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WEEKEND ESCAPE | NORTHERN CALIFORNIA | SAN FRANCISCO

San Francisco's Hayes Valley, epitome of cool

It's not scary anymore, it's so fly. This is the place to eat a cupcake off china, get a facial, learn about sake and have a nightcap at a drag bar.

By Janis Cooke Newman, Los Angeles Times
December 24, 2006[Click to Enlarge](#)

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San Francisco — MY San Francisco neighborhood is not cool. It is sunny and cheap, but living there conveys zero hipness. So whenever I want to feel cooler than I really am, I give myself a weekend in Hayes Valley, the trendy neighborhood that sprang up after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake destroyed the freeway that ran through it. Beneath the elevated concrete ramps, not far from San Francisco's Civic Center, were tree-lined blocks of Victorian row houses.

While the freeway was functioning, the neighborhood — named for Hayes Street, which dissects it — was dangerous. Once the highway was gone, the row houses began to be transformed into wide-windowed shop fronts and art galleries. The neighborhood's former inhabitants, few of whom you would want to encounter after dark, were replaced by 30-somethings who really know how to wear black.

Here's how cool Hayes Valley is: Nothing opens before 11 a.m., so I begin my weekend with brunch at Citizen Cake, because it's impossible not to love a restaurant that encourages me to "Have cake. Eat it." Citizen Cake serves up hip comfort food, like organic grits topped with a poached egg, and just to demonstrate how seriously it takes dessert, the cupcakes are presented on china plates.

After brunch, I like to wander across the street to Friend to check out the latest in modern design — transistor radios made of turquoise rubber, beanbag chairs in bright vinyl, Alessi personal fans that look like google-eyed aliens.

Inspired by Friend's collection of Herman Miller and Philippe Starck objects, I head to Timbuk2, where I can design my own messenger bag. San Francisco-based Timbuk2 began by making indestructible — and great-looking — bags for bike messengers. Now seemingly every San Franciscan with a sense of style uses one to carry an iBook and the newest Dave Eggers tome.

My next stop is Blue Bottle Coffee Kiosk. Blue Bottle, roasted in the East Bay, is easily the best coffee in San Francisco. The company's two stands at the Saturday Ferry Plaza farmers market are always crowded. The Hayes Valley kiosk, no more than a counter tucked into a garage, is generally crowded but more manageable.

*

Corsets just for fun

NEXT to Blue Bottle is Dark Garden — Unique Corsetry. Part Victoriana, part S&M, Dark Garden makes corsets for brides and fetishists, and girls who just want to have fun. The store carries ready-made garments in silk brocade or leather, but most of Dark Garden's customers (including Christina Aguilera and Pamela Anderson) invest the two to three months necessary to be fitted with a custom model.

Dark Garden always prompts a visit to Alla Prima Fine Lingerie for something a little more conventional. Turns out, I had never owned a bra the correct size until I was taken into Alla Prima's fitting room and measured by Yolanda. The Italian underwire she brought actually gave me cleavage.

Then it's on to an ayurvedic facial at Gaia Tree. "After 30, you can't get too much oil," facialist Sabine Kuhner tells me, as she rubs a full jar of rose-water-scented ghee onto my face and scalp. Sabine presses on mysterious points beneath my nose, pulls on my ears and, ultimately, makes my skin look fantastic.

After washing the ghee out of my hair at nearby Hayes Street Inn, I'm ready for dinner. Suppenkuche is so untrendy, it's cool. Everybody eats German cuisine family-style at big wood tables, digging into gigantic platters of potato pancakes, Wiener schnitzel, and pork roasted in beer.

For a nightcap, I like Marlena's, the Cheers of drag bars. The place is full of men in sequins, as well as men in men's clothing, women who actually are women and the patron's dogs. Walls are covered with memorabilia from a gay rodeo — posters of men in chaps (and little else) and square-dancing dresses made for masculine proportions.

I like to begin Sunday morning with an Anusara yoga class at Yoga Tree. Anusara is a gentle form of yoga, suitable for beginners, and practiced at a temperature that will not cause you to sweat through your Prana tank top. The work-out room at Yoga Tree has a blue-skinned

Afterward, it's brunch at Modern Tea. Although the sunny yellow place has the intoxicating smell of waffles (which are made from a family recipe), I usually go for the cast-iron custard corn bread drizzled with maple syrup — comfort food from the Southern childhood I wish I'd had. Modern Tea serves seemingly every color and nationality of tea. Assam Breakfast from India goes exceptionally well with the corn bread.

Then it's on to True Sake, an import-only sake shop. It is possible to turn a visit to this store into a tutorial on sake-making. A video continuously runs images of a bubbling caldron of fermenting rice, and a chart explains the different grades of sake, which is determined by how much of the outer kernel is polished away. Descriptive cards are tucked into the bottles, declaring the sake inside to be "slick" or "snappy" or "clever."

Hayes Valley does not lack for clothing stores, but my favorite is Ver Unica, which carries 80% vintage. This is not musty-smelling vintage, but Chanel jackets from the '60s, and big '70s-style copper earrings. My last purchase was a '50s-era skirt printed with little Wells Fargo stagecoaches and fastened with real Bakelite buttons.

If I wish to turn my consumerism toward a higher purpose, I head next to Tin Horn Public Works, where the writing on the wall instructs me to "Buy Art — Save Lives." The work at Tin Horn is mostly by local artists and always changing. Some of it even spills over into the appealing Momi Toby's across the street — run by Tin Horn's owner and named for his mother.

By now it's nearly the cocktail hour. "Alcohol is the anesthesia by which we endure the operation of life," according to George Bernard Shaw, and as quoted in the (impressive) cocktail menu at Absinthe Brasserie & Bar. Concocting cocktails is an art form at Absinthe. The restaurant's bartenders have just published a recipe book called "The Art of the Bar." With the light slanting through the shelves of amber bottles and the green devil Absinthe grinning from the wall, this is exactly the place to spend some time before dinner.

Everybody has a special-occasion restaurant, a place where the food, atmosphere and service are always sublime. Jardiniere is mine. Bacon-wrapped quail with creamy polenta. Spring pea flan. Warm banana and bitter chocolate ice cream. All served against a backdrop of sinuous pushed-steel banisters and Art Deco light fixtures. After dinner here, I go back to my less-cool part of the city just happy to live in the same area code.