

Why we're all eating in Paula Wolfert's world
by Josh Sens

New-style escapes

PRIVATE HIDEAWAYS: The 16 most relaxing places to unpack for a freewheeling weekend

Michael Chabon and the rise of Dad Lit

San Francisco



\$4.99 October 2009
www.sanfrancmag.com

MODERN LUXURY



COTTAGE INDUSTRY:
The arrival of the chic shack as the hotel room of the 21st century satisfies our post-meltdown craving for head-clearing weekends in the country, no airfare required. This prefab cottage, with a backyard patio, is one of 86 at wine country's Carneros Inn. See page 74.

► Just half a mile from the *whoosh* of traffic on the Napa Valley's Silverado Trail, secluded **Calistoga Ranch** is one of the region's new leaders in satisfying today's driving urge—to disappear completely.

Privacy, please

THE FANTASY DESTINATION IN THE POST-MELTDOWN ERA IS SILENT, SOOTHING, AND REMOTE, WHILE THE FANTASY AIRFARE IS ZERO. SO WHERE ARE THE CLANDESTINE ECO-LODGES AND DREAMY COTTAGES THAT WILL SUSTAIN US? **LISA TROTTIER** ASSESSES THE SHIFTING STATE OF THE BAY AREA ESCAPE.

+ THE 16 HIDEOUTS BEST SUITED TO CALM OUR JANGLED MOOD

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN FANTL



AS 2009 HAS SLOWLY drawn its fingernails down the chalkboard of our collective nerves, my Bay Area friends have been coming to me with magazines flipped open to images of exceptionally remote hideouts set deep in the wildest nature.

I'm used to this. I've been a travel editor in this town for a decade now, and people have always brought me pictures, in the same way they'd bring a celebrity shot to their hairdresser. Until last fall, though, they usually showed me splashy, can't-top-this hotels known for a nightclub made of ice, or a half dozen pools patrolled by model-handsome teenagers asking to spritz your sunglasses, or ironic touches of postmillennial decor. Can we talk for a minute about that giant chair in the lobby of the Clift, in downtown San Francisco, circa 2001?

That was before. Now, it seems, the travel fantasy has gone all Robinson Crusoe. What overworked, overstimulated Bay Area professionals count as hot-spots in 2009 are tiny places where they can just go "poof" and disappear to a deck on the edge of nowhere. Open-air eco-lodges south of the border. Five-star tent hotels in the wilds of British Columbia. Decks suspended above the jungle canopy in Costa Rica. All places of intense privacy, luxurious in their own way yet rooted to their spot under a swath of open sky.

Of course, most people can't afford to go far away for such indulgences—they've already canceled a trip to Italy or Bali because committing to the airfare, not to mention the time out of the office, seemed too chancy. So they're looking for a civilized safari (maybe a canister of dark espresso delivered to their tent before a dawn yoga class under the trees; would a paddle across a bay to a table set for two on a lonely beach be too much to ask?) and seem sure that after two booms and a decade of travel-industry splurging, it must be around here somewhere.

This is when I break the news, as the preface to ticking off what the past 5 or 10 years have brought our way, that the fantasy of the perfectly intimate eco-lodge is one itch we just can't scratch within driving distance.

► The cooking classes at the **Philo Apple Farm**, in Anderson Valley, are justly famous. Less well known, though, are the three emblematically airy **designer cottages** out back in the orchard, rentable at \$175 and up per night.

Trends

THE HOTELIERS BEHIND THIS PIONEERING GENERATION OF ESCAPES ARE REWRITING THE **TRAVELER'S HANDBOOK**.

OUTDOOR LIVING SPACE? **IN.**

Patios and **outdoor showers** are the new must-have amenities.

HALLWAYS AND ELEVATORS? **OUT.**

In their place: **landscaped paths** and rooms you step into from your own front porch.

