

FROM LAURA'S TRAVELOGUE — SAN FRANCISCO

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL
MESSENGER FOOD WRITER

As soon as we arrived, it was obvious we were somewhere far from western Kentucky. Tectonically speaking, northern California is where the Pacific plate rubs noses with the North American plate, resulting in steep, Asian-style mountains, cold, cold seas, and mysterious fog banks that roll down across the Golden Gate bridge like a scene straight out of *The Fog*. In nearly every way, San Francisco is, quite simply, different.

One of the first things we wanted to do was see the Golden Gate Bridge; crossing it is an adventure in itself. According to goldengatebridge.org, the type of fog along the coastline is called "advection fog." It wraps around the bridge before swooping out across the ocean, and is one of the reasons that the bridge is painted orange and not actually gold; the color makes it easier to see the structure under heavy cloud cover. While crossing through the dense, living fog I half expected to see a pterodactyl glide over our heads, or perhaps a herd of sauropods waiting to welcome us to Sausalito.

Garden Paradise

South of the city along the Pacific Coast Highway, that amazing stretch of road that clings to the cliffs along the ocean like a wriggling tree snake, farmers were preparing for spring planting. Some of the smaller farms and truck patches already had lush fields of artichokes pushing sunward. Small, household gardens were brimming with greenery, too, but most of the big farms were still blank canvases of well-groomed, incredibly rich soil.

Sandwiched between the Coastal Mountains and the Sierra Nevadas, the patchwork of jungle green and dense black soil along the highway was a feast for the eyes. Coupled with the waves crashing mere yards away, I could easily understand why the folks there were willing to risk mudslides and earthquakes for the privilege of becoming a part of this gorgeous plot of earth.

That line between eccentric and just plain crazy

Of course, big resort hotels are great, but for me a trip to San Francisco is all about walking through the city. Because of this, I enjoy staying at the smaller, boutique hotels near the Embarcadero. From this area, it's fairly easy for a reasonably fit soul to walk to Chinatown, Fisherman's Wharf, or dart in and out of the shops along Market Street.

It's wise any time of the year to take a jacket along anywhere in Northern California, and a heavy coat isn't out of the question if you are heading to the Wharf area. By western Kentucky standards, the temps in this part of California range anywhere from slightly chilly to downright cold. San Francisco has very few level streets, and comfortable walking shoes are a must. It's wise to plan to take a few breathers here and there if you aren't used to walking steep hillsides.

I'm convinced that the most friendly vagrants in the country inhabit San Francisco. We encountered a few here and there, mostly near Chinatown and the Mission district, and they were appreciative, thankful, and consistently polite even to non-philanthropists. I'm equally certain that many of them are not genuinely needy, and suspect that some are actually doing college research work.

While out walking, frequently we found the city to be downright smelly. I suspected the hilly terrain and close vicinity to the ocean created some sort of sewage backup, but later learned that it's actually due to one of San Francisco's many "green" laws. Conservation efforts have resulted in such a low water supply in the city sewers that the pipes simply cannot cleanly flush



San Francisco's iconic Golden Gate Bridge, curving its way across the bay through the fog.



A yeasty turtle rests atop a friendly crocodile in the viewing window at the Boudin Bakery and Restaurant at Fisherman's Wharf.

the system. Other large cities around the country are beginning to experience the same problem, including Louisville, Ky. It's most noticeable when standing near a manhole — so we tried to avoid lingering near them when possible.

Another quirky San Francisco law is one requiring shoppers to either provide their own "earth friendly" shopping bag or pay a dime tax for every bag they use. This even applies to airport gift shops. I made some purchases at one shop that did not have bags, so I had to haul my armload of souvenirs to another store and buy one.

Chinatown

Chinatown is a whole little country packed into a few city blocks, and an absolute must for any visitor to San Francisco. Trying to absorb all the amazing things we'd seen/smelled/heard/tasted can cause a brain ache, and walking around we could imagine we were really in Shanghai. There was stuff piled everywhere. Beautiful, bizarre, funny and sometimes scary stuff. And in Chinatown, nearly everything you can think of can be found in a dried or pickled state.

If our hotel room had been equipped with a full kitchen, I would have really enjoyed preparing some of the intriguing foods found in Chinatown. The baby pac choi was delightfully fresh, and there were many things I'd never seen before, including piles of bright fuchsia colored dragonfruit. Each morning I contented myself with fresh brewed Phoenix White Eye Jasmine tea from one of the tea shops.

Outside of one shop an elderly Chinese man was playing a ru'an, a traditional stringed instrument

that vaguely resembles a banjo, but with a decidedly melancholic tone. It was interesting watching this man quietly play while all around him relative chaos reigned.

