

Discover some hidden gold in Nevada County's burgeoning food scene

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Diane Covington-Carter

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On your next trip to the Gold Country towns of Nevada City and Grass Valley, or as you are passing through on your way to or from Tahoe, here's the list of places I give to my family and friends when they're visiting.

Both historic towns date from the 1850s Gold Rush and are fun to stroll through and explore. All of these picks are downtown, if not otherwise noted.

Note: There are many more amazing food finds in these small towns. This is not meant to be a comprehensive list, just a few of my personal picks and why these are where the locals know to go.

Nevada City

The New Moon Café:

By far my pick as the best restaurant in our county. Owners Buzz Crouch and Peter Selaya offer local, natural and organic food, an imaginative and interesting menu and excellent service. They describe their restaurant as “Big-city dining with a small-town atmosphere and lots of love. Sophisticated, comfortable and thoughtful.” And I agree. Be sure to call for a reservation. Patio dining in summer. TheNewMoonCafe.com.

Three Forks Bakery and Brewing Co.:

Prepare for a line of locals in the morning for the delightful array of baked goods. Artisan breads come out of the wood-fired oven at 11 a.m. Wood-fired pizzas go well with the craft beer, brewed in their on-site, seven-barrel brew house.

The menu changes weekly. It’s fresh, simple and based on what is available locally in each season. Outside seating in sunny weather. Also open for dinner. ThreeForks-NC.com.

Wheyward Girl Creamery

Right next to Three Forks, this small shop is the first certified creamery in Nevada County. They should be making their own cheeses soon from the milk from local small farmers, which locals are really excited about. They now carry cheeses from all over the world from small farms and farmsteads, which use holistic farming practices. Open since July 2014, enjoy free samples, and cut to order delights such as parmesano from Italy, as well as regional cheeses such as Point Reyes Bay Blue. 530-478-1665.

South Pine Café

A locals favorite for breakfast, brunch or lunch. Locations in both Nevada City and Grass Valley downtowns. Everything is made in-house with fresh and natural ingredients. Cage-free eggs, natural meats, organic tofu and all juices made with fresh fruits and veggies. Organic, locally roasted Caroline’s coffee and gluten-free options available. Very yummy muffins. SouthPine-Cafe.com.

Lefty’s Grill

Owners Chris Duncan and John Cammack, both left-handed, describe their restaurant experience as “white tablecloth casual dining.” Burgers consist of a half-pound blend of Kobe and chuck beef with gluten-free buns available. Gluten-free pizza is also available. Desserts range from classic s’mores to gluten-free flourless chocolate almond torte. Locals love the sweet potato fries and sitting out on the deck with the creek gurgling by in the summer. LeftysGrill.com.

Northridge Restaurant:

This restaurant has been described as “old-style Nevada County.” The decor and the friendly old-fashioned welcome will take you back in time, as do the reasonable prices and juicy burgers. Located a two-minute drive from downtown, this hidden gem is worth finding. Known for their pizza and burgers, they also have delicious fire-roasted vegetables and salads. Very kid-friendly. Check out their coupons on the website for extra savings. NorthridgeRestaurant.com.

The Truffle Shop:

If chocolate is your thing, then you don’t want to miss this shop. The chef, Willem De Groot, has made goodies for customers ordering from the White House to the Vatican and beyond. Celebrating their 30th anniversary and located in the New York Hotel building on Broad Street. TheTruffleShop.com.

Treats:

When you’re hankering for a special treat, check out this tiny trove of artisan ice creams, sorbets and other decadent delights such as cookies and cupcakes, including some vegan and gluten-free choices. Try their Mint Chip ice cream, which swirls fresh spearmint with rich dark chocolate bits, Chai Coconut vegan ice cream or pear ginger sorbet. TreatsNevadaCity.com.

Grass Valley

Tofanelli’s

Described as a “casual Italian-American Bistro,” this popular restaurant is located in a historic building that dates back to 1859. Serving breakfast, lunch and dinner (including vegetarian and vegan choices), as well as cocktails, beer and wine, they also offer patio dining in warmer months. Their breakfast menu includes 101 kinds of omelets. Tofanellis.com.

Summer Thyme’s Bakery and Deli

You have to drive a minute from downtown Grass Valley to find this gem (or walk 10 minutes), but it will be worth the trip. They make all their baked goods from scratch using local and organic ingredients when possible, with wheat-free, paleo and sugar-free options. Yummy soups and “piled high” sandwiches, salads and free-trade coffee round out the menu. Outside seating. SummerThymes.com.

Cirino’s at Main Street

Also using family recipes passed down through the generations, this beloved restaurant offers Italian and Mediterranean dishes in a variety of price ranges, with more than 70 menu items from which to choose. They even boast that their signature Bloody Mary will “change your life.” Reservations recommended. CirinosAtMainStreet.com.

Maria’s Mexican Restaurant

The owner learned authentic Mexican cuisine from her grandmother on summer visits to Mexico and continues to use those recipes in this popular restaurant. Beer, wine and cocktails and patio seating, weather permitting. Serving breakfast, lunch and dinner. MariasGrassValley.com.

Sergio’s Caffe

A favorite with locals for affordable good food, the menu reflects the owner’s Italian roots. Open every day for lunch and dinner. Fresh homemade pasta and handmade ravioli and potato gnocchi served daily. They use local produce and accommodate all dietary needs — vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, etc. SergiosCaffe.com.

Lazy Dog Ice Cream Shop

Lazy Dog ice cream creators have been known and loved around town for many years for selling their treats from their modified pink classic Chevy truck. Now you can buy one of their 25 flavors of dipped ice cream bars any day and enough other chocolate and sweet treats to satisfy any sweet tooth. Local ice cream bar favorites include Bailey's Irish Cream, mocha almond fudge and Swiss orange chip. Right next to Sergio's on Mill Street, downtown Grass Valley. SpotLazyDog.com.

Marshall's Pasties

During the Gold Rush, the Cornish miners who worked the local Empire Mine carried lunch buckets filled with pasties and tea down into the mines. They'd heat it all up over a candle to enjoy for their meal break, miles underground the streets of Grass Valley. This pastie shop, just down the street from Sergio's, makes a variety of pasties for you to enjoy. At 203 Mill St., 530-272-2844.

So whatever your taste buds are searching for, you can find it as you explore all the fun and interesting pieces of California history hidden all over these two Gold Country towns. Take your time, settle in, and, above all, enjoy!

Diane Covington-Carter is a freelance writer. For more of her work visit DianeCovingtonCarter.com.