IN-ROOM MESSAGES? **IN.**

Bardessono stashes **message tables in every room**, so when your hour is up, you can stay on the table for as long as you like before slipping into the bath your therapist drew before slipping out. Gaige House sets up tables right next to the mini-outdoor Japanese garden that make its "Zen suites" so, well, Zen.

HOTEL GYM? **OUT.**

Solage and Bardessono have **free bikes**. Cavallo Point, Post Ranch, Calistoga Ranch, and Solage throw in **free yoga**. Who wants to lift weights on vacation, anyway?

PLASTIC? **GONE.**

Instead of bottled water on the nightstand, you'll find a **glass milk jug** (Nick's, Solage) or a **handmade ceramic pitcher** (Calistoga Ranch). In the bathroom, there are no more tiny bottles of shampoo to collect dust in your cupboard at home—everyone has switched to full-size refillables.

Deals

2009 HAS NOT EXACTLY BEEN A BANNER YEAR FOR HOTELS. USE THE **LEVERAGE** YOU HAVE, AND EVERYONE MAY WIN IN THE END.

CALL LAST-MINUTE AND MAKE AN OFFER.

If a hotel manager is staring at a half-empty reservation book, chances are, he'll talk. As Pat Kuleto, who has 12 cottages to fill at Nick's Cove, put it, "We'll rent the room, no matter what. Day of, the rates go down as it gets closer and closer to dusk."

IF YOU'RE NOT SEEING DISCOUNTS, CHECK OUT PACKAGES.

While some hotels have strict no-discounting policies, it's really just semantics. Cavallo Point "doesn't discount," but right now, if you pay for two nights, you can stay for three. That sounds a lot like 33 percent off to me. The lodge will also give you dinner, a night's stay, and breakfast for \$395. Given that dinner at Cavallo is (a) terrific and (b) really expensive, this works out to be a great deal for a one-night splurge. Check a hotel's website,

then call the reservations staff to see what else they can do for you. A glass of wine? A massage? Remember, they just want to get you in the door.

REQUEST AN UPGRADE.

When suites are sitting empty, many hotels will use an upgrade from a basic room as a lure.

SLIP AWAY MIDWEEK.

Easier said than done, I realize. But the business guests who traditionally sustain hotels on weekdays have gone AWOL this year. Everyone's hurting Monday through Thursday, and many places will make it worth your while to call in sick for a couple of days.

WAIT UNTIL NOVEMBER.

In wine country, anyway—October is crush season, the busiest of the year. You won't get squat out of hotels in the area this month, but next month will be a different story.

Well, there is one place. **Post Ranch Inn**, in Big Sur, has been the proto—and the über—eco-lodge since it opened on a cliff above the world's most jaw-dropping coastline 17 years ago, instantly reinventing how luxuriously invisible a hotel could be. The only hitch (and it's a doozy) is the up to \$2,200 per night it'll run you for an oceanview room. Other local enterprises that have tried to charge less for eco-escapes have paid dearly for it. **The Lodge at Sky-londa**, a hiking retreat and spa in the redwoods above Silicon Valley, shuttered in 2003. **Costanoa**, which introduced us to the concept of "glamping" a decade ago, still occupies the same pristine piece of San Mateo coastline, but hotelier Joie de Vivre dumped it in 2003, and it has since changed hands again. These days, you'll recognize it by the KOA campground sign on Highway 1.

That Post Ranch has not only survived but thrived is a testament to how well it pampers the recession-proof crowd while backing off enough to let its edge-of-the-universe location work its potent magic. The lack of other such fairyland eco-escapes, though, just demonstrates how hard Northern California can be on hoteliers crazy enough to try to give us what we want most. Dream of a place with lots of space but relatively few rooms to bring in cash, and set that dream on some of the most beautiful, stratospherically expensive, and hard-to-develop land on Earth, and someone (the dreamer, the banker, the guest) will have to pay for it.