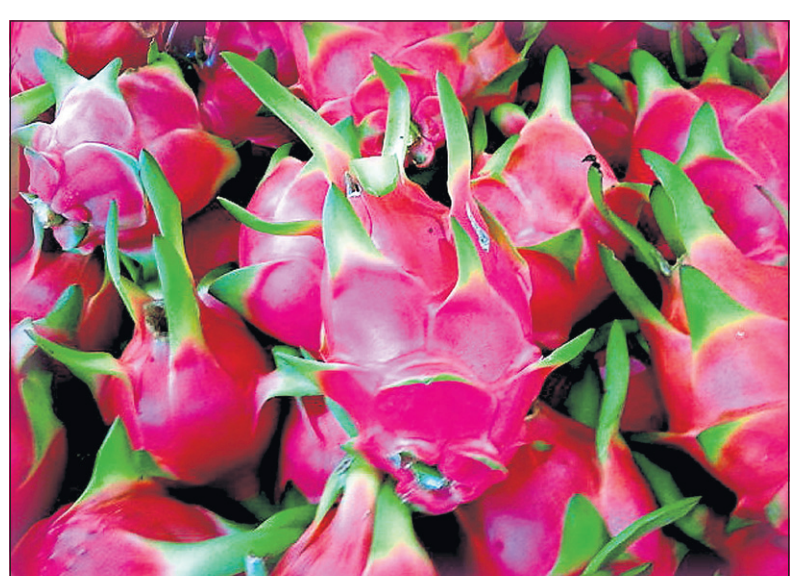
Along with the music, various Asian dialects echoed loudly around us. The Chinese conversational style is quite lively, and to the uninitiated it may seem like an argument-inducing virus has taken over the streets, but really it's just a normal day. Many residents of Chinatown speak a limited amount of English and communication is generally a combination of words and gestures.

Trying too hard

Many of the restaurants were a bit of a disappointment in that there was often so much effort put into the presentation of a dish that flavor was at times secondary. For example, Fog City Diner's special: chicken tenders hand breaded in a medley of Rice Krispies and Corn Flakes. Really, now, I think we can do better.

Fortunately, there were a some great exceptions. Boudin Bakery and Restaurant at Fisherman's Wharf is one of them, and well worth the stop. The atmosphere is laid back and the bakery is fun for kids and adults alike. They're specialty is — you guessed it — San Francisco style sourdough bread. Unlike the softer, sweeter version, San Francisco sourdough is renowned for it's crispy crust and sour-ish flavor. At Boudin, bakers shape the dough into all manner of wildlife and edible art. On the restaurant side, we tried a delicious hot crab and spinach dip with toasted sourdough rounds.

A few doors down from our



Piles of exotic, brightly colored dragonfruit at a market in San Francisco's much heralded Chinatown.

hotel was one of the many small Japanese take out and sushi bars that dot the city, and after making my way back from the Embarcadero one afternoon I was tempted by a sandwich board sign advertising "Nagasaki Champon". It's a noodle dish served up with pork and seafood, which was accompanied by cup of white miso soup that was utterly delicious, reminding me of the broth from my Dad's oyster stew.

Rounding out the menu

I never expected to like San Francisco as much as I did. For one thing, there's that whole earthquake, mudslide, wildfire thing. There are quite a few quirky, dare I say neurotic, laws, too. In nearly every way, it is as different from western Kentucky as can be.

What I discovered when we arrived, however, was that I enjoyed it a great deal. Northern California is a gem; I was utterly overwhelmed with the natural beauty that the residents of this city are blessed with, and look forward to many return visits. I also discovered that ginseng root looks a lot a dried up squid.

The Recipes

Hot Crab and Spinach Dip

This is my own version of this savory dip, which can be served as an appetizer or as a great accompaniment to a bowl of soup or a salad.

1 10-ounce package frozen chopped spinach
1 8-ounce package cream cheese, softened
1/2 teaspoon Old Bay seasoning
1 teaspoon lemon juice
Hot sauce, optional, to taste
14-ounce package crumbled feta cheese
1 6-ounce can lump crab meat

1/2 cup shredded mozzarella

Thaw and drain spinach. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Blend together spinach, cream cheese, old bay, lemon juice and hot sauce, if using, until thoroughly combined. Carefully fold in feta and crabmeat. Pour into a well buttered shallow baking dish and top with mozzarella. Bake, uncovered, about 25 minutes, until bubbly and cheese is slightly browned. Serve with toasted sourdough, tortilla chips or crackers. Serves 6-8, as an appetizer.

Japanese-Style Noodle Dish

Nagasaki Champon is a slightly complicated mixture of pork broth, vegetables, seafood and fish cake. Champon noodles are similar to ramen but a bit thicker. Here, I have created a San Francisco inspired noodle dish using ingredients that are readily available in western Kentucky, including that college student staple, ramen noodles.

3 tablespoons oil
8 peeled, frozen shrimp
1/4 pound thinly sliced pork
1 cup thinly sliced cabbage
1/2 cup bean sprouts
1/2 cup baby carrots, julienned
2 package Ramen noodles, chicken or shrimp flavor
2 thin slices peeled fresh ginger
Cayenne pepper, to taste
2 green onions, thinly sliced

Heat the oil in a skillet or wok on medium-high heat. When hot, add the shrimp and pork and stir-fry until nearly cooked through, 3-4 minutes. Add the vegetables except for the green onions, and cook until meat is done, about 3 more minutes. Prepare ramen noodles as directed, adding the ginger and cayenne pepper to the broth as it heats. When done, divide the noodles between four soup bowls. Top the noodles with the meat and vegetable mixture, then pour the broth over all. Serve piping hot, with chopsticks for fun. (Simply slurp the broth from the bowl.) TIP: Add scrambled egg or use your favorite seafood, meats or vegetables. Four servings.