

Travel > Americas

Long Island's North Fork: a low-key alternative to the Hamptons

The South Fork has long been favoured by celebrities and well-to-do New Yorkers, but its quieter neighbour has plenty of charm of its own

Oscar Quine | @oscarquine | Wednesday 24 August 2016



Claudio's Clam Bar is a North Fork landmark. *Katharine Schroeder*

There is something so enchanting about the open road in the US, yoked as it is with the American Dream. As I sat on the Greyhound bus from New York City, I watched as the grey melted into green, the last fragments of metropolis giving way to rich, verdant countryside.

The bus was winding its way out to Long Island's North Fork, which begins at the town of Riverhead and stretches 30 miles to the Atlantic Ocean, a finger with Orient Point at its tip. Come the heat of summer, the weekly pilgrimage out to the beach brings city-dwellers sweet relief. And while Long Island's South Fork long ago morphed into the Hamptons, the North Fork retains its sleepy, New England-style character.

Yet some fear that the clapboard houses and mom-and-pop restaurants could soon give way to the mega-mansions and flashy offshoots of Manhattan joints that dominate its brasher counterpart.



Orient marks the end of the North Fork (Shutterstock)

"It's changing around here," said the elderly gentleman sitting next to me. He grew up in Greenport, one of the 10 towns that run the stretch of the North Fork, but has lived in the city for decades. "Weekending is New Yorkers' favourite sport."

Indeed it is, and more and more city-dwellers are heading out to this area that *The New York Times* has dubbed the "un-Hamptons". Having visited this stretch of coast since childhood, I believe (well, hope) its charm is too dyed-in-the-wool to be relinquished. But visit soon, just in case.



READ MORE
Traveller's Guide: Long Island

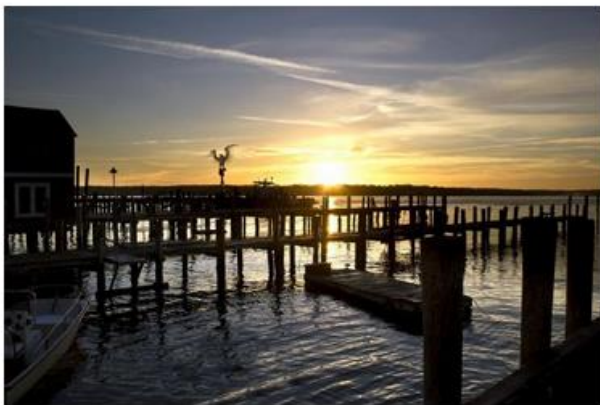
What awaits is an apple pie-slice of America with a ruggedly beautiful Atlantic coastline, acres of farmland, vineyards, small towns and some very good restaurants. Driving down the North Fork's leafy residential streets is like entering a John Hughes film; men in baseball caps tend their lawns on ride-on mowers, while children jump on trampolines or play under sprinklers. Elsewhere, strip malls sit side-by-side with 17th-century churches that pay testament to the fact that

this was the first corner of the US populated by European settlers. It's fading in places, but the odd tumble-down house simply adds to the charm.

It takes just 45 minutes to drive the length of the North Fork, with most towns stretching from the Connecticut Sound in the north to Long Island Bay in the south. A little down the coast lie Port Washington and Great Neck, on which F Scott Fitzgerald based *The Great Gatsby's* East Egg and West Egg.

It takes just 45 minutes to drive the length of the North Fork, with most towns stretching from the Connecticut Sound in the north to Long Island Bay in the south. A little down the coast lie Port Washington and Great Neck, on which F Scott Fitzgerald based The Great Gatsby's East Egg and West Egg.

The North Fork is teetering on the cusp of change, something perhaps most clearly visible in its restaurant scene. There are still plenty of old-school, wallet-friendly eateries like **Claudio's Clam Bar**, which has served modestly-priced seafood overlooking the marina in Greenport for over 140 years, as well as Wendy's Deli, Sicilian Pizza & Pasta, and **Magic Fountain Ice Cream**, all in Mattituck.



Greenport's Mitchell Marina (Shutterstock)

Yet, there is a growing shift towards higher-end, farm-to-table dining. **North Fork Table & Inn** is a white-tablecloth bistro in Southold, serving superb dishes based around top-quality meat and fish, all locally-sourced, matched with a fine local wine list. A five-course tasting menu costs \$125. Meanwhile, **Noah's** in Greenport has a daily-changing menu of "new American small

and isn't all locally-sourced, matched with a fine local wine list. A five-course tasting menu costs \$125. Meanwhile, **Noah's** in Greenport has a daily-changing menu of "new American small plates" and a raw bar. It's more low-key but will set you back upwards of \$50 a head.

This bountifulness, and the foodie focus that accompanies it, is a relatively new development for the North Fork. From the 1950s to 1970s, pesticide use killed many local crops, as well as the local osprey population. It took some major irrigation work to solve the problem and bring back agriculture. Now, the bounty that bursts from the North Fork's lush fields finds its way on to roadside stalls as well as restaurant plates. Drive down any country road and you'll see hand-painted signs advertising corn, strawberries, peaches, tomatoes, eggplant and sunflowers.

There is another crop that's flourishing: grapes. Louisa Hargrave was a pioneer, setting up Hargrave Vineyards, now known as **Castello di Borghese Vineyard**, in the town of Cutchogue in the mid-Seventies. It has been a runaway success, and others have followed suit, so visitors can while away a day touring local wineries, including **Macari Vineyards**, patronised by the White House, and **Vineyard 48**.



<http://www.northforkbudget.com/park-and-hotel-booking-57207641.html#>

Sparkling Pointe in Southold takes full advantage of the cool local climate to produce fantastic local fizz. The short season prevents grapes from becoming too sweet, manager Melissa Rockwell explained. The final product is comparable to Champagne or Cremant de Bordeaux, but, insisted Rockwell: “We’re definitely not trying to be champagne; we grow our grapes on the North Fork.”

Pinot noir, chardonnay and a pinot meunière can all be enjoyed over a long, sun-drenched afternoon on the deck out back. And there’s fine food to accompany it, including a selection of caviars.



Sparkling Pointe's vines

The arrival of places like this, and the crowd they attract, may be what the old man on the bus was talking about. However, the change doesn’t yet feel like a bad thing - it has brought new ways to enjoy the North Fork, without yet washing away what was here before.

Travel essentials

Getting there

Oscar Quine travelled with British Airways ([ba.com](https://www.britishairways.com)), which operates a first-class only service from London City Airport to New York JFK, stopping en route at Shannon airport, where passengers go through US immigration. Returns start at £2,038. Direct economy returns from Heathrow start at £398.


Staying there

The Harborfront Inn at Greenport ([theharborfrontinn.com](https://www.theharborfrontinn.com)) has doubles from \$234, room only.

More information

[iloveny.com](https://www.iloveny.com) ●

More about: | [Long Island](#) | [New York](#) | [The Hamptons](#)

 [Reuse content](#)