

## Master of DESIGN

Pat Kuleto continues to set the style for  
California restaurants **BY TIM FISH**

**T**he first thing you notice about Pat Kuleto's office at his Napa Valley estate winery is the tree. It's hard to miss—a live oak that's 5 feet in diameter, it rises from the ground and continues right through the ceiling. While building his winery in the mountains east of St. Helena, Kuleto thought it a waste to cut down the oak, so he integrated it into the structure's design.

OPPOSITE: GABRIELA HASBUN



Pat Kuleto has been designing restaurants for more than two decades. This year, he is poised to launch his most ambitious projects to date.



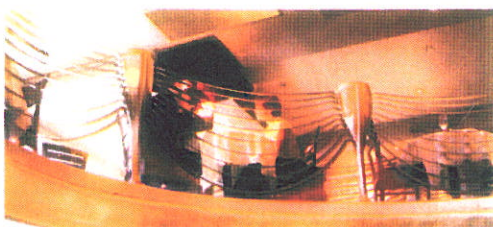
No one designs restaurants quite like Kuleto, as evidenced by the art deco revisionism of Buckhead Diner in Atlanta, the under-the-sea adventure that is Farallon or the colorful modern art extravagance of Postrio, both in San Francisco. He creates a fanciful space that somehow makes you feel at home, yet his vision goes beyond design—it informs almost everything he does. Whether it's as a vintner and grower, a restaurant mini-mogul, an outdoorsman or a dedicated bon vivant, Kuleto pursues his passions with gusto.

"He's bigger than life and he has a lot of energy. It's no holds barred with him," says friend and Napa Valley vintner Carl Doumani. "A lot of people dream about something and never do it. He thinks big and then does it."

With a résumé that includes 185 restaurants around the world, the lion's share of which are in California, Kuleto is also a principal owner of four: Boulevard, Farallon and Jardinière in San Francisco and Martini House in St. Helena. This year, he is launching his most ambitious projects thus far. In the fall, he is opening Waterbar and Epic Roasthouse, two restaurants side by side on San Francisco's waterfront, near the high-profile Ferry Building and the shadow of the Bay Bridge.

Outside of the city, Kuleto is scheduled this spring to open Nick's Cove & Cottages resort on the shores of Tomales Bay, one of the most beautiful stretches of the California coast. When Kuleto bought Nick's, a rundown watering hole and fishing village, even his friends thought he had finally bitten off more than he could chew. But after spending \$12 million to modernize and upgrade the property and surviving eight years of bureaucratic song and dance, Kuleto is poised to make Nick's one of the hottest destination restaurants and resorts north of San Francisco.

Standing on the end of a 400-foot pier, Kuleto looks out over Tomales Bay. It's the middle of winter, but a warm sun reflects in the soft sway of the water, and a seagull hangs on a cold breeze like a surfer on a wave. A small boat slips through the water toward the shore, where



An oval-shaped bar dominates the center of the main dining room at Jardinière, the popular San Francisco restaurant co-owned by Kuleto and chef Traci Des Jardins.



Farallon was built on the former site of an indoor pool, prompting Kuleto to create an underwater theme with aquatic touches such as jellyfish light fixtures.

men wait to unload fresh oysters. Kuleto points toward the mouth of the bay. "The oyster farms are just over there. You'll see herring boats out there when it's the right season," he notes. "This is the most pristine bay on the entire Pacific Coast of the United States."

