

Feature: Jam-packed

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Marin's culinary scene and tour offerings appeal to foodies near and far



Marin offers an abundance of tours and tastings, for tourists and locals alike.

By Flora Tsapovsky

A place's touristic appeal may not come to mind very often for locals. When you go about your business, visit favorite restaurants and bird-watch from your favorite vistas, it's easy to forget that some people travel very far to do the very same thing. In Marin County especially, where everyday living is inevitably soaked in nature and organic products, we often take for granted the attractiveness of the region. And yet, the abundance of tours, travel packages and wine-tasting programs is a great reminder: Marin is a California culinary destination. Just enter an experience-awarding website like Tripadvisor-owned Viator.com or LivingSocial, and Marin County foodie tours are a hot commodity; Tomales Bay. Hog Island Oyster Company. Table Top Farm in Point Reyes. Cowgirl Creamery. All of Marin's highlights are there, accompanied by images that make the region look utterly irresistible and somewhat other-worldly.

Renée ReBell, the founder of **Gourmet Food & Wine Tours**, knows this well. “I started Gourmet Food & Wine Tours two-and-a-half years ago on the Sonoma Plaza, after taking my first food tour in Chicago the year prior,” she recalls. She was already in the wine industry, working with small-production winemakers and promoting their creations with food created by local chefs for specialty events. Within two years, she began running Sausalito- and Tiburon-bound foodie trips, combining her love for hospitality and local offerings. “All of the destinations are places I would visit when I wanted to have a special dining experience in my 23 years of living in Marin County,” she says.

The tours ReBell specializes in are equal parts wine and food, “except the ambiance comes from top restaurants instead of a winery.” ReBell makes sure to include well-known local ‘stars’ such as Larry Mendel’s Poggio in Sausalito and nostalgic, must-go-to stops like Sam’s in Tiburon. “Besides being a walking tour, we offer interesting historical tidbits along the way that are relevant to the landscapes we walk through,” she says.

What establishments make the cut? “I built the food tours in towns I knew best, and would want to share with my own guests,” ReBell says. “Both share deep California history and the historical societies from both towns have been extraordinarily helpful.” Some favorites, however, are forced to stay out of the itinerary: “Le Garage in Sausalito is a little too far to walk for our current tour, but I love the creativity, energy, scenery and



Gourmet Food & Wine Tours hits the popular spots in Tiburon and Sausalito. Photo courtesy of Gourmet Food & Wine Tours.

of course the French know-how,” she adds. According to ReBell, the recent surge in neighboring tech companies makes for a whole new clientele market, along with the to-be-expected “birthday celebrations, reunions and bachelorette experiences, families, couples, moms and daughters,” as well as monthly Match.com tours for foodie singles. What Twitter employee wouldn’t love “corporate off-sites that provide a climate of gratitude, contentment and fun?”

Capitalizing on Marin’s escapist appeal in the eyes of hardworking city dwellers is **Taste Marin**, a tours-and-weekend-trips service founded by Paul Baidoa, a journalist, cook and Marin County enthusiast. Offering private guided trips around the county’s restaurants and wineries, Taste Marin doesn’t have a set itinerary, but rather tailored individualized experiences. One option is the Foodie Weekend, with transportation and an overnight hotel stay. Another is the Backroads Tasting Tour, which takes guests to Marin French Cheese Co., the Fremont Diner (in Sonoma) and to olive oil tastings and oyster samplings. Each tour is individually crafted according to the group’s needs, and includes lunch, plenty of farms and photogenic cows. “Did you know that some of the San Francisco Bay Area’s trendiest restaurants and notable chefs purchase their produce, meat and seafood from an area just over the Golden Gate Bridge?” smartly asks Baidoa on Taste Marin’s website, winking at the San Franciscans’ foodie snobbery. “There weren’t many tasting tours in Marin at the time,” says Baidoa of launching Taste Marin in 2010. “Now, there are so many more companies offering social dining and touring!”

