

This website has not been registered for automatic password input yet, please swipe your finger!

Close

Help

FINANCIAL TIMES

Home World Companies Markets Global Economy Lex Comment Management Life & Arts
 Arts Magazine Food & Drink House & Home Lunch with the FT Style Books Pursuits Travel Columns How To Spend It Tools

May 16, 2014 6:42 pm

Long Island's North Fork, a world away from the Hamptons

By Kate Maxwell

Our mission that fourth of July weekend was to find a beach with enough room to spread two towels and to have unimpeded access to the ocean – no paddle ball or Frisbee games to dodge; no errant boogie boarders or amorous couples to sidestep. If you've been to the Hampton-studded South Fork of Long Island at this time of year – to Southampton, East Hampton, Bridgehampton, or now even Montauk – you will know this is a challenge of epic proportions. They pose as a sanctuary from sweltering, social whirling New York City but, in reality, the Hamptons are host to the same crowd.

You may not even have heard of the North Fork, the top half of Long Island's crocodile jaws, which gape 80 miles east of Manhattan. When New Yorkers talk about summering on Long Island, or "LI" or "the beach" (it's gauche to call them "the Hamptons"), they mean the South Fork, never the North. Consequently, the North Fork's roads are quiet and the locals regard the beaches as crowded when there are five people on them. We got up that Sunday, drove four miles, parked, walked down a wooden stairway, and unfurled our towels on a pebbly beach with not a soul on it.

It wasn't the only one. Later, we found Potato beach, the perfect spot to launch a kayak, with clear, shallow water, backed by oyster flats arrayed with spiky green reeds; Goldsmith's Inlet beach, a popular fishing spot on an estuary with a pebbly, sandy beach on one side, flats and rose bushes on the other and mangroves at its tip, and the sandy, sloping McCabe's beach. As a rule, the beaches are rocky on the sound side, slight and sandy on the bay side.

However, it's not just empty beaches that distinguish the incognito North Fork from the extravert South. What makes this 35-mile-long prong New York's most underrated summer destination is the combination of twin agrarian assets: farms and vineyards. The loamy farmland of the Hamptons has been steadily appropriated by real estate since the 1970s but on the other side of Great Peconic Bay and Little Peconic Bay, the ploughs have continued to turn as they have for centuries.

In 1973, Harvard graduates Alex and Louisa Hargrave bought a 60-acre farm in Cutchogue, uprooted its cauliflowers and potatoes and sowed Long Island's first grapes, taking agricultural inspiration from Roman statesman Cato, whose *De Agri Cultura* they read in the original Latin. Their initial attempts at winemaking were not wildly successful, not only because of their inexperience, but because it takes generations to make good wine – just ask the Bordelais, whose cool, maritime climate this area shares.



Forty years later, the grapes and the viniculturists have matured, and the North Fork is a bona fide terroir with around 40 wineries. Granted, there's still plenty of insipid plonk more worthy of spitting than sipping but there are also Pinot Noirs, Cabernet Francs and Sauvignon Blancs which wend their way, in modest numbers, to Michelin-starred restaurants in Manhattan. "You're never going to find Long Island dominating New York wine lists," says David Page, co-owner of Shinn Estate, whose 2013 First Fruit Sauvignon Blanc is on the list at Gramercy Tavern in Manhattan. "We're a tiny region producing 450,000 cases a year to Napa's 10 or so million. But that's what makes the wine, and the experience of producing it, so precious."

Claudia Purita's One Woman Wines supplies Manhattan's ABC Kitchen and Le Bernardin, and its tiny tasting room on Old North Road is one of the North Fork's most appealing. The winery produced the region's first Grüner Veltliner; its 2010 (generally agreed to be the North Fork's best year yet) is a delicious grassy, fruit-forward number.



67 Steps beach in Greenport





Lobster sign in front of Claudio's restaurant, Greenport



Greenport's Main and Front Street

Just outside the village of Jamesport, Sherwood House is, perhaps, the area's prettiest winery, combining an interiors store selling retro pieces with a tasting room. It pioneered the North Fork's cork-passing practice – take a cork from one winery for a free taste at the next – and is known for its Chardonnays. On the other side of Middle Road, McCall Wines has what is often considered the North Fork's best Pinot Noir; the 2010 Reserve is worth a splurge at \$60.



Wine tasting at Shinn Estate

Page is one of several winemakers in the area promoting what he calls “sustainability, and a lifestyle that's geared towards happiness, not just profit”. As a result, Shinn Estate runs on wind and solar energy, and uses biodynamic methods and native yeast. A similar impulse is shaking up the farming community. It was a dream of a sustainable good life, and reading Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), that prompted Tom Hart to drop out of medical school and start an organic smallholding on a skinny, one-acre strip near Orient, at the easternmost point of the North Fork. When I met him, shirtless on a scorching afternoon, he introduced me to his only employee, his mother Michelle, and walked me past beds of lettuce, chard, onions, beets, carrots and herbs, to a muddy patch of clover where three heavily pregnant Tamworth pigs wallowed. Behind them, scores of white and russet chickens squawked and pecked.

