



In Good Season

A drive from Sacramento to San Francisco—with stops in Mendocino and Sonoma along the way—reveals how Northern California’s culinary bounty inspires some of America’s greatest chefs.

— by Amber Gibson

ON THE ROAD

Clockwise from above: Roederer Estate; cedar-smoked salmon on the Japanese breakfast menu at SingleThread; preparing a wagyu dish at Marlena.



When the Michelin guide awarded stars across the entire state of California for the first time in 2019, suddenly restaurants beyond the San Francisco Bay Area began receiving more attention, especially among jet-setting international diners. I have spent a lot of time in San Francisco, Napa, and Sonoma over the years for work and leisure, but this time around, on a food-filled road trip with my cousin Nathan, I was keen to explore a couple new destinations too, like Sacramento and Mendocino County.

Sacramento may still fly under the radar as a dining destination, but California’s capital city does enjoy a reputation as the farm-to-fork capital of the United States, thanks to its 5,700 square kilometers of surrounding farmland and a year-round growing season for more than 160 different crops, including most of the country’s sushi rice. Even the local NBA basketball arena sources 90 percent of its food from nearby growers and producers.

While a couple of Sacramento restaurants now have Michelin stars, our best meal there was at Bib Gourmand recipient **Canon** (*canoneast.sac.com*), where unpretentious service in a reimagined warehouse space belied the complexity of the food we ordered. Big booths and large tables were ideal for sharing, and I happily snuck the last bite of garlic-and-sesame-crusting ahi tuna while Nathan was looking the other way. Our server was pleased to see that we had cleaned our plates and proudly told



us that the pomegranate in our tofu-skin and persimmon salad came from his own backyard.

Several natural wine bars have popped up in midtown Sacramento over the past few years, like Nico Wine, Good News Wine, and Ro Sham Beaux. The latter is next to **Ginger Elizabeth** (*gingerelizabeth.com*), the city's best patisserie, where we stopped to pick up bagel croissants filled with herby cream cheese on our way out of town.

From Sacramento, we drove north on the I-5 and then west along State Highway 20 to Mendocino, one of California's most underrated wine regions. A winding but beautiful drive past the blue expanse of Clear Lake brought us to **Goldeneye Winery** (*goldeneyewinery.com*). The Anderson Valley appellation is known for its excellent pinot noirs and sparkling wines, and to celebrate Nathan's birthday, we sipped a bottle of sparkling rosé to pair with the briny pop of Tsar Nicoulai caviar, also locally harvested from farm-raised white sturgeon.

Just up the road was **Roederer Estate** (*roedererestate.com*), where the same family behind seventh-generation Champagne house Louis Roederer in Reims, France, have been producing America's best-value champagne dupe since 1982. On our tour, we glimpsed massive French oak casks and thousands of smaller barrels, precisely stacked like soldiers in formation. The estate felt heavy with tradition, yet the multi-vintage brut costs less than US\$30 and it's been a go-to bottle since my college days.

Our next stop was the historic **Harbor House Inn** (*theharborhouseinn.com*; doubles from US\$525) in Elk, a small coastal village with just a few hundred residents. To get there, we took the slightly longer but much prettier drive through Navarro River Redwoods State Park, where I marveled at the sheer size of the trees. In the chaos and confusion of the modern world, being among these majestic redwoods felt safe.

At the Harbor House, chef Matthew Kammerer

THE COAST IS CLEAR
Above: Chef Matthew Kammerer walking the grounds of the Harbor House Inn, where he champions hyperlocal cuisine inspired by the surrounding forests and coastline of Mendocino County.

MATT MORRIS, OPPOSITE PAGE; TOP: EVA KONEVNIKO; KASSIE BORRESON; MICHAEL BATTEY; GARRETT FROWLAND; NEXT PAGE, FROM LEFT: ANNA WIG; ISTOCK/WILL LI; TARA RUDDUPH



SINGLE-MINDED
Clockwise from right: Kyle and Katina Connaughton of SingleThread; one of the five guest rooms at SingleThread; sea urchin with egg custard and dulse at the Harbor House Inn; SingleThread's home in the heart of Healdsburg.



are sourced within 45 minutes of the restaurant. Cooks pick up fresh ingredients each morning from farmers on their way to work; before dinner service, I spotted a couple of silhouettes harvesting sea vegetables from the cove below.

Some of Kammerer's favorite cooking techniques include smoking proteins and vegetables with local cypress, eucalyptus, and manzanita wood; steaming for delicate flavors; and seasoning with sea salt and housemade misos, shoyus, and vinegars. Seaweed sourdough with cultured seaweed butter is a staple, as is red abalone. Tender black cod gently smoked with bay laurel and served over sweet pops of sprouted rye was perhaps the most memorable dish of the night, though dessert was uniquely delicious as well.