Pat Kuleto's **Nick's Cove**, for example, is one of the triumphs of the past five years. But it also represents a cautionary tale about the difficulties: Kuleto's idea was to fix up a dozen rotting fishing shacks near the oyster joints and placid kayaking routes that draw weekenders to Tomales Bay—something along the lines of **Deetjen's**, in Big Sur: charming, cozy, reasonable...and shabby. But after a nearly decade-long battle to get the place approved, Kuleto could no

◀ Yountville newcomer **Bardessono** woos visitors with an eco-ethic, innovative indoor-outdoor layouts (starting with the open-air lobby), and real modernist splash.

longer afford to play just to us down-to-earth locals; he had to fancy the place up with Persian rugs, plasma-screen TVs, and claw-foot soaking tubs in bathrooms with radiant heating in the floors. In doing so, he followed the understandable tendency for hotels to push everything more upscale, even in down times, so they can command the higher rates that might thread the economic needle and convince rich people to fly in from New York, Dallas, Dubai.

Nick's is a runaway hit, and when I spent a night there, I noticed that my cottage's guestbook overflowed with exclamation points: "A perfect getaway!" "A dream!" "Everything we'd imagined!" But after the scrawled "Only \$1,000 for a weekend—wow," there was a telling kicker: "I could've gone to Mexico." Touché. Yet high-tailing it to Kuleto's over-the-water cabins, all wood paneling and distressed furniture and taxidermy, clearly fits our bust-time mentality much better—even at \$500 a night—than flying away for a several-thousand-dollar weekend at the party palace Wynn, in Vegas, or at Maui's Grand Wailea.

This synchronicity also applies to the new spate of boom-era, \$300- to \$600-a-night cottages, most of them set in wine country. The cottage, in fact, has become a cottage industry that's changed the Bay Area getaway as we know it. Instead of rooms, we now check in to bungalows with little patios, even itty-bitty yards, as if we've picked up and relocated to a simpler life for a couple of days. These resorts were designed for a flusher age. But somehow they predicted what post-meltdown locals would crave even more than spider monkeys swinging from the trees: elbow room.

The trend started in 2003 with **The Carneros Inn**, whose barn-chic, cedar-and-sheet metal cottages populate a wide-open hillside where vineyards roll out in all directions, followed by **Calistoga Ranch**, a hushed enclave of luxurious indoor-outdoor bungalows clustered in an oaky canyon at the other end of the Napa Valley. I loved the weekends I spent with the bedroom doors flung open to private decks at both these places, so I was happy to see that **Solage Calistoga**, which opened on the outskirts of town in 2007, followed suit by scattering sunny yellow cottages across an open field (though, to keep rates a couple hundred dollars lower, each actually holds a side-by-side duplex, and many patios look across the way to

► At **Calistoga Ranch**, each bungalow is a mini-compound, complete with an outdoor living room, where you can relax in front of the fireplace after a dip in the hot tub.

Splurges

MY COST-UNCONSCIOUS GUIDE TO SELECTING THE BEST NEW-STYLE RESORT FOR THE OCCASION.

FOR A TRYST

There's that shower, then there's the other shower, the one outside. Really, the **Carneros Inn** makes it all too easy for you: You'll feel like there's no one on the other side of the wall (there isn't), so you can throw open the back doors to the patio without being seen. FROM \$450. THECARNEROSINN.COM

FOR THE VIEWS

The hiking in Big Sur is legendary, but once you check in to **Post Ranch**, it's unlikely your boots will see any action. From the deck, it's just you, the ocean, and the sky—a landscape made for pushing the restart button in your brain. FROM \$550. POSTRANCHINN.COM

TO DISAPPEAR

Tucked away in a woody canyon you can easily miss as you whiz through the Napa Valley along the Silverado Trail, **Calistoga Ranch** is a strictly guests-only affair. The pool, the tranquil restaurant overlooking the valley, and the spa under the oaks all have a hush that says,

these people are unplugged for the weekend. FROM \$550. CALISTOGARANCH.COM

TO SOAK UP A WEEKEND

Not only is **Solage's** palm tree-lined pool massive enough to merit a day of idle paddling, but a short walk away is the spa, where you can dream the afternoon away under a breezy sky while bubbling buck-naked in the bath-warm mineral pools. FROM \$375. SOLAGECALISTOGA.COM

