

## **West Sonoma County day trip** **Great views and good food dot this Northern California landscape**

by Amy Wolf

**In summer:** Outsmart August's thick fog by stopping your car just short of the coast.

**Game plan:** While the crowds head to the beaches of Bodega Bay, you'll get the last laugh with green rolling hills and quaint main streets.

**Destination?** Valley Ford, Freestone, and Occidental — three tiny towns in a tight cluster near State 1.

**What's changed:** At last, there's more than just pretty scenery out here.

**Pick up inspiration for your next remodel:** At **West County Design** (14390 State 1, Valley Ford; 707/876-1963), where local artists show handcrafted wooden furniture and smooth-as-marble concrete counters.

**If you can't resist the shore:** Head to sleepy Dillon Beach (*\$7 per vehicle; end of Dillon Beach Rd.*), off Valley Ford Franklin School Road, a roller coaster of a route that passes by giant boulders and fertile farmland.

### **Twist up a scenic backroad**

**Coleman Valley Road** starts innocuously, branching off the Bohemian Highway in Occidental and climbing through a forested landscape. But bear with it, and—bam—sudden vistas of meadows and fog-shrouded ocean stretch into eternity. The drive to the coast is about 10 miles and takes about 45 minutes, but you'll reach a pullout with views after just 5 miles.

### **Good neighbors**

Those in the know drive all the way to Freestone just for the breads at Wild Flour Bread (707/874-2938). The payoff for the wait in line is the Eden-like garden, where sunflowers rise above rows of raspberries you're welcome to pick. Two doors down, Freestone Vineyards (*\$10 tasting; 707/874-1010*) makes a perfect follow-up. Sit down for a relaxed tasting in the farmhouse-style winery or grab a bottle of Fogdog Chard or Pinot to take home.

### **Snag a souvenir**

Betcha no one you know has a key chain like these, made of old traffic signs. Get them and more at **Renga Arts** (3605 Main St., Occidental; 707/874-9407), where funky, functional art and jewelry made of salvaged and recycled materials are sold in a cottagey store.

### **Paella by the foot**

If you can slip away on a Friday, check out the Occidental Bohemian Farmers Market to see what's being grown in these hills. The centerpiece? A scoop of **Gerard's Paella** (*\$10*), cooked on the spot in a 5-foot-wide pan. *4 p.m. to dusk Fri.*

### **Gourmet on the go**

Valley Ford's historic Dairyman's Bank now doles out crayfish and corn instead of cash. Stop by the new **Sonoma Coast Fish Bank and Picnic** (*14435 State 1; 707/876-3474*) for a basket of barbecued oysters and lemonade served in jars.

### **Make it a weekend**

Energetic owners have given the 1864 roadside Valley Ford Hotel (*from \$165, including breakfast; 2-night minimum; 707/876-1983*) a major makeover. Now the bar at the hotel's restaurant, **Rocker Oysterfeller's Kitchen & Saloon** (*\$\$*), is the place to hang out on weekend nights, and the rooms upstairs are a rare combination of country charm and salvage style.