

# Caledonia—the soul of Sausalito

Yards from the Sausalito waterfront,  
this neighborhood still feels miles away from the tourists

**“W**e reside top-siders.” A small placard in the shoe repair shop says it all about this quiet backstreet. At first glance, you understand why so few people find it. There are no colored flags. No flower baskets. No sidewalk signs for free wine tasting. Sausalito slows down in this six-block stretch. “What’s here?” one wonders at first glance. This side street, it seems, offers nothing out of the ordinary.

Tucked just above Bridgeway between Napa and Johnson streets, Caledonia Street is not far from the San Francisco ferry drop-off. Still, it remains a well-kept secret compared with Bridgeway, its tourist-haven counterpart to the north. Out-of-towners on a straight shot to the waterfront walk right on by. Skirting Caledonia, they miss what most residents consider the soul of Sausalito. Locals prefer it that way. This is where the true Sausalitans live and play.

More than a collection of shops, Caledonia is a community. Hidden here are the essentials—a bookstore, a gourmet grocer, ethnic restaurants, fitness centers, art galleries, antiques, a theater, a park, even a neighborhood bar—run for years by the same family. The street is Sausalito’s seat of government. City Hall sits at one end, the fire station at the other. A few spots draw folks from around Marin—like the Michelin Guide-listed Sushi Ran—but most cater



to Caledonians. Longtime resident Vicki Nichols says, “It’s great for dinner, light lunch, entertainment and just walking. You can get around without a car. I can hear the foot traffic—the moms and the nannies coming down the street. That really sets the tone, the community feel.”

How did Caledonia Street get its character? It developed along a different track from the rest of Sausalito. In the late-19th century, developers bought a ferry to bring in settlers from San Francisco. The wealthy built mansions in the hills at the southern end of the city; “villas” or “cottages,” they named their private estates. At the other end of town, the working class populated the mudflats. Land was divided up from William Richardson’s old Rancho del Sausalito. Many lots sold in the 1880s were small, but that wasn’t the case on Caledonia. With the dairies up in the hills, the lowland remained undeveloped. “There’s more space,” Nichols points out. “More yards. My building is on the corner and has a large garden, a more neighborhood sense. I’m able to walk around.”

On these mid-sized plots, builders, dairy hands and railroad workers formed a community. A welcoming, residential feel grew. The businesses sprang up to serve this clientele. “New Town” Sausalito developed. It became a street where you could grow up, live your whole life and raise kids—all in the same place.

Before Bridgeway was built as the major thoroughfare, Caledonia was Sausalito’s main street. It was a community gathering place, explains Nichols. In that pre-fridge era, she says, “folks used to come



WATERSTREET HARDWARE ON CALEDONIA

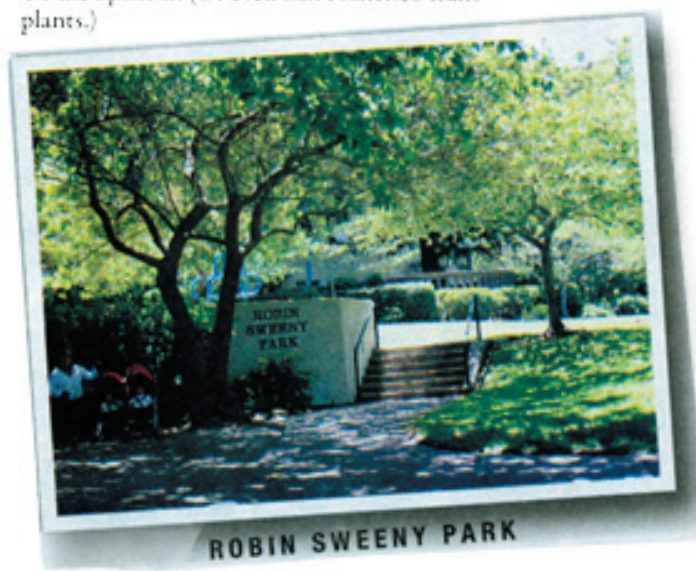
down to Caledonia to get ice." They'd stand around mingling, chatting. "That history," she affirms, "contributes to the feeling it still has today." A few buildings from that era remain, including the ice house. It was used for a while by a local architect as an office before he donated it to the city, which eventually transplanted the building downtown. Now it's Sausalito's visitor center. Other hints of the neighborhood are less obvious. Know the story behind the beacon at the Lighthouse Café? It came from Caledonia's old miniature golf course.

