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The other side of Long Island

Forget the Hamptons. Charming villages and small wineries on the North Fork are capturing tourists' hearts

By Abigail Tucker

Sun Reporter

Originally published August 6, 2006

Where there is an abundance of good wine, the gourmets are not far behind. These are tourists who want more than a plate of the local steamers -- or at least, tourists who want to enjoy those steamers with a delicate salad of heirloom tomatoes in a place with decent ambience.

Luckily, the North Fork -- as its name implies -- boasts some mighty fine grub. The wine trails wind past several restaurants of note, where foodies can fortify themselves with a simple lunch or a five-course meal.

For the former, there's the homey Jamesport Country Kitchen, just up the road from Paumanok. The lunch menu includes chicken nicoise with snap peas, black olives and fresh basil dressing (\$9), and the house specialty, salmon cakes with jalapeno tartar sauce (\$9). The decor is plain but cozy, and the wait staff is affable and apparently used to dealing with the occasional wine-warmed customer.

For more substantial fare, there's the much-nicer-than-it-sounds Seafood Barge in Southold. Far superior to touristy fish restaurants around the Greenport ferry, it offers -- along with pretty water views -- a lobster roll with grilled brioche and sun-dried tomato butter (\$20), as well as more eccentric entries such as the

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grilled shrimp, which comes with mushroom risotto and--the zinger -- a truffler-fried egg (\$27).

Even fancier spots are opening on the North Fork, including Greenport's the Fifth Season -- which, truth be told, is just entering its second summer season -- and the Frisky Oyster, with a racy menu that doesn't actually have much to do with shellfish.

Those who have drained their wallets at the wineries need not despair. Locals still frequent the Coronet, a diner that's been in Greenport since 1949 and still serves grilled cheese (\$4.95) and other sandwiches for a relatively reasonable price.

With its beat-up window booths and counter stools, the place might not have looked much different in the 1950s. And even when -- as you are eating a breakfast bowl of homemade oatmeal (\$3.50) -- you overhear a waitress rehashing a recent Nicole Kidman sighting downtown, the Hamptons feel distant indeed.

The towns

The North Fork consists of fewer than a dozen tiny villages, most of which are little more than an ice cream parlor and a post office. Greenport is the communal heart, with a population of about 2,000. It is farther out than most of the wineries, but its business district is the biggest, most likely because it's the home of the Shelter Island Ferry-- the gateway to the Hamptons.

Each summer it seems like more and more well-heeled yuppies clatter down the gangplank, and there's a tacit awareness in Greenport that the North Fork could become just another soulless resort. A big poster in a bookstore window proclaimed: The End of the Hamptons -- an ominous neon advertisement for a new book about the ruin of "America's paradise."

Indeed, there were little signs that the North Fork might be a Hamptons substitute--the evolving inventory at Preston's Marine Supplies, for example. A ship's chandlery that dates to the late 1800s, Preston's used to outfit the community's whaling ships. A section of its floor space is still dedicated to teak oil and other nautical nuts and bolts (for the best stuff, check out the "Bargain Bilge: All Sales Final" section) but much of the store is also crowded with cutesy sailing attire and fake-looking scrimshaw.

Up and down the main streets of town there are other bellwethers. A gelato bar, a ritzy-looking cheese shop. A chi-chi pet store with an emphasis on rhinestones.

These changes have an upside. Take the Greenporter, which used to be, by all accounts, a rather scruffy 1950s-era motor lodge, and is now a retro-chic hotel and spa. The guest rooms are done in mint, cucumber and yogurt tones, so that even crawling into bed feels like a spa treatment. For the real thing, head downstairs; the lemongrass and ginger friction massage is pricey (\$100 for 55 minutes) but sounds rather exquisite.

Also, many priced-out Hamptons artists have fled north, and so art and jewelry are plentiful in Greenport. The Velvet Elvis on Front Street, for instance, offers beautiful handmade jewelry, including adorable summery resin earrings for \$15.

And despite all the French headings that have been cropping up on local menus lately, most parts of Greenport, and the North Fork in general, remain unaffected. The dress shops don't cater to the razor silhouette of the Hamptons' trophy; the ample middle-class woman is still queen here, and store windows tempt her with artfully draped scarves.

Perhaps the surest indicator, though, that the North Fork's bucolic traditions are safe is the lack of nightlife in



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Greenport or any neighboring town. Evening programming at the Greenport library is a major social event.

Sure, there's a crowd of old salts at the counter of the Whisky Wind, and some newcomers sip -- horror of horrors -- Grey Goose martinis at the bars of the new restaurants, but mostly the already sleepy villages conk out entirely after 7 p.m.

Which leaves visitors little choice but to grab that nowchilled bottle of Paumanok riesling, some cheese from the cheese shop, and toast the silent North Fork night.

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IF LONG ISLAND, N.Y.'S SOUTH Fork is a Grey Goose martini downed on the dance floor, the North Fork is a chilled glass of chardonnay savored on the veranda. The south is Bridgehampton's Mercedes-Benz Polo Challenge; the north is the old-fashioned merry-go-round on the Greenport harbor front. Go south to shop Bulgari- and Prada-stocked boutiques; head north for pansy flats or fresh asparagus and farmers' eggs.

