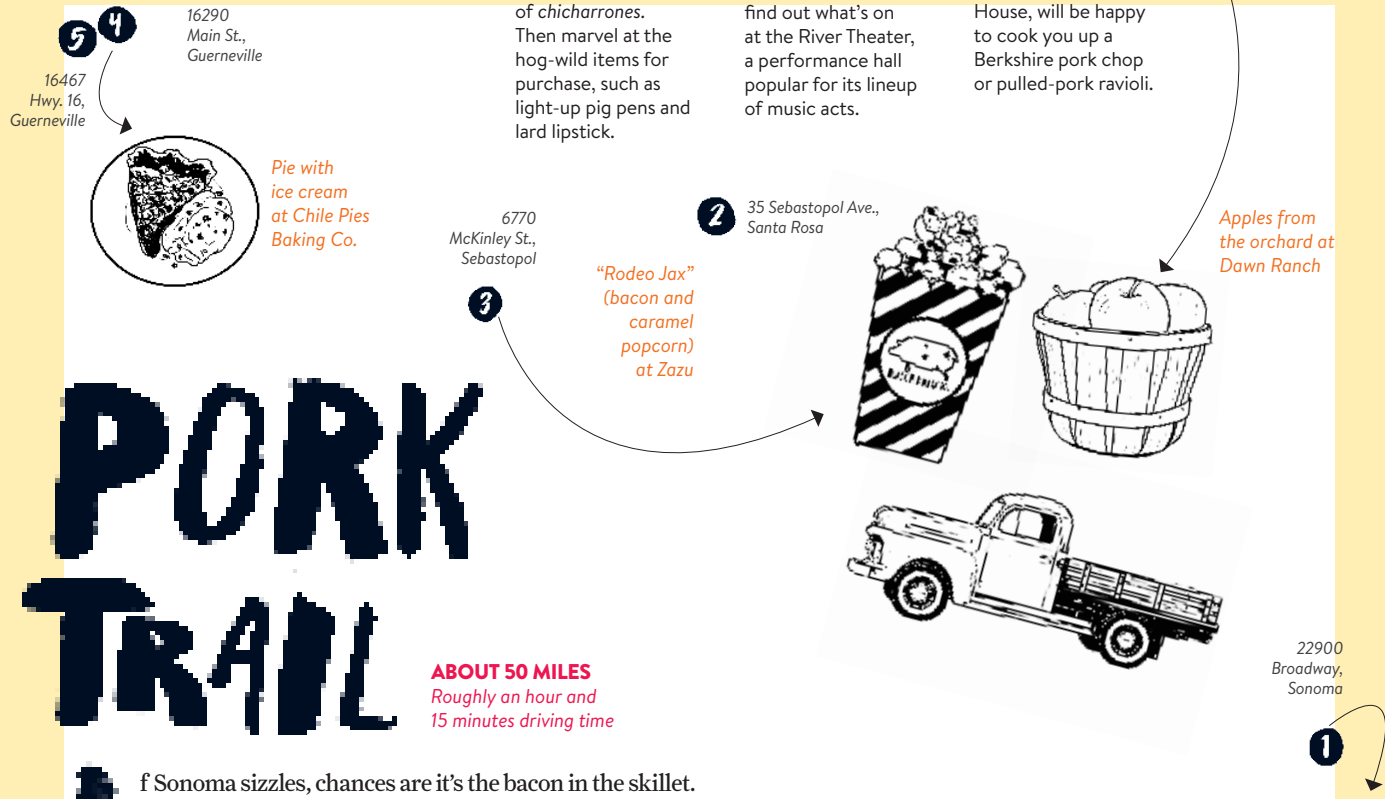
A 15-minute drive west from Santa Rosa brings you to Sebastopol, where you can fortify yourself with a BLT at **ZAZU**. Located in the Barlow, a cluster of food- and arts-centric warehouses, this restaurant and bar is sleek but with the friendly vibe of a fish fry. Try the "rodeo jax"—bacon and caramel popcorn—or the house version of *chicharrones*. Then marvel at the hog-wild items for purchase, such as light-up pig pens and lard lipstick.

4

Top off lunch with berry pie crowned by a scoop of Nimble & Finn's bacon-accented maple bourbon brittle ice cream at **CHILE PIES BAKING CO.**, in Guerneville, just north of Sebastopol. Both Chile Pies and Nimble & Finn's are housed in the historic Guerneville Bank Club building. Afterward, amble down Main Street to find out what's on at the River Theater, a performance hall popular for its lineup of music acts.

5

Hit the hay in another piece of Guerneville history, the **DAWN RANCH**, built in 1905 on the banks of the Russian River. Fifty-three cabins and cottages dot the property's 15 acres, which also support an apple orchard and kitchen garden. If you find you haven't yet had your fill of pork, the ranch's restaurant, Agriculture Public House, will be happy to cook you up a Berkshire pork chop or pulled-pork ravioli.



PORK TRAIL

ABOUT 50 MILES
Roughly an hour and 15 minutes driving time

If Sonoma sizzles, chances are it's the bacon in the skillet. The county is a center for such heritage pig breeds as the Tuscan Cinta Senese and the Mangalitsa, a Hungarian hog with rich meat marbled with fat. Whatever the heirloom breed, these animals lead what Front Porch Farm, a practitioner of sustainable animal husbandry in the Russian River Valley, calls a "fully expressed life." Says Sonoma farmer/butcher John Stewart, who with his wife, Duskie Estes, owns the Black Pig Meat Co.: "Our pigs have only one bad day." They permit their animals to forage in open pastures right up to the time they become menu items at Zazu, Stewart and Estes' convivial Sebastopol restaurant. "There's a family behind every business here," Estes says. "I call it 'Sonoma soul.'"



Schellville Grill

Editor at large **ANDREW NELSON** (@andrewnelson) has traveled the U.S. in search of great tastes. Photographers **LEAH NASH** (@leahnashphoto) and **CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT** (@christopheronstott) contribute to numerous publications.



Free-roaming Front Porch Farm pigs (top) forage for acorns. Dusk descends on Jordan Vineyard (above), producer of wines and a tasty extra-virgin olive oil.