

NORTH STAR

Forget the Hamptons – the charm of Long Island's North Fork is less about celebs and all about embracing its seaside, agricultural roots.

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sit at a sun-washed picnic table overlooking Dering Harbor, where the ferries to Shelter Island glide to and fro across the water. In my gloved right hand, I grip an oyster-shucking knife, ready to liberate from their grey, craggy shells the dozen Hogs Necks on ice in front of me.

"See that little notch at the tip right there?" says my server and guide at Greenport's shuck-your-own **Little Creek Oysters** (littlecreekysters.com). "Just wiggle your blade in, nice and easy." I place the bivalve in a wooden oyster jack - a simple, wooden device for the shucking-shy that holds an oyster in place - and do as instructed, aiming the rounded tip of my blade at the hinge on the skinny side

of the shellfish before me. I give it a little shimmy and, pop, the top loosens from its clamped state and I feel like I've just discovered a new country. An awkward but quick swipe of the knife separates the muscle from the white, inner shell and, slurp, it goes down simultaneously sweet and briny and all the more delicious because I managed it myself.

This is the sea-sprayed, sandy charm of eastern Long Island's **North Fork**, a narrow, 37-kilometre strip of land with a string of sleepy, small towns bearing the names of its Corchaug American Indian and English Colonial roots - Jamesport, Aquebogue, Cutchogue, Southold, Greenport, Orient. But instead of trying to out-glam the famed Hamptons to the

south, this quiet peninsula, 130 kilometres east of Midtown Manhattan, with the Long Island Sound on one side and the Peconic and Gardiners Bays on the other, thoroughly embraces its fishing, farming and foraging roots - and often lets you in on the experience. Teach a woman to fish (or shuck or paddle board or feed a goat) and ... well, you know.

With a belly full of local oysters, I glide off on a bike from **Dan's Bike Rental** (greenportbikerental.com), an outfit that will drop one off to your hotel or even your stop on the Long Island Rail Road or Hampton Jitney bus. I'm inspired to pedal over to **67 Steps Beach** (66 Sound Road), named after the wooden staircase that leads you from a small car-park down to the boulder-dotted shore, for a walk on the wind-worn stones and shells that feel akin to stepping through the contents of a treasure chest. I take off my shoes and wade into the cool, clear salty water of the Long Island Sound; in the distance, Connecticut appears only as a thin 

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Opening pages, combing 67 Steps Beach. Previous page, the charmingly monikored Love Lane, in Mattituck. Clockwise from above, the family-run Kontokosta Winery in Greenport invites vinophiles to sample its wares in a light-fuelled tasting room, from rosé to Riesling; sample sips at Macari Wines, the estate of which has been comandeered by the Macari dynasty for more than half a century; another family-run business, 8 Hands Farm is a sustainable operation that lets chickens and sheep run riot across free-range pastures.



*BASED ON RTN FLIGHTS IN PEAK PERIOD, EXCL. TAXES AND CHARGES

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NORTH FORK

indigo line far, far away, and I yearn to get more than my feet wet.

With a little instruction from Chris Dowling, paddle-board pro and co-owner with his wife, Blake, of the local surf and clothing boutique, **One Love Beach** (onelovebeach.com), and a \$40 board rental fee (\$60 if you want to come early for a lesson beforehand), I and a small group of shore-curious explorers head out for a stand-up paddle-boarding tour through the marshy inlet wetlands around Richmond Creek in Southold. Here I spy egrets, terns and osprey above and, in the clear water below, blue claw and horseshoe crabs, schools of quick-moving minnows and even a few turtles.

Hungry from the biking and paddling, I make a pit stop at **The North Fork Shack** (thenorthforkshack.com) in Southold for a bowl of creamy, fortifying chowder chock-a-block with locally harvested clams and an SLT sandwich (shiitake, lettuce, tomato – the dehydrated mushrooms are a dead-ringer for bacon and can make even the most meat-devoted a veggie convert), and then bike a few minutes down the road to meet the sweet, friendly goats at **Catapano Dairy Farm** (catapanodairyfarm.com), who stick their downy noses through the fence in greeting. Inside the tiny gift shop, I can't resist the options of goats' milk products: little tubs of fresh chevre, homemade soaps and soft, velvety fudge that's so damn good, I can't help eating it on my way out the door.

Ample fields of the island's staple crops of potatoes, cauliflower, lima beans, broccoli, and asparagus stretch

far and wide on the broad, flat tracts of well-tilled land that you will begin to see as soon as you get off the Long Island Expressway. But about 50 years ago another agricultural boon took root in the fertile, loamy-sandy soil here, when the first *vitis vinifera* vines were planted. Today, vineyards account for more than 1,200 trellised hectares on the North Fork, where the vines soak up the sun and seaside air.

I know a trek to the North Fork is not complete without sipping its famed fermented juice. There are dozens of wineries with tasting rooms from which to choose but I settle on a few strategic stops. The first, **Kontokosta** (kontokostawinery.com), for a glass of their estate-grown cabernet franc, which I take on a stroll down to the edge of their 25-hectare property and stand sipping on a bluff overlooking the white-capped, wind-swept Long Island Sound. My second stop takes me to the funky chicken-coop-turned-tasting room of **The Old Field Vineyards** (theoldfield.com), where I can't resist picking up a bottle of their fresh and zippy chardonnay and the pricier but keepsake worthy Commodore Perry, made entirely from merlot, the grape most widely grown on Long Island. My final stop is the Mattituck tasting room of family-run **Macari Wines** (macariwines.com), where I get to sample some older vintages of their biodynamically skewed wines and nibble on charcuterie made from their farm-raised pigs and cattle that roam a portion of the family's estate.

