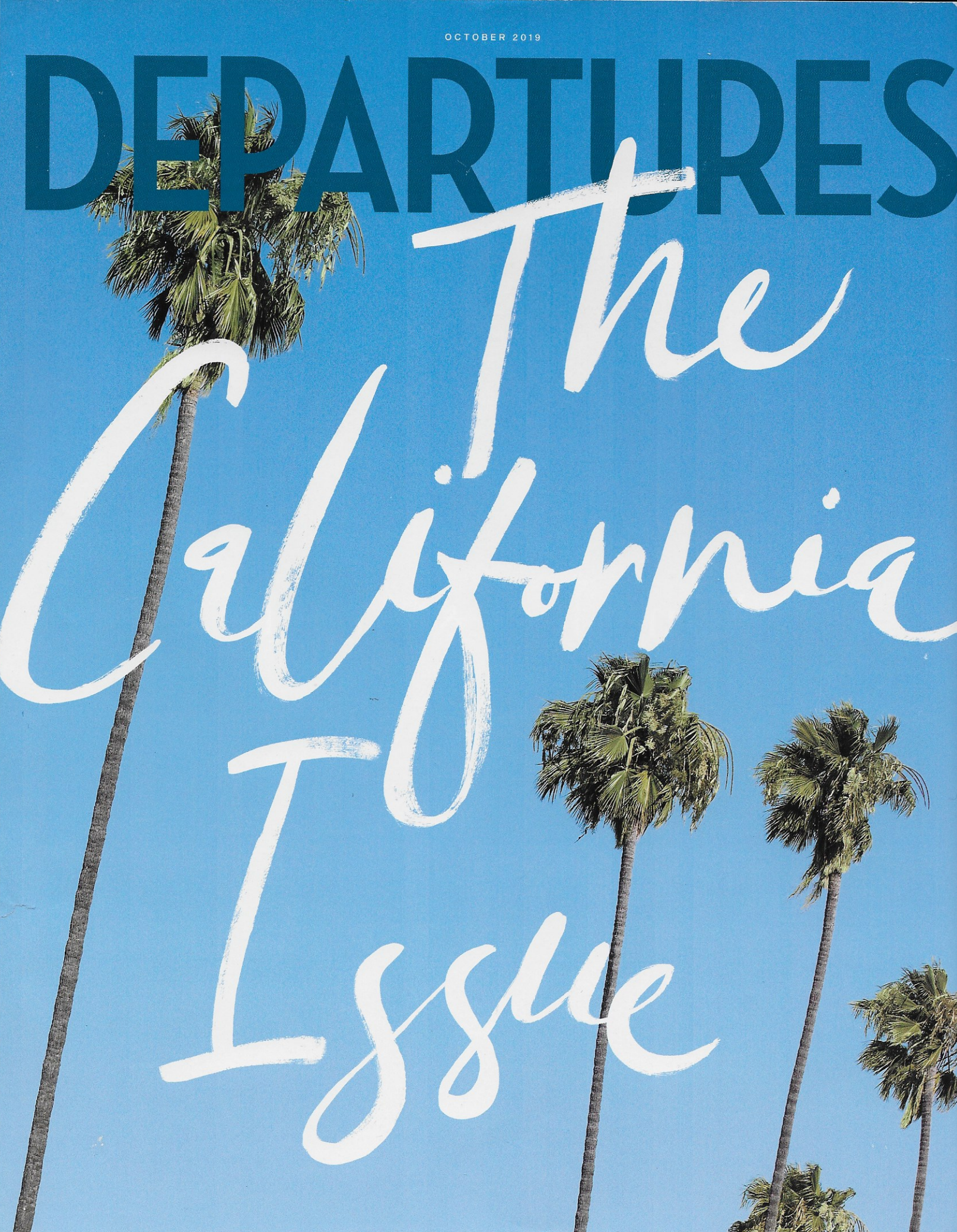


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Sea urchin with toasted shallots at the Harbor House Inn in Elk. Left: Sea urchins being harvested at the beach.

Cooking from the Sea

Mendocino County chef Matthew Kammerer is tackling Northern California's sea urchin epidemic one delicious dish at a time. *by Chaney Kwak*

ON A REMOTE STRETCH of the Northern California coast, chef Matthew Kammerer of the **Harbor House Inn** (theharborhouseinn.com) is looking for dinner ingredients. Behind him, a series of bluffs covered in wildflowers with names like self-heal seem to form a giant folding screen. Ahead, water-sculpted islets rise from the Pacific like ellipses. This is Elk, population 275, give or take.

"When you work here, you have to look at the tide chart every day," says the 30-year-old chef, whose 25-seat, tasting menu-only restaurant won a Michelin star in June. When the sea drops below the craggy landscape, it's time for Kammerer to gather uni.

