

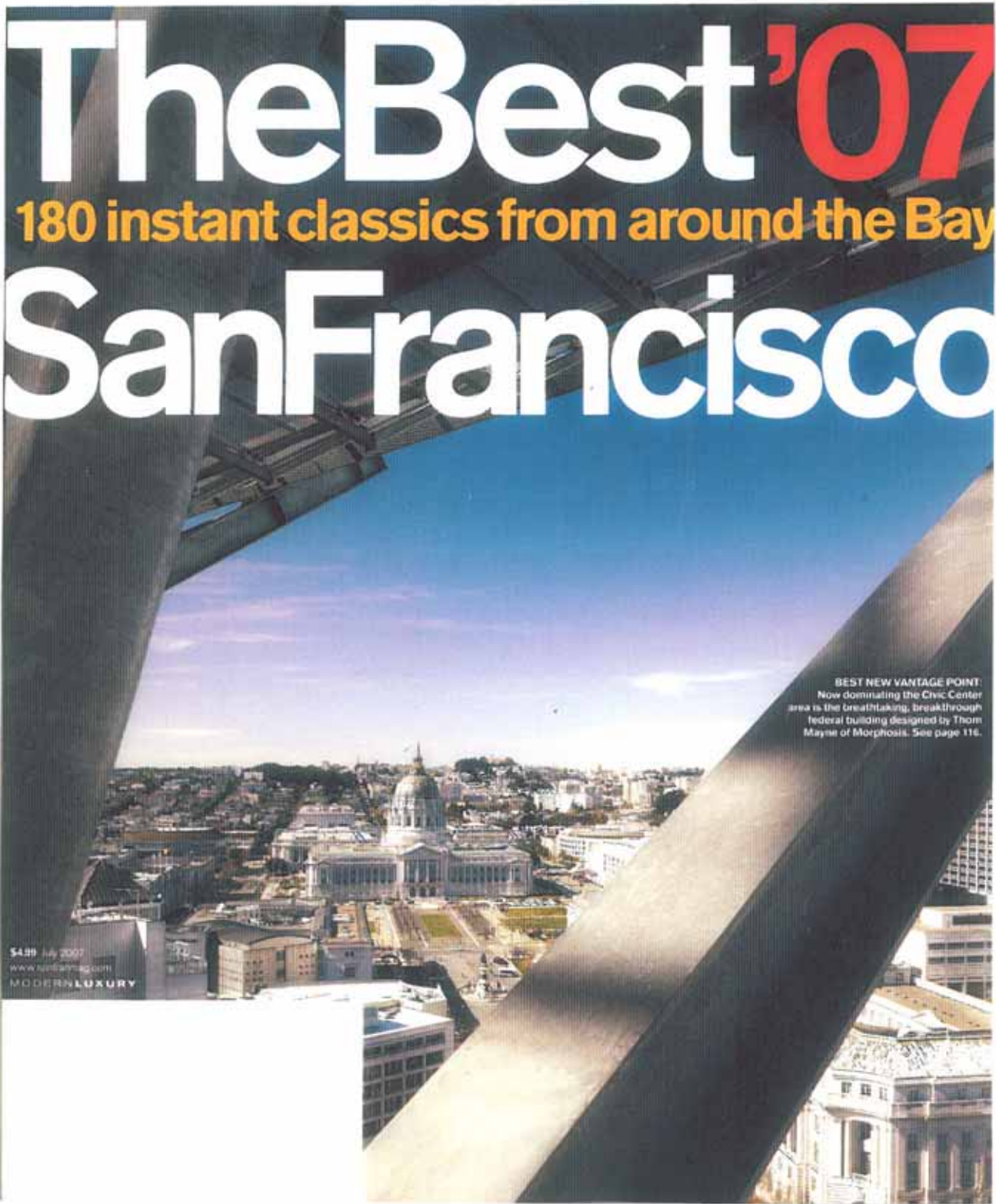
The Best '07

180 instant classics from around the Bay

San Francisco

BEST NEW VANTAGE POINT:
Now dominating the Civic Center area is the breathtaking, breakthrough federal building designed by Thom Mayne of Morphosis. See page 116.

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MODERN LUXURY



Sonoma on the verge

Sonoma Plaza has always managed to feel both small town and tourist worthy. But with money to be made, how long can the balance last?



