

LOVE AT FIRST BITE

The opening of The Harbor House Inn gives GEMMA PRICE new reason to taste her way through coastal Mendocino, California's most exciting dining destination

MAIN PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

HOME TO LAUDED DINING ESTABLISHMENTS AND BELOVED BY POETS AND ARTISTS, MENDOCINO TOWN IS THE ONLY SPOT ON THE CALIFORNIAN COAST AMONG THE US NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

I HAVEN'T BEEN beachcombing since I was a child, but for Chef Matthew Kammerer, who launched his ambitious first solo project The Harbor House Inn in north California's Mendocino County in May, a trip to the black-pebbled shoreline fronting the property is a daily undertaking.

His pared-back, seasonal tasting menu highlights products unique to this rugged Pacific Coast culinary terroir. Most are sourced from within 24km and a large proportion is grown, foraged and fished from the property's grounds, beach and bay.

As we hop between tide pools, walled in by craggy, lichen-carpeted cliffs and waves crashing through dramatic rock arches, Kammerer gathers seaweed no longer attached to rocks by its holdfast for his house-made bread. It is served as a standalone dish with house-churned kelp-infused butter.

"It's actually one of the most labour-intensive courses," he explains, as we head back up the steep cliffside steps to tour redwood-framed culinary gardens and patches left wild, where he points out chard, allium flowers, sheep's sorrel and bronze fennel. All this is part of the kitchen staff's picks for tonight's meal.

This historic, nine-room inn first opened its doors along California's Scenic Highway 1 in 1916. It re-opened in spring after undergoing eight years of meticulous renovations with Kammerer, 29, overseeing its culinary programme (his work-life partner Amanda





Nemec is the general manager).

After honing his naturalistic cooking style at In De Wulf in Belgium's Dranouter, Nihonryori Ryugin in Tokyo, and most recently as sous chef at three-Michelin-starred Saison in San Francisco, Kammerer wants guests to take in and feel invigorated by the natural vitality of their surroundings.

Dinner, served Thursday through Monday, starts with an aperitif of local cider and expansive ocean views on the restaurant's deck. Once inside the wood-paneled dining room, dishes — morels with grilled pine and California kosho, artichoke

and trout roe — arrive in family-style portions and include relatively few ingredients, served raw or cooked simply over wood, charcoal or steam to highlight the quality of each product.

The menu changes daily, informed by what the kitchen team finds on the property each day and what they are brought by the region's eccentric fishers, farmers and foragers.

"Mike the fisherman", who lives a little further north in Albion, might supply live rock fish from the bay that fronts the property. Trout — who lives on a compound in the middle of the woods — brings oyster, shitake and lion's mane mushrooms he cultivates by hand-separating spores from wild specimens.

Since few people here have a website, e-mail address or even a mobile phone (the town of Elk, population 200, doesn't even have mobile phone reception), Kammerer often doesn't know what his suppliers will bring, or when.

"We just kind of go with it. It's a more honest

style of cooking and in that moment you get a little more creative," he says.

While Mendocino County is overshadowed by neighbouring wine country destinations Napa and Sonoma, known for high-style wineries, boutique hotels and celebrated Michelin-starred eateries, it has a culinary cred of its own. Harbor House is the latest of its long tradition of inns with restaurants that are worth making the trip (San Francisco is three hours to the south).

Driving north of Elk, the Albion River Inn Restaurant is lauded for James Beard Award-winning chef Stephen Smith's coastal cuisine — Bouillabaisse, pan-roasted white fish, grilled filet mignon with fetabrie gratinée — accompanied by a stellar list of Scotch whiskies. Perched on a hillside within the timber-framed Four-Diamond Stanford Inn is Ravens Restaurant, which serves standout vegan

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: BUILT IN 1916, HARBOR HOUSE INN HAS NINE ROOMS AND A TASTING MENU-ONLY RESTAURANT; THE INN IS SURROUNDED BY A REDWOOD FOREST; TRILLIUM CAFE SERVES UP LOCAL CATCH; EN ROUTE TO ALBION RIVER INN RESTAURANT



PHOTOS: HARBOR HOUSE INN; CASSANDRA YOUNG; ALBION RIVER INN RESTAURANT

fare. If you're headed this way on a Thursday or Friday, a prix fixe Shared Table dinner at the adults-only Glendeven Inn is a hot ticket.

Mendocino town proper, beloved by poets and artists and home to saltbox houses and rambling Victorians, is the only spot on the Californian Coast listed among the US National Register of Historic Places. It is a great place to spend the weekend, not least for its charming places to eat, drink and stay.

Cafe Beaujolais, set within an 1893 Victorian farmhouse, is credited with almost single-

handedly establishing Mendocino as a dining destination in the 1960s for its Californian-style French cuisine that showcases local produce. MacCallum House Restaurant also specialises in local produce and house-made breads and pastas while whitewashed wood-walled Trillium Cafe serves sea-to-table preparations of local salmon, rock cod, Dungeness crab and abalone in its fireplace-lit dining room and outdoor deck that overlooks the restaurant's culinary garden and the Big River.