FOR A ONE-NIGHTER

Closer to downtown San Francisco than some far-flung parts of the city are, Marin's **Cavallo Point** calls your bluff about not being able to get away. The Golden Gate Bridge and skyline views are a dazzling palate cleanser during the walk from a memorable dinner to your suite. Your boss won't even have to know you left town. FROM \$240. CAVALLOPOINT.COM

Inns

BIG ON NATURE AND SHORT ON SCENE, THE REGION'S BEST **SMALL HIDEAWAYS** ARE CHIC COUNTRY HOMES AWAY FROM HOME. BUT DON'T YOU DARE CALL THEM B&BS.

FARMHOUSE INN

This north-of-Sebastopol favorite has just been redone from top to bottom in a sassy style that still feels farm-fresh. The new barn building airy houses four suites and four rooms as cushy as anything you'll find at the resorts. Stay put for dinner—the restaurant is intimate, and the food is delicious. FROM \$295. FARMHOUSEINN.COM

NICK'S COVE

Of the dozen fishing shacks remade into luxurious refuges by Pat Kuleto, the five that hang out over Tomales Bay are the priciest by far—but that doesn't stop people from booking them first every time. FROM \$255. NICKSCOVE.COM

GAIGE HOUSE

Every one of the stylish city-with-a-twist suites at this Glen Ellen retreat comes with a deck or patio. But the suites bordering the creek feel like the real escape. FROM \$200. GAIGE.COM

KENWOOD INN

Visiting this inn at the northern end of Sonoma is like being at a country house in France's Loire Valley. Rooms are spread out across three ivy-covered courtyards, each with its own pool, keeping things quiet and private. FROM \$275. KENWOODINN.COM

VENTANA INN

With 60 rooms, this coastal Big Sur icon may be more mid-size than small—but with 243 acres to roam, it shares the quiet vibe of the other resting spots listed here. A Joie de Vivre takeover and redo in 2008 shook loose the dated look it had been clinging to since the '70s, making it once again fully drive-worthy. FROM \$500. VENTANAINN.COM

someone else's). Yountville's new **Bardessono**, a modern compound of precise lines and right angles that does a 180 away from the town's usual faux-French and faux-Tuscan inns, directs guests over bridges and past trickling streams and fans them out to several courtyards, some with a dozen or so rooms opening onto them. I'm not sure whether wine-country visitors will warm to Bardessono's unadorned aesthetic, but breaking up the hotel into clusters is genius—it guarantees that the space never feels congested and that guests, unless they're asleep, are rarely indoors.

The idea driving each of these neighborhood-style resorts is to eliminate anything that smushes us in with other people, including hallways and elevators. At the Carneros Inn, cottages are grouped around common lawns with fountains, as if at dusk all the guests are going to pour out their front doors, casse-

Nick's is a triumph, but it also represents a cautionary tale: After a long battle to get it approved, Pat Kuleto could no longer afford to play to just us locals.

roles in hand, for a potluck. Parked in front of my door at Solage were two single-speed cruiser bikes, one of which I used to zip from my cottage down the lane to the pool, and, later, from the spa over to dinner. And things get downright Norman Rockwell-esque at my newest go-to splurge, **Cavallo Point Lodge**,

which is tucked into a cove at the Marin end of the Golden Gate Bridge. Once home to naval officers' families, its stately, century-old white houses with red roofs all have a wooden staircase leading up to a porch where a pair of rocking chairs invites you to sit and spin a yarn or two.

The cottage trend has white-trash roots: Both Carneros and Calistoga Ranch got green-lighted by piggybacking on existing zoning for trailer parks. (Little-known but amusing fact: Peel back the cedar shingles at the base of a posh Calistoga Ranch love nest, and you'll find four tires underneath.) Yet the formula is pushed by the same economics behind Kuleto's \$500 shacks. "It's a rate game," explains Philip Kendall, who has run both Calistoga Ranch and the Carneros

◀ Nick's Cove deftly dresses up the simpler-life fantasy. The pricier cottages, perched on stilts right over Tomales Bay, have the ultimate perk of the moment—a nerve-soothing view.