The culture of Long Island's far end splits with the sandy land itself, into two distinct parts. The southern portion -- also known as the Hamptons -- is a season-long party, an international destination far removed from its potato farming roots. Sun-burnished resort towns that revolve around sexy nightclubs, super-exclusive golfing greens and beaches with Splenda-fine sand -- who hasn't dreamed about the Hamptons, or at least heard the zillion references on Sex and the City reruns?

But it's the lesser-known North Fork that's been getting second looks lately. Its sleepy vistas and gustatory charms are drawing summer tourists, and prospective vacation-home owners, from its world-famous neighbor. And why not? Houses that would be called cramped on the other side of the bay are cozy on the North Fork, and it's hard to miss the battering Atlantic Ocean while frolicking in the gentler surf of Long Island Sound.

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Even longtime Hamptonites are ferrying themselves over to tour the up-and-coming vineyards that supply many of the artisanal wines served at their superstar restaurants. As a result, North Fork house prices are rising, spas are opening and traffic is slowing to a crawl on summer weekends.

It may be best to see this beautiful spot now, lest it become the Hamptons' citified twin.

So take the Long Island Expressway -- or sail, if you like -- past the Pine Barrens, past the glut of outlets at Riverhead, to a series of quaint villages strung out on a thin spit of land. And bring an appetite.

The vineyards

Wine is the fuel powering the revival of the North Fork villages, which used to scrape by on farming and fishing profits. The first vineyard opened in 1973. By 1995 there were 17, and now there are roughly twice that number -- so many that the chauffeured tasting room tours become a very good idea indeed.

But only one winery, Pindar, is large enough for national distribution. Some vineyards produce fewer than 10,000 cases a year and supply local restaurants almost exclusively; the only way to try one of their wines is to travel down one of the two thin, winding highways that extend to the tip of the island. Either is a beautiful drive, shady and green.

One of the first stops along the way is the 77-acre Paumanok Vineyards, which makes a lovely semi-dry riesling. Paumanok is a classic mom-and-pop operation; the owner's three sons sometimes deliver cases to clients themselves. On a spring afternoon founder Charles Massoud was wearing a work flannel shirt and toting a wrench; a piece of machinery broke in the process of bottling the year's cabernet franc, and he was fixing it himself.

But this is no bumpkin business. The immaculately manicured wine estate has come far since 1983, when it began in a barn covered in peeling paint. The barn still stands, the pretty architectural details of its heavy doors intact, but now they open onto an airy tasting room, all polished wood and big windows, and a processing room of gleaming stainless steel vats.

The North Fork's cool maritime climate has been good to this and other wineries, whose fruits thrive in the fast-draining soil, beneath a steady sun and sheltered on three sides from the harshest weather by bodies of saltwater.

As a result, the industry "has exploded," said Steven Bate, executive director of the Long Island Wine Council.

People from all over the world are interested in growing grapes here.

"In the beginning, it was just locals from Long Island," says Ursula Massoud, the winemaker's wife. "Now we have people from Japan, Jerusalem."

The Massouds are hardly natives themselves; she was raised in Germany; her husband, in Lebanon.

"I'm whites, he's reds," she explains.

Even South Fork-sounding celebrity types are getting in on the action. Michael Lynne, executive producer of The Lord of the Rings trilogy, owns two vineyards; other owners -- such as the former Manhattan restaurateurs who run the organically oriented Shinn Estate Vineyards -- might also pass muster in the Hamptons.

Yet the wineries may save the North Fork from the South Fork's overcrowded fate, locals say. Along with attracting moneyed tourists, acres of grapevines permanently protect precious open space that in the Hamptons has been snatched up by developers. Even people getting priced out of their neighborhoods seem to agree: better vineyards than McMansions.

Food, plain and fancy

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DINING Jamesport Country Kitchen // 1601 Main Road, Jamesport; 631-722-3537.

The Fifth Season // 45 Front St., Greenport; 631-477-8500.

Seafood Barge // Point of Egypt Marine, Southold; 631-765-3010.

The Frisky Oyster // 27 Front St., Greenport; 631-477-4265.

Coronet Luncheonette // Main and Front streets, Greenport; 631-477-9834.

VINEYARDS

Pindar Vineyards // Main Road, Route 25, Peconic; 631-734-6200; pindar.net. Open 11 a.m.-6 p.m. daily. Tours available at 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. weekends. Weekday tours at 2 p.m. through this month. Wine tastings are available for \$3 per person for a tasting of up to six wines. Pindar Wine Store is at 117 Main St. (Route 112), Port Jefferson, near the Port Jefferson Ferry. Paumanok Vineyards // 1074 Main Road, Route 25, Aquebogue; 631-722-8800; paumanok.com. Open 11 a.m.-6 p.m. daily.

Shinn Estate Vineyards // 2000 Oregon Road, Mattituck; 631-804-0367; shinnestatevineyards.com. Open noon-5 p.m. Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Walking tour at 3 p.m. Saturdays and 1:30 p.m. Sundays.

Long Island Wine Council // For information and maps of vineyards and wineries, call 631-369-5887 or visit liwines.com.

SHOPPING

The Velvet Elvis // 110 Front St., Greenport; 631-477-2722.

Preston's Marine Supplies // 102 Main St., Greenport; 631-477-1990.

INFORMATION

For more information, contact the Long Island Convention and Visitors Bureau at 877-FUN-ONLI or visit discoverlongisland.com. For information on the villages of the North Fork, visit northfork.com or northfork.org.

[ABIGAIL TUCKER]

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