And because the region's abundance — well-stocked offshore fisheries, grass-fed cattle and bison, commitment to organic, sustainable farming practices, grains and grapes — means culinary festivals abound year-round, there's no bad time to visit.

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The culinary calendar kicks off with the Crab, Wine and Beer Festival in January. On the first Saturday of July, Noyo Harbor in Fort Bragg hosts the World's Largest Salmon BBQ. In August, there's the Blackberry Festival in Round Valley, followed by the World Championship Abalone Cook-Off & Festival in October and a 10-day Mushroom, Wine and Beer Festival in November, with fixtures such as mycologist-led foraging expeditions to discover the region's 3,000 fungi.

Of course, if you're a fan of al fresco drinking and dining, you'll want to come during the long sunny days between spring and autumn to enjoy the products of Mendocino's 90 wineries in situ.

On this occasion, I was lucky enough to snag a room at The Harbor House so after a breakfast of shirred eggs, I decide to do just that. Heading inland from Elk along the Philo Greenwood Road, in 30 minutes the majestic redwoods thin to reveal rolling vistas of the lush vineyards of Mendocino's most lauded wine region, the

Anderson Valley, renowned for excellent pinots, chardonnays and high-brow accolades. Goldeneye Winery's 2005 Pinot Noir was served at the Obama inaugural luncheon. Husch, the valley's oldest winery, is another must; the list offered at the tasting room in a converted 1800s pony barn lists 22 wines, of which only six are distributed nationally.

But today I stop at the Roederer Estate, an offshoot of revered French Champagne house Louis Roederer, and esteemed as one — if not the — top producer of bubbles in northern California, to pop a cork and unwind beneath amber awnings on the back patio.

As the saying goes, and any vintner will tell you this, it takes good beer to make great wine and Mendocino does not disappoint.

Before craft brewing took the US by storm, there were already many artisanal breweries here, including the first brewpub to open in California following the Repeal of Prohibition in 1933. The aptly named Hopland Brewery (now Hopland Tap House) quickly became a local landmark along California's scenic Highway 101. Nearby is another first; the Ukiah Brewing Company was the nation's earliest certified organic brewpub.

The Anderson Valley Brewing Company in Boonville, meanwhile, is another popular spot for its



FROM FAR LEFT: HUSCH WINERY; NAVARRO RIVER REDWOODS STATE PARK; THE CREAMERY AT PENNYROYAL FARMS; ITS VINEYARD IS WEDED BY BABYDOLL SHEEP; THE BEWILDERED PIG SOURCES FROM MENDOCINO FARMERS

picnic groves, horse pastures, and disc golf course, as well as a social Tap Room where you can enjoy amber nectars on tap not found anywhere else, and a lesson in speaking Boontling — an elaborate turn-of-the-century jargon patched together from regional Appalachian, Spanish, and the local Pomo Indian vernacular by hop field workers as well as women wanting to exclude “brightlighters” (city folk) from the conversation. Fewer than 100 people still speak it fluently but I've found most locals will give it their “bahlest” (best) go after a couple of pints.

Nearby, the Boonville General Store is a one-stop shop for local produce, grab-and-go salads and sandwiches, and Pennyroyal Farm's award-winning

hand-crafted cheeses, although a visit to the creamery itself is well-worth for a tour of the milking parlour and solar-powered barn to meet animals before enjoying a cheese and wine tasting.

For a substantial dinner, The Table 128 Bistro + Bar at modern roadhouse Boonville Hotel is a good bet for prix fixe family-style American meals featuring dishes that range from green bean salad with toasted walnuts and Pennyroyal blue cheese to pan-seared flat iron steak with roasted potatoes.

Today, fresh from my flight of Roederer sparkling, I opt for chef-owner Janelle Weaver's new eatery The Bewildered Pig, a collaborative effort with Mendocino's farmers, ranchers, foragers, fisherman and artists, and order her “choucroute” braised pork belly.

Fortunately, Mendocino offers plenty of opportunities to work off all those calories. Hiking trails at the Point Arena-Stornetta California Coastal National Monument criss-cross more than 1,600 acres of rugged,

windswept coastline, where spray from waves crashing against the cliff faces leaves salt on your lips and in your hair and you can whale-watch while walking (or picnicking) on the bluffs. The coastline's myriad breaks make it a popular destination for surfers; the 130-year-old Skunk Train is a great way to journey into the redwoods for a walking or mountain biking adventure.

And when dinner time rolls around again — or you need a snack on your way back to the city — you might want to visit Stone and Embers, located within The Madrones in Philo. This is where to savour smoked potato beignets, perfectly spiced meatballs, and the Fume Blanc pie, with fresh mozzarella and salami topped with calabrian chilli, charred onion and smoked parmesan. Yes, it's one of Kammerer's favourite places to grab a bite, too. **E**

theharborhouseinn.com;
mcfarm.org

PHOTOS: HUSCH VINEYARDS; BRENDAN MCGUIGAN; THE BEWILDERED PIG; PENNYROYAL FARMS