Inn. "These places feel more like suites. The privacy is sexy, and people will pay a higher rate for that"—as they will for an interior that contrasts with the folksy exterior and goes all city bachelor pad on you, with sleek gas fireplaces, flat-screen TVs, Eames chairs, and pillowy beds. The effect is a sexed-up version of home, a place where you can pretend your typical afternoon involves a tub, a glass of wine, and a long soak—rather than working late at the office or spending six hours cleaning out the garage.

Then, for those who don't like resorts or can't afford them more than once a year, there's the final frontier: the simple, quirky, affordable cottage that's not about the pool, the room service, or the bellman. This is the regular escape hatch, private and quiet, your little rental in the country.

You'd think that these would have become as rare as \$1,000 San Francisco apartments, but in the past decade or so, they, too, have kept cropping up. My personal favorite is **Mar Vista Cottages**, which feels better than ever this time around the recession block. I've spent half a dozen weekends hidden away in one of its perfectly retro 1930s cottages, which are scattered across a field on the Mendocino County coast. Thanks to Renata Dorn's long career as a manager in some of San Francisco's finickiest hotels, the cottages are sparkingly clean and full of unexpected touches you won't find anywhere else, like sheets that are clothespinned up in the sun over lavender plants, then hand-pressed before being smoothed across your bed, fragrant and crisp. I loved my cottage's window linens, accented with bits of vintage fabric, so much that I tracked down the Englishwoman who makes them and hired her to design a set for my bedroom at home.

"I always say, thank god we didn't have a lot of money when we opened in 2000," says Dorn's husband, Tom, who helps her run the place, "because it helped us keep everything simple. And that's what really resonates with people."

Of course, a stay at Mar Vista means kissing things like private granite soaking tubs goodbye. There's no room service to call. But more and more people I know are turning to similarly pared-down retreats, where the proprietors essentially hand you the keys and leave you in peace for less than \$300—and sometimes less than \$200—a night. These locals are

► **The retro A-frame at brand-new Far Meadow, located south of Yosemite at 7,500 feet, was joyfully designed by boutique hotelier Veronique Lievre with bright colors, ceiling windows, and a floating stairway leading to a bedroom loft with views of the forest canopy.**

Rentals

WELCOME TO THIS DECADE'S **UNHOTEL**. AT MY FAVORITES, YOU FORGO VALET SERVICE AND A POOL IN FAVOR OF A KEY, ROOM TO ROAM, AND RATES THAT START MOSTLY AT LESS THAN 200 BUCKS.

MAR VISTA COTTAGES

A dozen fishing shacks on a field across Highway 1 from a cliff-backed **Mendocino Coast** beach are fresh, bright, and immaculate. FROM \$155. MAR.VISTAMENDOCINO.COM

THE OTHER PLACE

Four colorful, modern homes with big views from every room divvy up a 500-acre ranch on the crest of the hills above **Anderson Valley**. Up here, you could go the whole weekend without seeing the other guests. FROM \$140. SHEEPDUNG.COM

FAR MEADOW

A pair of clean-lined, mod, and cozy cabins recently opened in the woods just **south of Yosemite**. If you've drooled over magazine stories on Verana, the lovely eco-resort in Yelapa, Mexico, these are by the same people—but with a woodsy Sierra edge. FROM \$185. BEEN-SEEN.COM/BOUTIQUEHOMES

PHILO APPLE FARM COTTAGES

The three artful A-frames set out in the orchard of **Anderson Valley's** rural haven, Philo Apple Farm, have been hard to book since the day the farm began renting them out, nine years ago. But it's a whole new world in 2009. If you've had trouble getting a reservation in the past, this is your chance. FROM \$175. PHILOAPPLEFARM.COM

LONG VALLEY RANCH

Up and over the hill from Anderson Valley, the Other Place people have expanded onto 800 oak-shaded acres **outside Ukiah**. Nobody's going to find you here, that's for sure. FROM \$225. SHEEPDUNG.COM

Openings

HOTELIERS ARE CONTINUING TO BET ON OUR APPETITE FOR WEEKEND ESCAPES, EVEN DURING A RECESSION. WATCH FOR THESE FIVE RIBBON-CUTTINGS.