Lately, the region's chefs have taken to the coastline to forage for healthy ingredients. James Syhabout, behind Oakland's only Michelin-starred restaurant, Commis, harvests nori seaweed; in San Francisco, Matthew Accarrino of Italian-accented mainstay SPQR cycles out of the city to collect sea

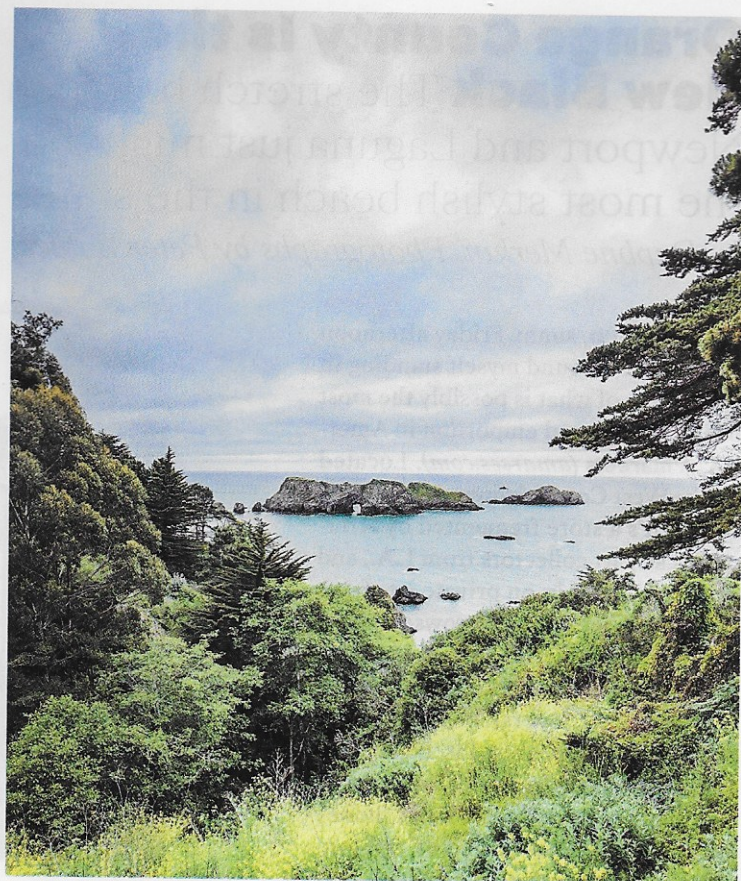
beans that are reminiscent of briny snap peas; chefs Carrie and Rupert Blease of Lord Stanley and chef Dennis Lee of Namu Gaji team up with Blue Ocean Goods to offer catch-and-forage excursions culminating in prix fixe dinners.

Kammerer has a distinct advantage over those Bay Area food makers, though: His kitchen is just a few hundred feet above the tide pools, where he gathers seaweed along with purple sea urchins. With their porcupine-like quills, sea urchins can seem menacing. As it so happens, they *do* pose a threat to the ecosystem much greater than their minute size (they rarely grow larger than a fist).

"It's not their fault," says Kammerer, "but they do get a bad rap."

The echinoderms' population grew out of control, one theory has it, after the 2014–2015 El Niño raised the water temperature. Coinciding with the decimation of their natural predators, otters and starfishes, the environmental change allowed the sea urchins to grow in number and devour the underwater forest of bull kelp that provides shelter to marine species. More than 90 percent of kelp has disappeared in Northern California in the past decade, setting off ecological dominoes that are affecting fish big and small.

"The urchins belong in this environment," says Cynthia Farrell, who works at the Noyo Center for Marine Science, which promotes environmental research and activism. "It's just that there are 60 for



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every one that needs to be here.” The Watermen’s Alliance, an organization of spearfishing enthusiasts, routinely gathers volunteers to haul out tons of the spiny pest. Even without joining such group excursions, you can rent a wet suit from **Sub-Surface Progression** (subsurfaceprogression.com), a local dive shop, that is happy to oblige with equipment and even a guide.

The water temperature along the coast rises barely above 60°F, so even in a wet suit treading in is a shock to the system. But those who persevere may discover a bonanza of edible treasures. “Just a matter of being in the right spot,” says Steve Lackey, the dive shop’s pro who gives guided underwater tours. “You may find a cluster of empty purples, then just a few feet away, you can find them well-fed and full of eggs.”

Up the street at Noyo Harbor, where commercial fishing boats dock, Thomas Trumper grew up diving with his father, who founded Pacific Rim Seafood. Today, his company supplies red sea urchins to Bay Area restaurants like the Korean-American Maum and the omakase spot Robin.

With his hands etched with scars, he shows how

to use his custom-made titanium picker to flick urchins off the reefs. When the diving crew returns to land, workers form an assembly line to weigh, crack, and scoop out the gonads—yes, that’s what uni is—that look as appealing as they sound: jiggly and bright orange.

“Purples can be just as delicious,” he says, “but they melt right away, so it’s impossible to ship them.”

So the problem perpetuates itself: While the more prized red sea urchins decline in numbers, the prolific purples keep spreading, with little to no market.

For his part, Kammerer mostly serves the purples. His tasting menu is a love song to Mendocino, with dishes like local salmon cured over apple clippings, and grilled maitake in a broth of kelp. His is a menu made mostly with hyper-local ingredients so it makes sense that there should be some of the abundant uni—in tonight’s case, tossed with foraged seaweed like *ogō* and kombu. The glistening uni captures the very best of the sea, clean and salty and improbably sweet. It may make you want to look for more with your own hands.

From left: The Harbor House Inn’s dining room; ocean views from the inn.