I’m about to let you in on one of the best kept secrets of the Bay Area – the artisan cheese-making movement. It was the Spanish priests who started making cheese from the milk of mission livestock in the early 1800s. Later European immigrants, mostly Italian and Swiss families, established dairies in the lush pastures and rolling coastal hills of coastal West Marin. In the mid nineteenth century, there were over one hundred individual family farms in West Marin and Sonoma with dairy operations flourishing during the Gold Rush. Initially they supplied butter (milk would spoil absent refrigeration) but in the early 20th century as the Bay Area developed and refrigeration became available, fresh milk could be supplied and the dairies thrived. With the advent of milk price regulation, however, and the emergence of industrial factory dairies in the Central Valley, local West Marin dairymen faded from the scene as they could not compete. Sadly, today the total number of family run dairies in West Marin is down to about fifteen!

This brings us to pioneers Sue Conley and Peggy Smith who took a hippie trip to San Francisco after finishing their degrees at the University of Tennessee in 1976. Each established careers in San Francisco’s most famous kitchens: Peggy spending 17 years at Chez Panisse, and Sue co-owning Bette’s Oceanview Diner in Berkeley. By the early 1990’s, Peggy and Sue were ready for a new challenge. They launched Tomales Bay Foods www.cowgirlcreamery.com in Point Reyes, a marketing vehicle to help West Marin’s farms and dairies get their delicious products into the hands of the Bay Area’s finest chefs. Their first location, a renovated hay barn in downtown Point Reyes, makes a great first stop on your tour and also houses their original creamery (where they currently make Red Hawk) at the entrance to the building. Using milk from neighboring Straus Family Creamery, they began making delicious fresh cheeses. The creamery is called Cowgirl Creamery www.cowgirlcreamery.com and now has cheeses in over 500 markets. The Tomales Bay Food’s building has a nice view into the creamery and all of the ingredients (wine, salumi, olives, bread, etc.) you will need, as
well as great cheese, for a wonderful picnic.

After touring the Creamery, walk around Point Reyes Station, a small hamlet at the southern base of Tomales Bay and the gateway to the Point Reyes Seashore National Park. Visit Toby’s Feed Barn www.tobysfeedbarn.com on the main drag—they have good espresso drinks in a small kiosk in the hay barn alley and tons of local fare, food, books and sweatshirts and the like inside. Two restaurants deserve special mention here: Osteria Stellina www.osteriastellina.com is an authentic Italian and California cuisine mélange with outstanding locally produced meats, shellfish, pastas and cheese dishes. The Sir and Star at the Olema Inn www.sirandstar.com has received rave reviews. And then there is Saltwater www.saltwateroysterdepot.com, a great new restaurant, oyster bar, and local hang out just a few miles across the Bay in Inverness that’s worth a detour.

But this is about the cheese. Head north out of Pt. Reyes for three miles and just past the Tomales Bay Oyster Company http://tomalesbayoysters.com/ is the Giacomini Dairy and home of the Pt. Reyes Farmstead Cheese Company www.pointreyescheese.com. The Giacomini family has been a pioneer in the conversion of dairying from bulk milk production to farmstead artisan cheese production. They produce California’s only classic-style blue cheese, Original Blue, which has become a local classic and recently won a prestigious SOFI (Specialty Outstanding Food Innovation) award. They are open to the public infrequently but do rent out for events (at their beautiful facility called “The Fork”) and have cooking classes so check their website.

After winding along the inordinately beautiful Route 1 headed north up thru Marshall, you will pass many amazing places to stop and have oysters: Hog Island Oyster Company Farm www.hogislandoysters.com, Tony’s Seafood, or stop for lunch and a to-die-for view at Nick’s Cove and Cottages www.nicks cove.com (great place to stay as well). If you have been smart enough to sign up in advance, go visit Marcia Barinaga and sample her amazing aged sheep’s milk cheeses and tour Barinaga Ranch www.barinagaranch.com which runs along the top of the Marshall Ridge and has spectacular views of the Bay and Inverness on a clear day.