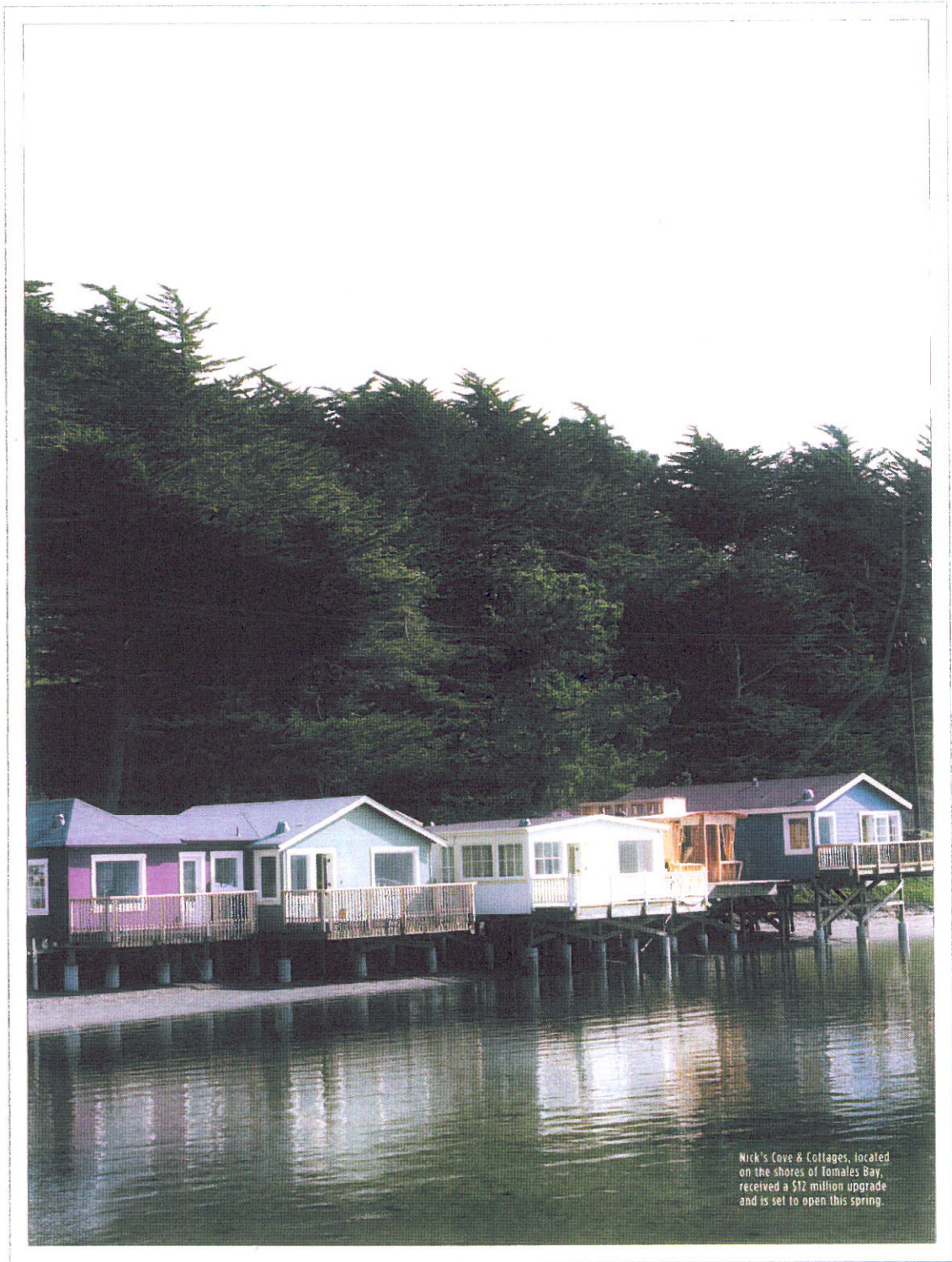
Six feet 2 inches tall and barrel-chested, Kuleto, 62, is difficult to overlook. His once dark beard has turned gray, and his hair is thin on the top but dangles in a ponytail in the back. He prefers Hawaiian shirts.

A native of Los Angeles, Kuleto is self-taught in the realm of design, but he hasn't allowed his lack of a formal education to get in the way. "I'm a lousy artist," Kuleto says. "I mean, I can't draw flies, [but] I can see it all in my head, every detail. I guess I have the gift of vision."

The Kuleto touch has set the style for trendy restaurants across the country. "Kuleto's over-the-top, spectacular designs were so experimental and unprecedented in the Bay area that they made waves and quickly became icons of San Francisco culture," says Zahid Sarfar, design editor for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "The highly crafted, imaginative aesthetic of spaces such as Farallon and Postrio... remain the gold standard of finely made restaurants that employ local talent and incorporate original art."

