

Wandering

# The North Fork

An artist's notebook of  
personal impressions  
collected on the east end  
of Long Island, New York

By Michael J. Killelea





Vegetables and vineyards in Cutchogue.

*ON THE COVER*

The Cutchogue Diner in Cutchogue

# Wandering The North Fork

by Michael J. Killelea

Woody Lane Books

## **T**here's something special about the North Fork.

This skinny spit of land runs east from New York City with the same orientation as its larger sibling to the south, but it really exists in a different dimension. The farmers, fishermen and tradespeople who live on the North Fork know this, not so much as something they think about, but rather, as part of the fiber of their existence. The people who come out to open their summer houses in May know it too. They felt it when they first drove out, stopping at a farm stand for vegetables or a colorful basket that caught their eye. Something special. They felt it again when they came back to pick strawberries in the spring or pumpkins in the fall. They might even have used the sensation as an excuse to stop at one of the vineyards, or for a pie at Briermere's on the way to visit a friend. They may have felt it driving through to the ferry at Orient, that short sea cruise to New England.

But gradually, the rolling land caught up with them and they stopped.

It's just slower out here. People seem to be more tuned to the rhythm of growing things and to the ever present sea. There's not much flash or sizzle in Cutchogue or Greenport or Mattituck and that's just

fine with the people who live there. You can't even drive too fast on most of Main Road because it's only two winding lanes through one little town after another. They widened part of the North Road so now

drivers who may be late for the ferry at the far end of the land can get past the occasional plodding farm tractor. But the ones in a hurry must feel a loss, for it's a shame to pass through East Marion in a blur, where the sea embraces the causeway so closely that your car windows get misty with salt spray on windy days.

It's changing of course, this homespun piece of the Island. It's always been evolving, but it might be doing so faster now. A generation ago, when the Hargraves realized that the sandy soil was ideal for growing grapes, potato farms began to turn into vineyards and the evolution hasn't stopped. That's been a good thing for agriculture, but the success and subsequent expansion of viticulture has also garnered attention from people looking for a place to slow down and settle down.

The North Fork has a great sense of place about itself. 150 year old farmhouses keep a stately watch alongside roads and inlets and have been witness to passing farmers, fishermen and occasional

rumrunners. Many of these buildings pass through generation after generation with the same family painting the trim, fixing the roof and cutting the grass. Occasionally one of them sits in somewhat faded splendor, hidden behind brambles and overgrown by brush where once geraniums and hydrangea brightened their facades. It seems a marriage of land and love, long since left in sadness like a spouse passed on. Still others of them have had their faces brightened by owners with a renewed sense of interest and love for this place. By dint of hard work, they've made the buildings into springtime brides again, bright with fresh paint and colorful flowers.

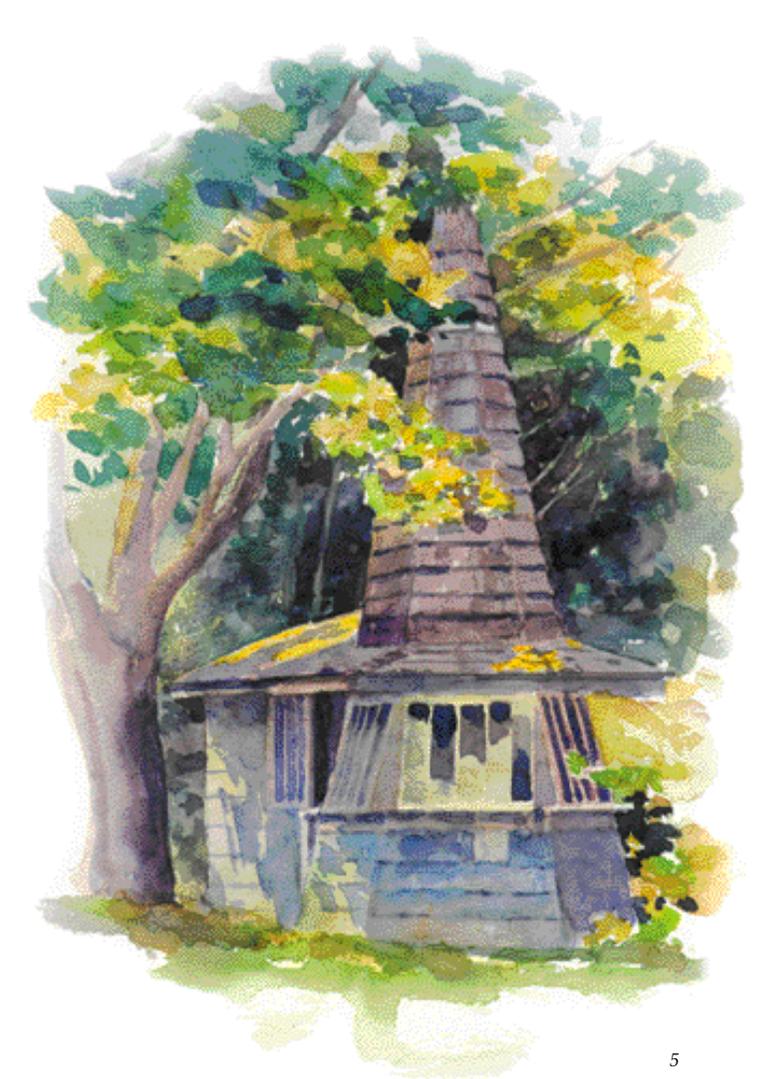
And always, just beyond that line of trees, there is the sea. It scours, caresses and shapes everything it touches on this island. It's a gorgeous but stern taskmaster that creates & sustains life and is a source of endless fascination.

What follows are the visual impressions of a passionate partisan, in love with a place blessed with bounty and beauty - the North Fork.



Winter carries its own beauty in on chilled winds, leaving the land to rest and the remnants of late plantings to nod and rustle stiffly in brittle isolation. Trees on the Mill Road Farm in Riverhead, like most in the dark months, evolve into sepia gray tones, but even here, the January afternoon sun brightens furrowed fields and slumbering tractors.

This winsome structure on Main Road in Aquebogue has been the stuff of legends for at least a hundred years. Built as a farm stand and affectionately known as the “witch’s hat”, it was originally used to sell drinks and candy. Although it has long since exchanged the smiles and warm chatter of its original youthful vendors for the quieter sounds of insects and outdoor creatures, it still exudes a weathered charm that puts to rest any hint of broomsticks and cauldrons.





The north end of Roanoke Avenue drops sharply down a sandy bluff to a small town beach on Long Island Sound after rising for miles across flat Riverhead farmland.



On its way north, the road passes idled crop wagons softened here by fog and gentle spring mists on the Schmidt Farm.