But while the vineyards add a little





Clockwise from top, the sprawling Macari Wines estate; fish-focused fare at Noah's; raise a sundowner at The Halyard overlooking the Sound.



glass-swirling sophistication to the area, the recently created **Hallock State Park Preserve** (parks.ny.gov) in Jamesport gives a stunning glimpse of the region's farming roots, which were part of the Corchaug Indian tradition, as well as that of the first Puritan colonists who landed in Southold in 1640. "It's our mission here to reconnect the connection of our shared agricultural heritage," offers Herb Strobel, executive director of the **Hallockville Farm Museum** (hallockville.com), which works in tandem with the public park and offers a well-preserved glimpse into the 300-year history of Long Island farmland and its dwellings. "People don't realize that most of Long Island used to be like this." Here, visitors can hike along serene forest trails or head to the beach to comb for ancient arrowheads and smooth beach glass.

Dinner at the **North Fork Table & Inn** (northforktableandinn.com) proves to be a lesson in utter farm-to-table sincerity, as chef Stephan Bogardus keeps close relationships with a multitude of farmers and fishers within steps of his kitchen, and even hunts himself during the autumn for duck and deer. The six-course tasting menu feels like a map of my day, with dishes such as Bogardus' cardamom-kissed razor clams fresh from the shore

and the smoke-spiked lamb and aubergine vindaloo, sourced from nearby **8 Hands Farm** (8handsfarm.com).

About two kilometres down the road, on a quiet stretch where only the occasional hum of a car engine interrupts the sounds of chirping crickets and tree frogs in the darkness, I decide to end my day looking up instead of down. On Saturday nights, **Southold's Custer Observatory**

(custerobservatory.org) opens its doors to the public to view the northeastern night sky through a powerful Zerochromat refractor telescope. I spy Saturn and Mercury, and clusters and clusters of stars that seem at once as ancient as they do bright and new - a just-right reflection of the North Fork's serene bounty and beauty. 

NORTH FORK ESSENTIALS



STAY

PEACE AND QUIET It's all about the view at the **Aqua Hotel**, where 18 light-filled rooms, thoughtfully decorated with mid-century modern restraint, have floor-to-ceiling windows aimed at the gently lapping waves of the Peconic Bay. There's a St Tropez-meets-mellow-east-end feel to the half-hectare property, which also boasts a private beach, bocce court and nap-worthy hammocks. Rooms from \$149. (15 Bay Avenue, Aquebogue, +1 631 722 3212; aquahotelbeachclub.com)

MOD PAD In-house modern art gallery? Check. Fifties era diner-chic café for when you're feeling peckish? Check. Private, manicured garden area where an alum from Miami's famed Broken Shaker

will make you of-the-moment cocktails? Check. The ten-room **Gallery Hotel**, above, sits in the heart of this old whaling village that's become the heart of the North Fork's weekend hub. Rooms from \$220. (437-441 Main St, Greenport, +1 631 477 4000; galleryhotelny.com)

ALL-ROUNDER You don't have to choose between a sigh-worthy view and being in the centre of the action at the **Harborfront Inn**. Steps away from the Weathered Barn, where you can pick up jewellery crafted from sea-shore finds, well-curated tomes at Burton's Books or a cool cocktail at the Frisky Oyster. Rooms from \$199. (209 Front St, Greenport, +1 631 477 0707; theharborfrontinn.com)

EAT

RISE & SHINE At **Bruce & Son**, chef Scott Bollman lets his passion for local sourcing drive this brunch-centric spot in Greenport, where standout dishes will completely change your view of this standard morning fare. Tip: a great souvenir is Bollman's sea salt that he sources from the waters of the Sound. (208 Main Street, Greenport, +1 631 477 0023; bruceandsongreenport.com)

FRESH CATCH You will find no fresher swimmy creatures around than at **Southold Fish Market**. Step up to the counter and order a plump lobster roll, overflowing with the sweet, juicy crustacean's meat, or the succulent, crab-stuffed flounder, and nab a seat inside or at one of the breezy outdoor picnic tables. (64755 NY-25, Southold, +1 631 765 3200)

FINE FINS Be sure to call ahead for a seat at **Noah's**, for seasonal and fish-focused fare served in the serenity of chef Noah Schwartz's airy, sea-green dining room on bustling Front Street. The wine list, curated by Schwartz's wife and sommelier partner, Sunita, leans toward a tenet of what-grows-together, goes-together, so expect lots of local options to try. (136 Front Street, Greenport, +1 631 477 6720; chefnoahs.com)

SMART TIP

SUMMER BUZZ From May to October, on the first Friday of each month, **First Fridays** on charming Love Lane in the town of Mattituck is a must-visit. From 6pm-9pm, the street is closed to cars so you can stroll the block where local businesses such as the Village Cheese Shop, Mint Clothing and Roanoke Vineyards sell their wares for your al fresco browsing and grazing pleasure.

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