Sonomans take great pride in their small-town quirks and close-knit community, which differentiate "Slow-noma" from the evil wine empire to the east. In fact, the farmers and ex-hippie baby boomers who live here have gone a long way over the years to keep their quaint, historic town—it has one of the most beautiful, chain-free town squares in Northern California—from turning into "wine Disneyland," which is how they view Napa. However, Sonoma is lately experiencing its own little version of capitalism on the march, and the locals are divided about it.

The town has been a stop on the tasting-room circuit for a while now, but as Sonoma's small-production varietals gain real traction—even sparking international interest—the county's Tourism Bureau and Vintners Association have started marketing Sonoma as a luxe destination. They're playing up the new resort hotels—such as the minimalist El Dorado Hotel on the plaza—fine wine country cuisine, and spas with grape-seed-oil treatments (which cost upward of \$200). Some locals think their long-held fear will finally be realized and the Sonoma they know and love will disappear. Indeed, tourist traffic is already increasing. Others are convinced they'll be able to continue to hold the line and preserve Sonoma's unique charm. Until it all shakes out, sooner rather than later is the smart traveler's creed.

BY NAIOMI KAUFMAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS HAWK

SHOP FRONTS

The **Wine Exchange of Sonoma** ⑤ pairs impressive selections of local and international wines with beers, making it a regular hangout for winemakers who've overdosed on grapes. 452 FIRST ST. E.

The owner of the **Cheesemaker's Daughter** ⑩, Ditty Vella, is indeed the daughter of local cheese legend Ignacio Vella, of Vella Cheese, and her lineage shows in the shop's ever-changing lineup of top-shelf cheeses. 127 E. NAPA ST.

Specializing in hand-made tchotchkes, jewelry made by third-world artisans, and ecofriendly curiosities such as elephant-dung paper, **Baksheesh** ③ is like Cost Plus with a soul. Its owners promote fair trade and environmentally sound practices. 423 FIRST ST. W.

Sonoma Girlie Stuff ② is Forever 21 gone small town. Here, unicolored thermals hang next to shiny wraparound skirts, and knockoff sunglasses sit next to stacks of designer jeans. 124 W. NAPA ST.

ONLY HERE

The **Swiss Hotel** ④, one of the oldest locally owned establishments on the square, is also home to one of Sonoma's best-kept secrets, the Glaniffie. This creamy Irish coffee-like concoction knocks you out and then picks you up—or the other way around. Helen Dunlap, the 93-year-old landlady, has been making it for 40 years and is the only living soul who knows the recipe. Not to worry about what happens when Helen is no longer with us: the recipe is in her will. 18 W. SPAIN ST.

THE GRUB

The family-owned **Harvest Moon Cafe** ⑧ feels like a trip to the European countryside; it's small and cozy with a lovely outside dining enclave and simple but delicious food, such as the housemade pork and pistachio terrine. 487 FIRST ST. W.

El Dorado Kitchen ⑦ boasts a creative cocktail menu and haute California cuisine prepared by three ex-French Laundry chefs (executive, sous, and pastry). 405 FIRST ST. W.

Patrons at **Cafe LaHaye** ⑥ sniff, swirl, and sip hard-to-come-by vino, paired with dishes like house-smoked trout with crispy potato pancakes and pear-ginger compote, while checking out the rotating art displays. 140 E. NAPA ST.

At the Portuguese restaurant **La Salette** ⑨, start with assorted charcuterie and cheeses, like linguica and queijo fresco. Then enjoy a steaming copper bowl full of the restaurant's signature cataplana de marisco, a delicious seafood and white bean stew. 452 1/2 FIRST ST. E.

ON THIS SPOT

Sonoma city council members spent the summer of 2000 removing and then returning the free-roaming chicken population on **Sonoma Plaza** ⑩. The "chicken saga" began with several rooster attacks and ended when the town sided with the birds. People lined up in front of city hall with signs reading "Save the chickens" and "They belong here too!"

HANGOUTS

On Tuesday nights, locals and tourists head from the farmer's market to **Murphy's Irish Pub** ⑪ to mingle "with their buckets of flowers and bags of squash, to visit and have a pint," as Sonoma's former mayor and Murphy's co-owner Larry Murphy puts it. 464 FIRST ST. E.

