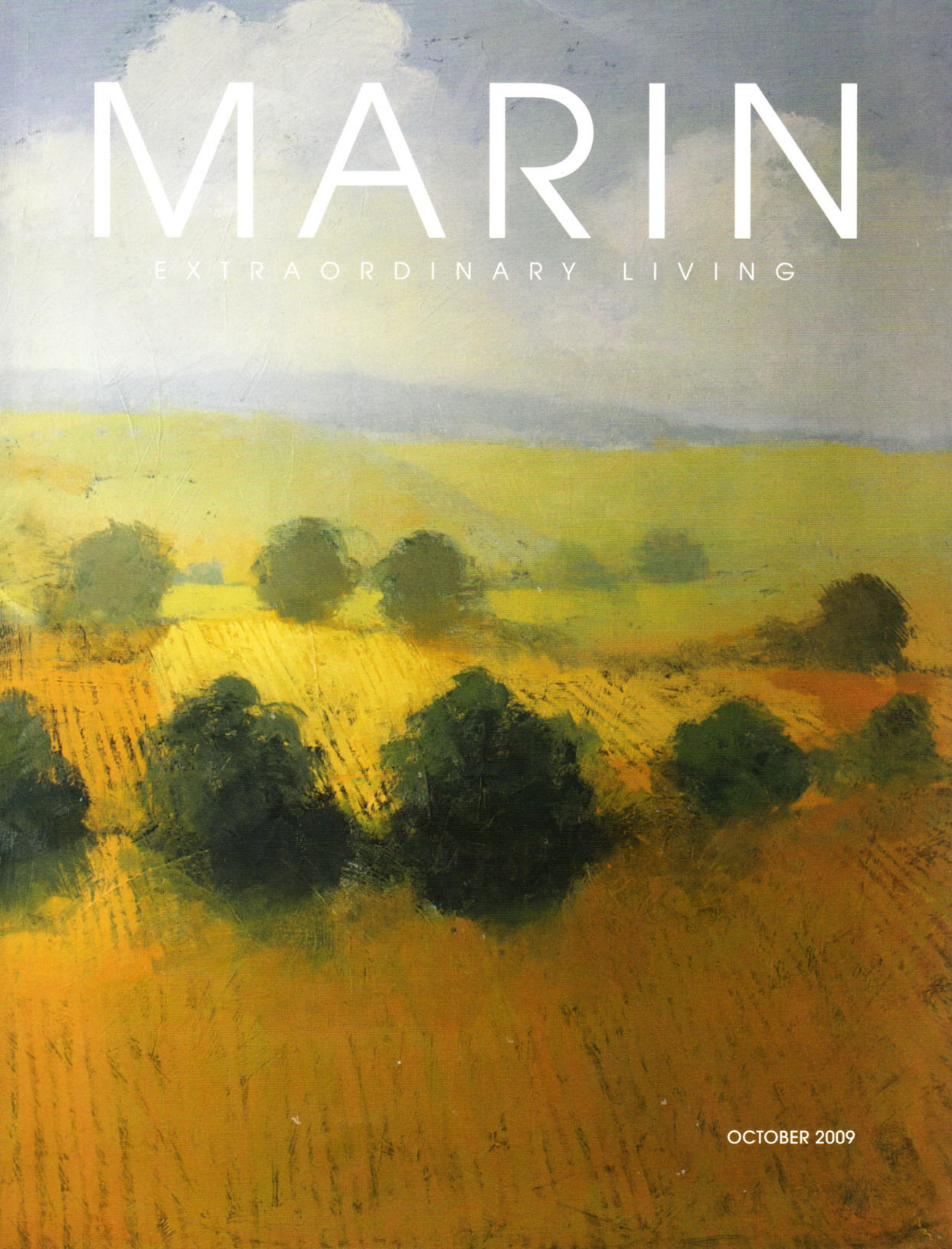


# MARIN

EXTRAORDINARY LIVING



OCTOBER 2009

An aerial photograph of a large, colorful hot air balloon with yellow, red, and green stripes, floating over a vast vineyard. The rows of grapevines are neatly spaced and stretch across the landscape. In the background, a small white building is visible. The lighting suggests a late afternoon or early morning setting, with long shadows cast across the fields.

GO

# 6 Degrees of RELAXATION

Half a dozen fall wine  
country getaways BY MIMI TOWLE AND SOMER FLAHERTY



Gain incredible views of Napa's vineyards with a hot air balloon ride.