On the slightly more rugged side of things, there's **West Marin Food & Farm Tours**, established and run by Elizabeth Ann Hill. "Food & Farm Tours was born in the spring of 2012 when I invited my culinary school friends to a weekend retreat at my family's cabin in West Marin," she says. "I took them on a tour to taste the local wines, cheeses and oysters and they decided I should make a business out of it! I sold my car to buy an eight-passenger van and started running tours a few months later."

From the van, participants, who sometimes find Hill through her collaboration with the aforementioned Viator.com, get an inclusive taste and feel of West Marin's diverse offerings. During the highly popular Flavors of West Marin Tour, they visit seven culinary destinations. Highlights include sampling fresh Bovine Bakery pastries while sipping homemade chai, tasting award-winning cheeses at the Cowgirl Creamery, devouring grass-fed burgers at Marin Sun Farms, wandering the fields of Table Top Farm and picking produce,

tasting sparkling honey wine at Heidrun Meadery and getting up close and personal with the kitchen at Hog Island Oyster Company and its specialty, raw and BBQ oysters. "I want to give my guests a good feeling for the diversity of the region," Hill says. "I select food producers that share my values: Quality, community, education and sustainability."

With ages ranging from 25-75, most of the tour guests, according to Hill, are San Francisco and Bay Area residents with a taste and curiosity for Point Reyes and its surroundings. "They love the delicious food, but especially the stories behind it," Hill says. "It gives them an appreciation for all of the hard work that goes into family farming and artisan food production."

Touring and tasting aren't the only options for those who want to enjoy Marin's culinary side. Cooking classes, the crown jewel of recent years' trending rise in experiential and 'hands-on' tourism, are also present. In San Rafael, the commercially appropriately named **Cooking By the Bay** focuses on fresh local ingredients and vibrant Californian dishes, dazzling visitors from the Midwest and the Pacific Northwest. The **Cavallo Point Cooking School**, a picturesque cooking school at Cavallo Point, 1,200 square feet and full of natural sunlight, accepts students from all over the world; Loren and Lisa Poncia of Stemple Creek Ranch teach students there how to prepare a meal around seasonal farmers' market finds, chef Linda Tay Esposito presents Pho techniques, and so on. "The school offers a series of day and evening classes designed for both the beginner and the aficionado alike," explains director Jayne Reichert, who notes that they flock from all over. "The school enjoys an enormous repeat patronage from Bay Area residents with a strong Marin-based focus, while overnight guests from across the country and around the globe represent a large number of attendees," says Reichert. "Marin has distinguished itself with a food culture that truly represents a sense of place," adds chef Justin Everett, who teaches at the school. "The ease of finding a secluded patch of coastline or a heavily wooded trail connects chefs to an abundant array of wild foods—abalone, sea urchins, mushrooms and wild greens are just a few things that, when experienced in their natural habitat, cannot help but inspire. All of these things create a community of individuals who truly value the food culture that has been shaped in Marin."



West Marin Food & Farm Tours combines van adventures, delicious food and a history of the region. Photo courtesy of West Marin Food & Farm Tours.

And over at **Cozymeal**, a Bay Area startup platform for cooking classes and foodie experiences, the Marin County section is abundant with options, from Paella-making in San Rafael to a vegan salads tutorial. Marin's healthy and ultra-Californian appeal makes a guest appearance in the advertising: "The sunny part of the Bay is the birthplace of Californian cuisine and home to the freshest ingredients around," claims the website. "Cozymeal chefs offer crisp vegetables, hot baked goods, and homemade pasta that will tickle your tongue like the sun during a nap outside. Our classes will brighten up your cooking as you take in a sweeping view of the foothills." Sounds quite dreamy, even to a local ear.

Elizabeth Anne Hill is adding a social note to the area's appeal: "Marin County is unique in that the residents have fought so hard to preserve the land and the family farms. There is an intense commitment to community, nature and sustainability that is incredibly inspiring."

Renée ReBell agrees. "Marin is the pinnacle of where farm-to-table and sea-to-table meet," she says, noting the local dairy scene and biodynamic farming as key ingredients in the county's culinary, environmental and innovative edge. "There are families like Straus who have paved the way for positive change in our food, and need to be celebrated. We weave these stories and facts into our table conversation."