"Seaweed ice cream with coffee-grounds oil?" My cousin looked skeptical as dessert arrived, but his eyes lit up after taking a bite. "This tastes like a lavender latte," he said. I couldn't have described it better myself.

There's an innate sense of place here that is truly extraordinary. The ceramics are all one-of-a-kind pieces by area artists; even our table was made from a naturally felled old-growth redwood from just up the road. The Harbor House is like the acoustic version of your favorite song: stripped down, soulful, and pulsing with raw talent and passion.

Could anything compare to the meal we just had? We were certainly about to find out the following evening when we drove inland to Sonoma County. Healdsburg is the most charming town in Sonoma, with several great luxury hotels. The five rooms above three-Michelin-starred **SingleThread**

has not only built a great restaurant, but he's also captured the pure essence of this rocky Pacific coastline through his cooking.

"Nature is in charge and decides what we cook, and how," he said. The menu changes daily based on product availability and 90 percent of ingredients



(singlethreadfarms.com; doubles from US\$1,200) are the most exclusive of all. Ours felt like a modern wine country pied-à-terre with high ceilings, a heated toilet, and a geometric lantern that I recognized as SingleThread's signature onion-flower logo above the bed.

The complimentary minibar was the best I had ever seen — and I used to spend 340 nights a year in hotels. There was Pliny the Elder beer, freshly made *onigiri* and matcha cake, addictive spiced nuts, yuzu-infused sparkling water, and CBD- and THC-laden gummies from Sonoma-based craft cannabis company Garden Society. No expense was spared in the details, from the fine stemware to the Cuzen machine for grinding fresh matcha tea.

Like the Harbor House, SingleThread is inspired by a Japanese culinary ethos that embraces hyper-seasonality; the restaurant even has its own farm operation, overseen by chef Kyle Connaughton's wife, Katina. This is where the majority of the produce comes from, including the last-of-the-season Jimmy Nardello peppers that were served to us alongside herb-crusting Chinese mountain yam and Sonoma County duck breast.

Unlike the night before, though, much of the seafood and wagyu on SingleThread's menu had been flown in from Japan. Our dinner here was also more orchestrated, from the artfully arranged *sakizuke* appetizers to the servers' sharply pressed suits. This meal was a symphony, with every instrument in sync.

After two consecutive nights of incredible tasting menus, we weren't the least bit hungry upon



waking up the next morning. Yet I urged my cousin to join me for a multicourse Japanese breakfast. When would we ever again have one of the best kitchen teams in the world preparing us such a repast? The parade of plates delivered to our room — yogurt parfait, tamago, pickles, miso-marinated king salmon — lived up to expectations, and I devoured crunchy cauliflower toast in a gleeful frenzy, sprinkling my bathrobe with crumbs and sesame seeds.

Happily satiated, we rolled both ourselves and our suitcases out to the car for the leisurely drive south to the Golden Gate Bridge and into San Francisco. Our home for the night was the new **1 Hotel San Francisco** (1hotels.com; doubles from US\$320), which I selected for its prime location across the street from the Ferry Building, my favorite daytime foodie hangout for everything from fresh truffles, oysters, ice cream, and crepes to Gott's Roadside for an old-fashioned American hamburger.

I skipped my usual burger and milkshake, though, in anticipation of one final great meal at **Marlena** (marlenarestaurant.com), where the city's most affordable tasting menu costs just US\$75 for four courses. The cozy neighborhood restaurant is run by husband-and-wife team David and Serena Chow Fisher, whose commitment to keeping fine dining approachable is especially commendable in a city known for its high cost of living. Marlena won a Michelin star just a year after opening in 2020.

As I bit into a perfectly pillowy agnolotto sprinkled with parmesan, Nathan and I smiled at each other across the table. Every one of our meals this week had been exquisite, and while I could rattle off a list of favorite dishes, what made the trip truly priceless was experiencing each moment with my cousin, a rare young man in his mid-twenties with as keen a palate as I. I gifted him a pottery bowl from SingleThread's farm shop for his new apartment in San Jose, and I look forward to eating a home-cooked meal from that bowl the next time I visit him as we reminisce about our epic road trip. 🍷

CRAVING CALIFORNIA

From far left: Black garlic-and-sesame-crusted ahi tuna with chimichurri and fried pickled ginger at Canon in East Sacramento; driving among towering redwoods; chefs David and Serena Chow Fisher at their San Francisco restaurant Marlena.