Fall is undoubtedly the best time to visit the wine country; the optimal weather, excitement of crush and fewer tourists make it an easy choice for a quick getaway. If that's not enough incentive, consider that a day (and a night) away could be just what your mind, body and soul need before the rush of the holidays. According to the Mayo Clinic, "relaxation is a process that decreases the wear and tear on your mind and body from the challenges and hassles of daily life." As we wind down 2009, which for many has indeed been a year of wear and tear, it's time to take care of ourselves with a little Wine Country 101. What follows are six different scenarios for a Napa or Sonoma visit, including options for getting the most from your recession-recovering dollar.

## Calistoga: Health

For centuries the Wappo Indians enjoyed the healing properties of the area's hot springs. But it was California pioneer and entrepreneur Sam Brannan who founded this town as we know it, with the intention of creating a West Coast health mecca. Thanks to the natural geothermal springs and thousands of pounds of the famous therapeutic mud, Calistoga remains a top destination for the health-minded traveler.

### BEDS

Centrally located on the town's main street (Lincoln Avenue), the **Mount View Hotel** has a motto: the Art of Relaxation. Guests can choose among perks like breakfast in bed, an easel and paints to take to the vineyards, and an afternoon at the on-site spa or just lounge with a book by the tranquil swimming pool. Rates: \$189–\$369.

### EATS

*Morning:* **Café Sarifornia** is a popular diner where you can fuel up on a classic breakfast. Its name is a nod to the naming of the town itself: according to legend, after a few too many cocktails, town founder Brannan made a toast to "the Calistoga of Sarifornia" when he had intended to say "the Saratoga of California," referring to the New York spa town of Saratoga Springs.

*Midday:* Enjoy a luxe lunch at **Solage Calistoga Resort's Solbar**. Opt for indoor (fireplace) or outdoor (patio) seating overlooking the pool. The menu features bounty from local organic farms.

*Evening:* Join the Main Street menu crawl as the sun goes down. Dozens of would-be diners size up the offerings and their appetites to find the perfect match. Choices include **Checkers** or **Boskos Trattoria** for pizza or pasta, JoLe at the Mount View Hotel for the latest in farm-to-table cuisine or Flatiron Grill for a great iceberg wedge salad.

### EXERCISE

Start early in the morning to summit **Mount St. Helena**, and bring a hat, water and sunscreen. In the words of the *Chronicle's* venerable outdoorsman Tom Stienstra, it's a "butt-kicking" workout. Start at **Robert Louis Stevenson State Park** and follow the signs to the trailhead. It starts slow and is a five-mile grind to the summit.

spent his summers with famous friends. A short trail from the lower parking lot leads to London's grave and to the spectacular ruins of the Wolf House. At Jack London's Beauty Ranch, tour the House of Happy Walls, a home and museum built by London's wife after his death.

## DON'T MISS

The Glen Ellen tasting room at **B. R. Cohn Winery** was founder (and Doobie Brothers manager) Bruce Cohn's former home. After your tasting, take a self-guided tour of **Quarryhill Botanical Garden**, home to rare plants and one of the largest collections of temperate Asian plants in North America.

## 4 Sonoma: History

While Sonoma is synonymous with sunshine and a delectable harvest, it is also situated around the northernmost California mission, making the Sonoma plaza a great destination for history buffs. Just up the

hill in a well-established cemetery is the grave of William Smith, the only Revolutionary War soldier known to be buried in California. The **Mission San Francisco Solano de Sonoma** was founded on July 4, 1823, and down the street, the **Blue Wing Inn** at 125 East Spain Street, built by General M. G. Vallejo in 1840, is the oldest adobe structure north of San Francisco.

## BEDS

**The El Dorado Hotel and Kitchen**, on the northwest corner of the plaza in a historical adobe building, is running a weekday special through the end of the year. For \$249 you get an overnight stay, a complimentary tasting at the biodynamic **Benziger winery**, and a three-course meal for two (not including alcohol or gratuity) at the hotel's celebrated restaurant. Cocktail-hour beverages range from \$5 to \$7.

## EATS

*Morning:* Grab a cup of coffee and a treat at California's historic landmark No. 501,

**Salvador Vallejo's Home**, aka the **Sunflower Caffé**. Most patrons are lured by the shaded patio and tempting victuals and don't realize that it is the oldest adobe building in the area open to the public.

*Midday:* The patio of the **Swiss Hotel**, built in 1909 on the northern edge of the plaza, has been a favorite lunch spot for decades. Not too hungry? Grab a snack at the **Sonoma Cheese Factory** next door for a picnic elsewhere.

*Evening:* **El Dorado Kitchen** executive chef Justin Everret's "farm-driven" menu is a favorite for locals and visitors alike. Enjoy his celebrated cuisine at an intimate table for two on the patio, under the century-old fig tree, or with a large party on the 21-foot dining room table of reclaimed single-plank wood from a Vermont bridge.

## EXERCISE

Connect with the bike path a block north of the square. Head east a mile or so to **Bartholomew Park**, a historic and organically