If at this point you have not totally become bloated on remarkable cheeses, wine and or beer and oysters, then take a break and rent a kayak for a surreal early morning paddle along the shore or a more strenuous ride in the afternoon against the winds and tide.

Continuing north after passing thru Walker Creek (my favorite part of the drive) you deadhead straight into the town of Tomales. At the outstanding Tomales Bakery on Hwy. 1, you can provision with great breads and scones, puff daddy’s, cinnamon raisin wheels and the like and then head west on Dillon Beach Road for a mile and half and take your first right on Middle Road and come visit us at Toluma Farms and Tomales Farmstead Creamery www.tolufarms.com. Our family purchased the farm over a decade ago. We have worked steadfastly to restore it, certify the land organic and repurpose the prior Jersey cow dairy into a goat and sheep dairy. Just this year we began making our very own farmstead goat and soon-to-be mixed milk (goat, sheep and eventually cow) soft ripened and aged cheeses. Sign up on line for our tours that are typically the first Sundays of the month.

Heading further north on Middle Road you come to the historic ranching town of Valley Ford where the local market sells many of the regions local cheeses and McClelland butter. www.mcclellandsdairy.com. You can also drop in our friends Andrew and Curtis at di Bufala Dairy who make water buffalo milk cheese and amazing gelato. Continue north out of the town and take your first right to head to Occidental and Freestone. Sample delicious local grown Phelps
R. Hirose, MD (unofficial self-appointed Vice Chair of Food and Wine), Department of Surgery, UCSF

This is the second part of a very personal, extremely biased, non-objective list of the absolute best eats in the San Francisco bay area.

BEST Ramen: Tonkotsu Ramen at Izakaya Sozai – nice creamy broth, firm toothy noodles…although newcomer Waraku will give it a good run for its money. Close to Parnassus!

BEST Karaage: Waraku as mentioned above – go for the tonkotsu ramen, but order the karaage– the karaage is outstanding crispy and not heavy as karaage can be

BEST Southeast Asian Noodle dish: Mandalay Special Noodle at Mandalay : No, not a typical dish like Pad Thai from Marnee Thai, which isn’t bad but The Mandalay Special Noodles (with chicken) is a unique winner. The Burmese favorite has been cranking out excellent food for over 25 years. Just enjoy the Christmas ornaments hanging from the season and taste the best Burmese food around. The Mango Salad, the Mandalay Beef are all standby’s but the Mandalay Special Noodles will have you craving between visits.

BEST Chinese Noodle dish: Jajamen at King of Noodles – don’t mess the Xiao Long Bao (Shaghai soup dumplings) either if you stumble into this hole in the wall with grandma handpulling the noodles in the back.

BEST Scallops: Live Scallop nigiri (special) at Ebisu – the fresh live scallops at the local Sushi place close to UC is hard to beat

Best Uni: Uni is definitely an acquired taste, but once you get over the hump and can actually enjoy the briny finish that makes the consumer fully aware that they are enjoying the fresh bounty from the sea, the creamy sweetness of sea urchin roe is highly addictive. Uni from Hokkaido (when they have it) at Sushi Ran in Sausalito is beyond the fresh Uni from Mendocino or Santa Barbara. Ask if tasting their many delicious organic cows’ milk fresh and aged cheeses.

Hopefully, this has given you a few ideas about a scenic and cheese-rich day out in the beauty of West Marin, probably the best-kept secret of the Bay Area. But if you still aren’t satisfied or your interests are truly piqued then go online and check out the other farms and cheese operations along the trail that are open to the public. Among the 29 producers listed on the Sonoma Marin Cheese Trail map, Web site (http://cheesetrail.org/) and mobile app, 21 are open for regular or periodic tours and tastings, or for visits by appointment. Guided cheese tours are also popping up, including a five-hour jaunt that includes four creameries, tastings of 30 cheeses, and a picnic ($152).
http://www.foodandfarmtours.com/