Doumani compares Kuleto's design style to a movie set. "It's kind of a fantasy, a background for a good time," he says. "People go in and get caught up." According to Sonoma vintner Don Carano, who hired Kuleto to design Bistro Roxy at Carano's Eldorado casino in Reno, Nev., "His restaurants are creative and there's a real feeling of comfort

TOP AND OPPOSITE: GABRIEL WAZEN; BOTTOM: FRANK ANDERSON



Nick's Cove & Cottages, located on the shores of Tomales Bay, received a \$12 million upgrade and is set to open this spring.

and warmth. It's amazing what he has done without a major architectural education."

Not that there haven't been challenges along the way. In the late 1970s, Kuleto made a fortune in real-estate development in Northern California, but when interest rates soared in the early 1980s, he was forced to declare bankruptcy. His first stab at growing grapes literally went up in smoke in 1992, when a grass fire swept through his 600-acre ranch in Calaveras County, in the Sierra Nevada foothills. In recent years, Kuleto parted ways with his wife, Shannon, but he remains close to their 11-year-old son, Daniel.

**B**ack on shore at Nick's, the sound of power saws and hammers drowns out the seagulls and lapping waves. Nick's is a small group of buildings that straddles Highway 1 on the eastern shore of the bay, about an hour's drive north of the Golden Gate in Marin County. With origins that date back to the early 20th century, it was once a thriving settlement, one of many that catered to tourists and fishermen on the bay. After the establishment of the Point Reyes National Seashore across the bay in the 1960s and the enactment of California's coastal protection legislation in the 1970s, development in the area was largely restricted, if not impossible. Gradually, the cottages and restaurant constituting Nick's fell into disrepair; Kuleto bought the property in 1999, before it went on the market.

So far, it's been quite the labor of love. "Talk about a long hang time," Kuleto quips. "We had no idea it was going to take eight years. We had more than 50 different governmental and special interest groups involved, and every one had its own agenda."

Nick's Cove will feature a casual approach. Mark Franz, Kuleto's partner in Farallon, will oversee the kitchen. The design of the 130-seat restaurant is a revisionist's old hunting lodge, with knotty pine paneling and stuffed animal heads and fish on the wall. There will be a raw bar and a menu that focuses on local seafood, meat, cheese and produce. "Most of the food we buy for our restaurants comes from right around here," Kuleto notes. "There's duck and lamb from Sonoma. Cowgirl Creamery is just down the road, and McEvoy olive oil is just over that ridge."

The wine list will comprise a few hundred selections and focus extensively on Northern California producers. Peter Palmer, wine director for Farallon, will oversee the list. Wine will be also available in the boat shack at the end of the pier, where oysters will be sold in buckets and a small menu will be offered. With only 12 cottages on the property, Kuleto knows he will have to attract a wide range of clients, locals and tourists

While he can't help but always have a project in the works, Kuleto aims to slow down a bit to spend more time with his son, Daniel.

"If [a]n artist is triggered than life and he may a lot of energy. It's no holds barred sort of thing. A lot of people dream about something and never do it. He thinks big and then does it." —COURTNEY JENSEN, *WINE SPECTATOR*



alike. If customers do decide to stay, they'll spend their time in rustic luxury. Six of the cottages are on piers over the water and provide soothing views. All the cottages are done in early to mid-20th century decor, with lots of redwood and other raw timber, country pine antiques and custom-built furniture. Each has a fireplace, hot tub and private deck.

Kuleto has designed Nick's to appeal to guests who appreciate the outdoors. Point Reyes, home to a classic lighthouse, has 70,000 acres that serve as a haven of hiking and biking. Tomales Bay is popular with kayakers, sailors and bird-watchers, and there's salmon and other sport fishing in nearby Bodega Bay.

At one point about three years ago, when the plans for Nick's were stalled, Kuleto began work on his San Francisco projects. The restaurants, Waterbar and Epic Roasthouse, are now under construction in the Rincon Park area, which encompasses about 2 acres on the Embarcadero. Kuleto took inspiration for the restaurant designs from the refurbished industrial buildings that line the waterfront, using lots of brick, limestone and exposed steel. Waterbar, which will specialize in seafood, will have two-story fish tanks. "It will be like eating at the Monterey Bay Aquarium," Kuleto says. Franz will



REY JENSEN