NOV. 2009

This spring, Bardessono added a sleek, modern note to Yountville's collection of inns, but as of **Hotel Luca's** November 1 opening, the town will be right back to Tuscan romantic, this time courtesy of the people who created the terribly civilized L'Auberge Carmel. HOTELLUCANAPA.COM

DEC. 2009

On December 9, the **Ritz-Carlton Highlands** opens halfway up the slope at Northstar, with a gondola-side location, plus a Traci des Jardins restaurant to make us feel right at home. RITZCARLTON.COM

2010

The people behind Post Ranch and Cavallo Point just got approval to tear down and reinvent the **Sea Ranch Lodge**, a dowdy spot on the edge of a crazy-beautiful cliff-top on the Sonoma coast. Ground breaks next year. PASSPORTRESORTS.COM

2010

Carmel Valley Ranch, which lies on 400 gorgeous acres upslope in Carmel Valley, was just sold under duress for a bargain \$20 million to a scion of the Hyatt family, who is pouring money into turning it into something smashing (not a Hyatt) by the end of 2010. CARMELVALLEYRANCH.COM

TBA

No one likes to drive home after nine courses at the French Laundry. Thomas Keller hears that, so he's gotten the go-ahead to build **Aloysius Inn** in the garden on the three-acre lot across the way from the restaurant. The word on the street? Don't hold your breath—it'll remain a garden for a while.

booking an airy cottage out in the orchard at the famously idyllic **Philo Apple Farm** in Anderson Valley, or, on the crest of the hills above, a bright, cheery home at the **Other Place** with a killer view and an open meadow.

Yes, you'll probably have to make do without a pool or a TV in your room (the latter omission is always a bonus in my book, yet it's a choice the fancier places, with the sole exception of Post Ranch, don't feel they can get away with). But the upside is that you can go the whole weekend without running into another soul at the Other Place. At Mar Vista, you're welcome to pick veggies from the organic garden for dinner and snip flowers from the cutting garden for a centerpiece. Looking out over endless oak-covered hilltops from your tub at **Long Valley**

Ranch's DogTrot cottage, you might think it's a bit of a miracle that places like this still exist.

But people do find such places, even here. My friend Susan returns once a year to the Julia Morgan lodges at **Asilomar**, across the street from the pounding surf in Pacific Grove. My friend Christine recently fell for the in-room sauna and freebies, like a gourmet s'mores bar, at western Sonoma's **Farmhouse Inn**, then turned around a few weeks later and went back for her birthday. Most of my friends have a place they can't mention without breaking into a smile.

When Tom Dorn recently told me that my favorite Mar Vista Cottage, number 6, burned down when a painter left a tarp over the stove, I actually got misty. It made me think that maybe the Bay Area's budget and luxury fantasies have finally converged. For as much as I enjoyed the \$2,200 Post Ranch suite I stayed in last spring, I don't think I'd need a hankie if someone told me it had gone up in smoke. ■

Thanks to the owner's long career managing finicky San Francisco hotels, the cottages are full of unexpected touches, like sheets pinned up in the sun over lavender plants.

LISA TROTTER, SAN FRANCISCO'S FORMER MANAGING EDITOR AND TRAVEL EDITOR, HAS BEEN COVERING CALIFORNIA GETAWAYS FOR A DECADE.

At the perfectly rustic **Mar Vista Cottages**, on the Mendocino Coast, guests are welcome to cut flowers from the garden or pull a couple of warm eggs out from under the hens.