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# Going back to the land

By Carolyn Jung Updated 4:26 pm, Friday, October 30, 2015

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Customers place their order at El Molino Cent.

### Chef Louis Maldonado

moved from hard-charge San Francisco to Healdsburg, Calif.

“Everyone was saying I was going to relax and be less intense,” he recalls. “I was saying, ‘Yeah, right. You don’t know who I am.’ If anything, I have become more intense. That’s just who I am.”

Moving to Healdsburg to take the reins of Spoonbar in the H2Hotel in 2012 may not have downshifted Maldonado into laid-back mode, but the lifelong karate aficionado and “Top Chef” competitor who finished in the top four has not been immune to its small-town charms.

“I like that you can walk everywhere,” he says. “The town is only three blocks, so I can walk my son to school, walk with him to the ice cream shop, then walk him back home. You get a beautiful summer here and a real winter. I’m close to my parents and just close enough to the city.”

In fact, it was the birth of his son 6½ years ago that prompted Maldonado to relocate. After a three-year stint as chef de cuisine at Aziza in San Francisco, he was looking to make a change that would allow him more family time.

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Sonoma County proved a homecoming of sorts. Maldonado grew up in Antioch and Pittsburg before moving as teenager to Ukiah, where his parents have owned a martial arts studio for years. His father, an eighth-degree black belt, teaches defensive tactics to Ukiah police officers, including Maldonado's sister.

For Maldonado, there are many parallels between martial arts and professional cooking. Both require the discipline to do something over and over until perfected. Both instill confidence and a strong work ethic.

As with a deft karate move, he's worked hard to finesse Spoonbar's cuisine. Last year, the restaurant was focused on tasting menus. This year, it's more about small plates and shared plates, which are swapped out every six weeks. There's a greater emphasis on sourcing

from Sonoma County and its environs now, too.

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"We use every farm from Boonville to Sebastopol," he says. "Every one has tomatoes. But we work our way from one to the other to get the best at the right time. We do get diners who came in one week for something, then come back the next week to find it's gone, but still want it. We are not the place for that. We move on because there is no more."

At Pizzando, which he opened inside the Hotel Healdsburg less than a year after taking over Spoonbar, the menu changes less often since Maldonado discovered just how loyal regulars are to favorites such as grilled Tuscan kale salad with prosciutto, and bucatini all'Amatriciana. "Both restaurants are geared to what I want to eat at any given moment," he says. "We try to stay away from the description of 'modern American.' We just say it's delicious. It's the only rule we have here."

**Spoonbar:** 219 Healdsburg Ave., Healdsburg, (707) 433-7222. [www.spoonbar.com](http://www.spoonbar.com). Dinner nightly.

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**Chef's taste of Sonoma County**

Tips for delectable experiences from Louis Maldonado:

**El Molino Central.** Maldonado says this unassuming taco stand is “hands down, the best restaurant in the Bay Area.” It’s not just the exemplary fried fish tacos, enchilada Suizas, white posole, sopes and tortillas, made of masa from organic dried corn that’s stone-ground daily. It’s that “there is so much soul and heart behind it all.” *11 Central Ave., Sonoma (Boyes Hot Springs). (707) 939-1010, [www.elmolinocentral.com](http://www.elmolinocentral.com).*

**La Michoacana.** After finishing your meal at El Molino, walk a few blocks down to this shop for paletas, especially on a warm day. “The mango paleta is always a solid bet,” Maldonado says. “But the pistachio coated in toasted pistachios is mind-blowing good.” *18495 Highway 12, Sonoma. (707) 938-1773, [www.lamich-icecream.com](http://www.lamich-icecream.com).*

**El Barrio Bar.** Maldonado recommends the unique cocktails, as well as the mescal selection, which can even be enjoyed in flights alongside queso fundido or Mexican deviled eggs topped with cilantro lime pesto and chili dust. “The atmosphere is so relaxed that you’d think you were on vacation,” he says. *16230 Main St., Guerneville. (707) 604-7601, [www.elbarriobar.com](http://www.elbarriobar.com).*

**Hamburger Ranch & Bar-B-Cue.** Maldonado remembers that when he was a kid, his parents stopped regularly at this beloved roadside eatery on drives to Ukiah. Back then, he’d always choose the burger. But nowadays, he’s partial to the brisket, baby back ribs, pulled pork and chicken — all cooked in a giant wood-fired smoker. He continues the tradition by bringing his son here now. *31195 N. Redwood Hwy., Cloverdale. (707) 894-5616, [www.hamburgerranchandbbq.com](http://www.hamburgerranchandbbq.com).*

**Healdsburg Running Co.** This is the place to outfit yourself, whether it’s for an easy jog or an ultra-marathon. Visiting pro cyclists and elite runners always make a stop here. “Owner **Skip Brand** does weekly runs through town that gain quite the crowd,” Maldonado says. “They are centered on a few miles, followed by a few beers and food at a local restaurant. This place embodies the core of Healdsburg and the people that support this town.” *333 Center St., Healdsburg. (707) 395-0372, [www.healdsburgrunningcompany.com](http://www.healdsburgrunningcompany.com).*

**Preston Vineyards.** Owners of an estate winery that grew to include a diversified farm, the Preston family were the first people Maldonado met when he moved to Healdsburg. He still buys from them today, most notably their lamb, which he says has a flavor unlike any other. He suggests starting your visit with a wine tasting, then moving on to sample a rustic loaf of bread, baked on the premises, along with some just-picked produce. *9282 W. Dry Creek Road, Healdsburg. (707) 433-3372, [www.prestonvineyards.com](http://www.prestonvineyards.com).*

**Motion Fitness.** Most mornings, you can find Maldonado working out here, where classes and personal training are also available. “It’s quiet and generally very calm,” he says. “For an hour or two of escape, it’s the place to go and grind it out.” *103 W. North St., Healdsburg. (707) 481-9097, [www.motionhb.com](http://www.motionhb.com).*

**Mugnaini.** Wood-fired pizza oven specialist Andrea Mugnaini recently moved her headquarters here. This place is a temple of temptation, Maldonado says. With all the beautifully tiled models on display, you can’t help but yearn for one. Learn how to cook in these specialized ovens in one-day or three-day classes held here, or on a seven-day excursion to Tuscany. Maldonado is a big fan, and he uses a Mugnaini oven at his Pizzando. *1530 Grove St., Healdsburg. (707) 416-4106, [www.mugnaini.com](http://www.mugnaini.com).*

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