Once the site of a mortuary, but now home to yoga and secluded shopping squares—the street has its quirks. The oldest house remaining in the city is the Bower, still inhabited at Caledonia and Turney. Dating from 1869, the historic facade has been preserved by current resident and owner Mary Griffin. She's spruced up the interior—in line with the spirit of Caledonia—to make it more than a living relic. The hardware store, too, has survived the years with a number of different lives. Old-timers stop out front and point, as if to say, "I went to school here and this was my classroom!"

Caledonia is so cute and cozy, what's the catch? The biggest threat to the neighborhood is creeping commercial development. Chains bring money. Some landlords want to cash in at the cost of Caledonia's character. You can't do everything you need to on Caledonia—there are no one-stop-shopping outlets. But nobody wants them. Residents revere their local establishments. Smitty's must be the homiest bar in town. And Waterstreet Hardware is the city's last-standing fix-it shop.

That's something to celebrate, and sunny Caledonia is perfect for parties. Protected from the fog of the Golden Gate, it's the site of the spring street fair. It's also Sausalito's main parade route. *Chamarita*, the annual Portuguese celebration, includes a grand procession, complete with marching bands and a little queen in a long robe, in recognition of the bounty of food that Queen Isabella once gave a group of starving Portuguese travelers. One of the most influential groups in the city's history, the Portuguese left several halls and the festival as a legacy before many went north for more land.

The original inhabitants of Caledonia weren't the Portuguese. Or the Spanish. (Or even San Francisco transplants.)



ROBIN SWEENEY PARK

Around 1920, Sonoma State University archaeologists uncovered evidence of earlier Miwok habitation. Like the Miwok's history, much of Caledonia heritage is buried or behind facades, including its remaining echoes of WWI. In the '40s, dock workers flooded Sausalito to build warships. Many homeowners crafted in-law units to accommodate them. Nichols's old house, the former Broderick and Wright market,

was closed to make studio apartments when the Marinship was established. Still there weren't enough rooms. Thousands of men worked around the clock. With housing scarce, they needed something to do—and thus Caledonia got a cinema. With its hint of Art Deco facade, CineArts at Marin stands in the same place today and movies are still playing.

The end of the war brought a sleepy feel back to the street. Twenty-thousand people—boat builders and other workers—took off. It was a big switch for the community. "After the war it was a spot where the neighborhood kids gathered in the sand pit behind the fire department," one resident remembers. "Everyone knew each other and ran through the hills. They took kayaks out on the water whether their moms knew it or not."

That's Sausalito's soul. The beauty of the water is one thing shared by the entire community. Only one block away from the waterfront, Caledonia is part of that collective heritage, something everyone wants to protect. —*Lauren Kellner*



SMITTY'S BAR

CALEDONIA AT A GLANCE

**FIRE STATION** - Sausalito Fire Department, 333 Johnson St.

**LIBRARY** - Sausalito Library, 420 Litho St.

**PARKS** - Robin Sweeney Park, Caledonia & Litho St.

**POST OFFICE** - Sausalito Post Office, 150 Harbor Dr.

**PUBLIC SCHOOLS** - Bayside Elementary/Willow Creek Academy, 630 Nevada St.

**DID YOU KNOW?** - Sausalito's oldest standing house, built in 1869, is located at Caledonia and Turney.