

Coastal Charmer

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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

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

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).

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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.

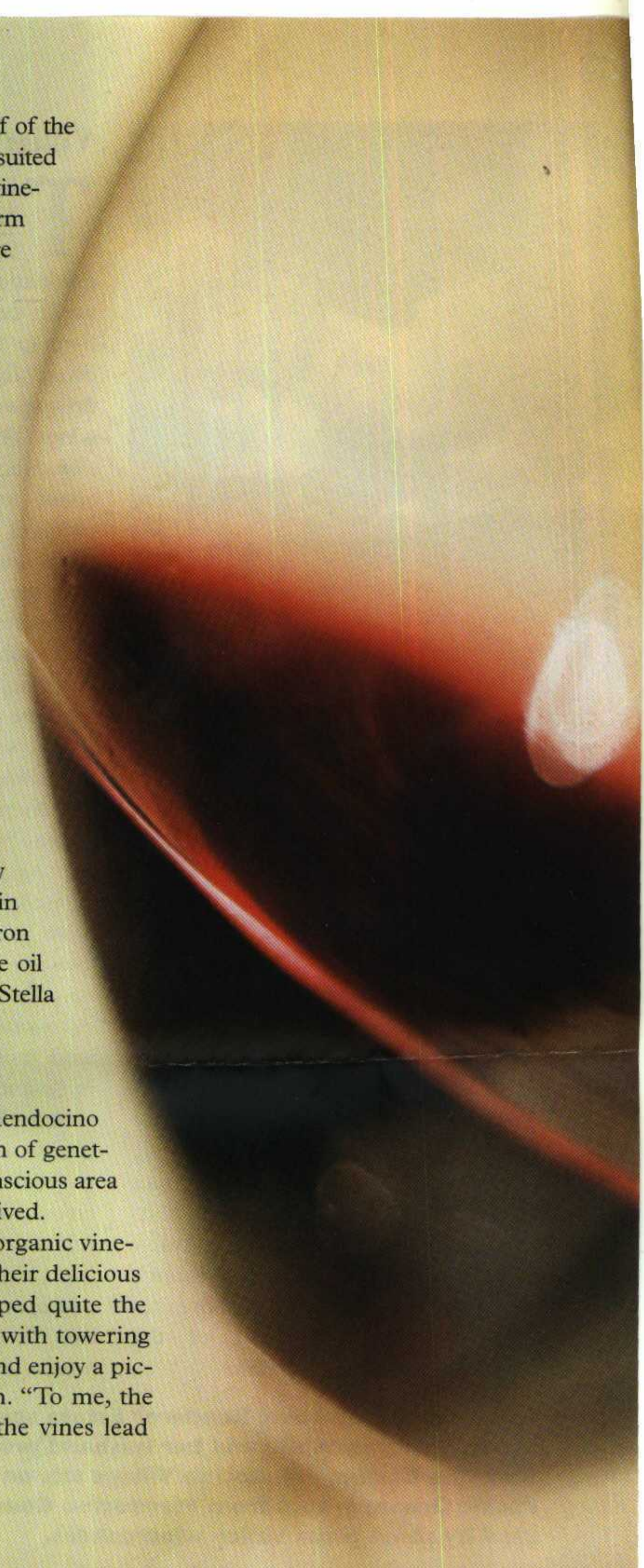
Mendocino's agricultural abundance fuels appetites already whetted by wine tastings, crisp air, and the occasional hike. Try to arrive hungry in Boonville and stop for lunch at the popular Mosswood Market. Sharon Hurley's memorable salads are topped with regional berries, and an olive oil bar replete 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 KWATKOSK



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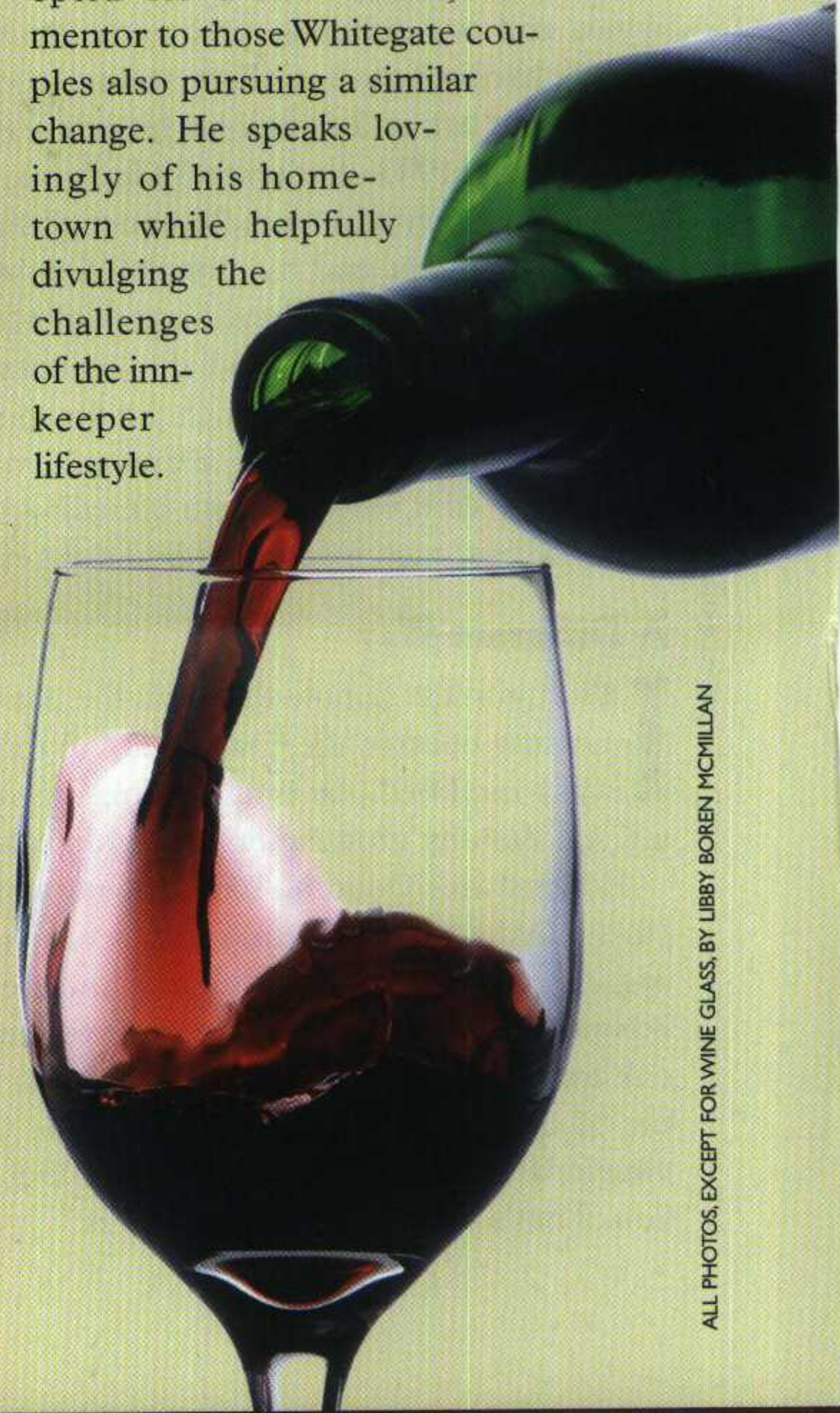
Village Voice

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.



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

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.