With a notable duck burger, the best espresso around, and an outdoor patio shielded by fragrant climbing flowers, the **Sunflower Cafe** ⑫ offers a lot more than Starbucks, which has yet to invade the square. 421 FIRST ST. W.

Boozehounds go to **Steiner's** ⑬, entering through the original (circa 1927) green saloon doors. After the bar's recent remodel, twentysomethings joined the geezers who've been regulars here for decades. 465 FIRST ST. W.

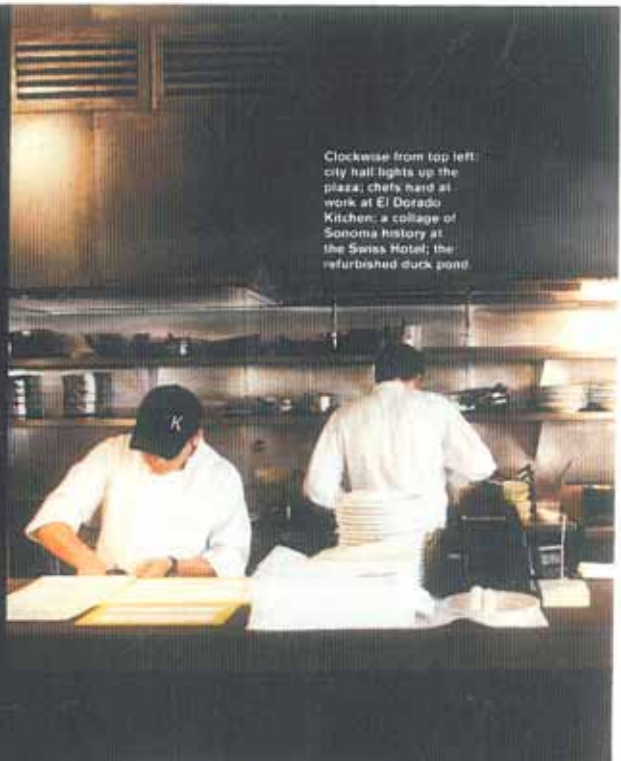
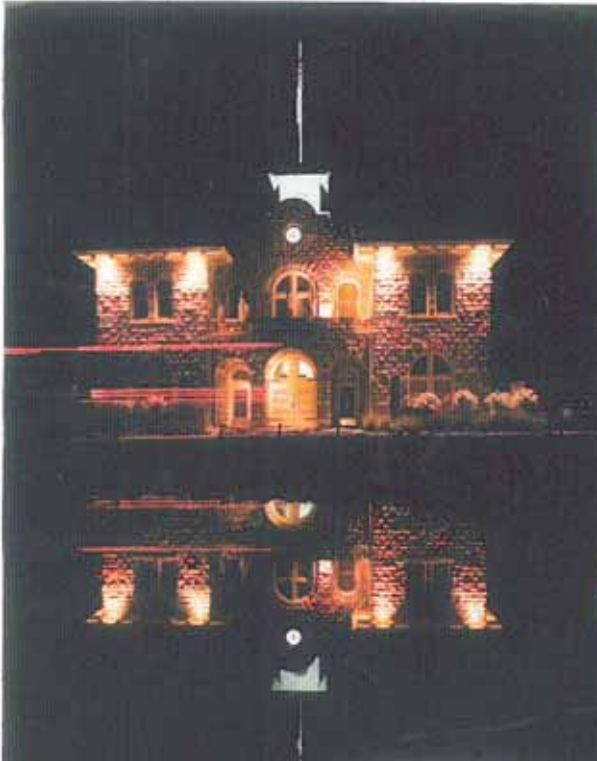
WHAT IT COSTS

To rent: \$1,250 for a two-bedroom duplex at 745 First Street West.

To buy: \$968,000 for a four-bedroom, 2.5-bath house at 1068 Fryer Creek.

THE TALK

The unpopularity of the plaza's recent duck pond renovation soared after the *Sonoma Valley Sun* leaked the price: \$70,000. The sum has been on the tip of many tongues, especially given the closing of Sonoma Valley High's swimming pool due to lack of funds last year. Locals worry that the tourism agenda is outweighing the best interests of Sonoma, and for many the proof is in the pond.



Clockwise from top left: city hall lights up the plaza; chefs hard at work at El Dorado Kitchen; a collage of Sonoma history at the Swiss Hotel; the refurbished duck pond.