Department of Agriculture regulations dictate that smallholders sell livestock direct to individual customers. Hart's solution? Posting his chickens on Facebook – direct marketing for the digital age. Next door, at Oysterponds Farm, a former Dow Chemicals executive and his son-in-law grow luscious blueberries, and black, red and, my favourite, golden raspberries that taste of passion fruit and pineapple. They sell the berries and the jam they make from the leftovers at a stand out front.

The seafood-rich Atlantic, the wine, and the fresh produce coalesce to make the North Fork one of the most exciting culinary destinations on the East Coast. The reputations of the Frisky Oyster in Greenport, the prong's largest and most happening village, and the North Fork Table & Inn in Southold are stellar enough to draw Hamptonites, for whom what is on your table is usually less important than who is sitting at the next one. “They ask us, ‘Why aren't you over there?’ and gesture to the Hamptons,” said Claudia Fleming, pastry chef at North Fork Table & Inn. “I feel like saying, ‘Because you are.’”

In the past few years, the number of top-notch yet unpretentious restaurants on the North Fork has proliferated. One of the best meals I had was an al fresco lunch from the Table & Inn's food truck: gazpacho followed by a spicy strip loin sandwich seeping with roasted peppers and crispy shallots. Another relative newcomer is First and South in Greenport, with 26-year-old Taylor



Knapp at the stove. The simple, well-priced menu makes the most of the region's ocean-farmland bounty (the herbs are Tom Hart's) and adds idiosyncratic inflections – Knapp isn't a graduate of Noma for nothing – such as dehydrated egg yolk grated over fluke sashimi.



North Fork Table & Inn's food truck

Despite the quality of restaurants, the atmosphere remains low key. Celebrity chef Tom Colicchio (the head judge on the TV cooking show *Top Chef*) has a restaurant in Bridgehampton, but relishes the chance to escape to the North Fork village of Mattituck, where he has had a home for more than a decade. "In the Hamptons I feel obliged to see people," he told me. "But I want a break at the weekend. The North Fork is quiet, there's no traffic; the produce is amazing. I fish and cook and I can be anonymous."

Unlike the South Fork, plush accommodation is sparse. It's only a matter of time before someone lands a crop of swish maritime-themed cabins in Greenport, or spruces up a seaman's cottage on a hydrangea-dotted, shingled street in the ludicrously pretty bayside village of Orient. But in the meantime, there are plenty of inexpensive options: Shinn Estate has four bedrooms; there's the Arts and Crafts Orient Inn, with friendly service, mahogany beds and appliquéd bedspreads; the North Fork Table & Inn, where Claudia Fleming's sublime breakfast (Oysterponds berries, lemony blueberry scones, the best frittata I've tasted) compensates for fairly basic bedrooms, and the 19th-century, Italianate Jedediah Hawkins Inn, with vineyard views and a great restaurant.

The fact that the North Fork hasn't yet been swamped with boutique hotels, despite property prices being at least a third

less than in the Hamptons, is part of its charm. This, and the fact that those beaches, lovely as they are, are not broad, Atlantic duney swaths, is what makes Fleming confident that, just as its topographic limitations mean it will never become Napa, the North Fork will never become the South Fork.

Hamptonisation has been predicted for 30 years and, so far, not materialised. Ironical, then, that F Scott Fitzgerald set *The Great Gatsby* (1925) on the north shore, not the south, of "that slender riotous island that extends itself due east of New York". The Hamptons' celebrity status, its wild, model-thronged parties and mansion-lined beaches, will continue to shield its wallflower cousin from the spotlight, as it has done for decades. So go now, or next summer, or the year after next. Take your time to find your empty, pebbly sound beach or your narrow lip of bay sand because, like its wine, the North Fork will only get better.

Details

Wineries: Shinn Estate Vineyard and Farmhouse: 2000 Oregon Road, shinnestatevineyards.com

One Woman, 5195 Old North Road, onewomanwines.com

Sherwood House, 1291 Main Road, sherwoodhousevineyards.com

McCall Wines, 22600 Main Road, mccallwines.com

Restaurants and accommodation: First and South, 100 South St, Greenport, firstandsouth.com

Frisky Oyster, 27 Front St, Greenport, thefriskyoyster.com

North Fork Table & Inn, 57225 Main Rd, Southold, doubles from \$200, nofoti.com

Orient Inn, 25-500 Main Rd, Orient, doubles from \$245, orientinn-ny.com

Jedediah Hawkins Inn, 400 South Jamesport Avenue, Jamesport, doubles from \$275, jedediahhawkinsinn.com



Robby Beaver, the owner of Frisky Oyster restaurant



Jedediah Hawkins Inn

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/3dd0489e-d9dd-11e3-b3e3-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© **THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2014** FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.