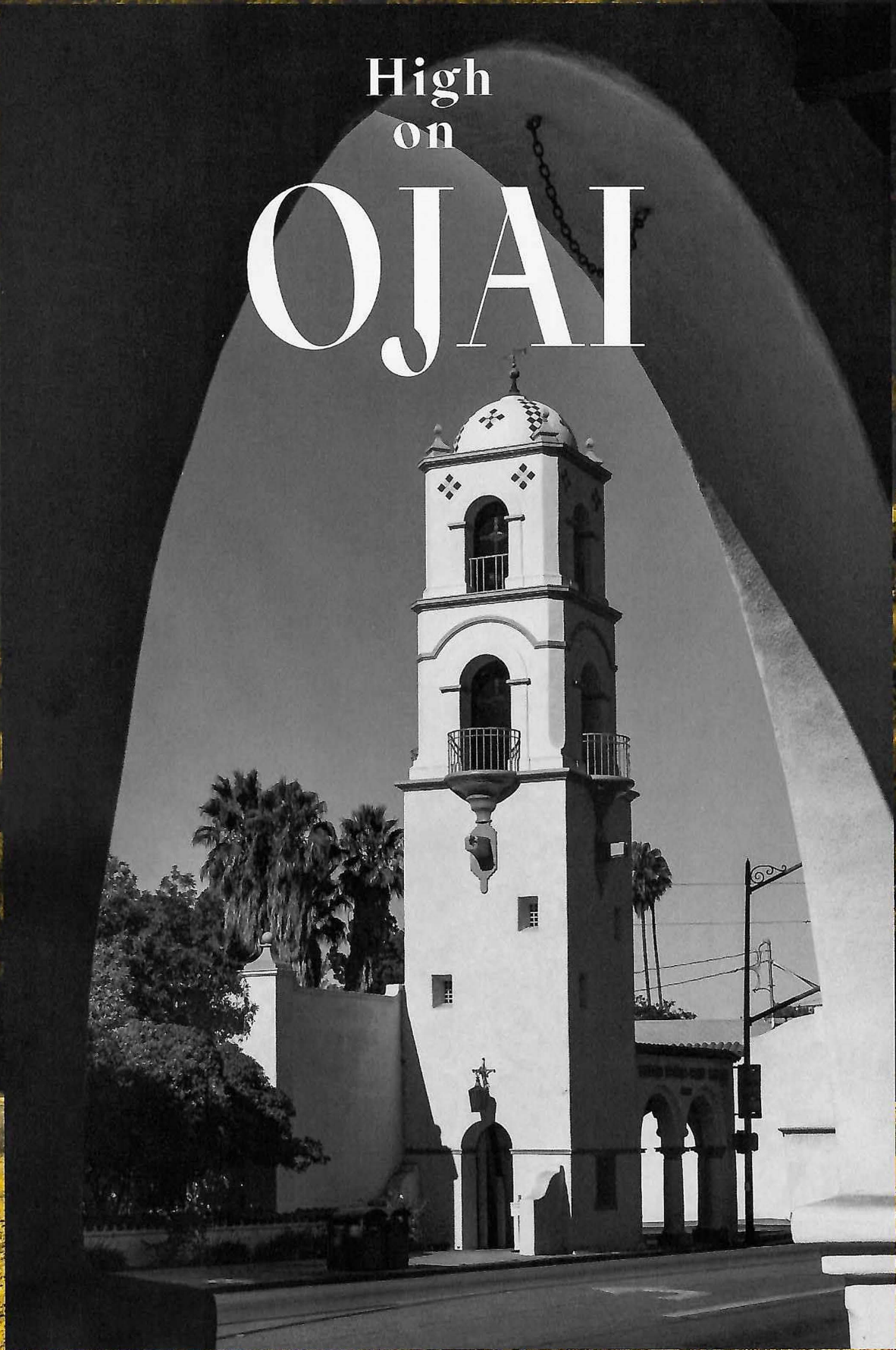


High  
on  
OJAI







Maeve and Rory  
McAuliffe check out the  
crops at Earthtrine  
Farm. *Opposite:* An  
early-20th-century bell  
tower in downtown Ojai.



In this California utopia  
of goat farms and sound  
baths, free-spirited  
tastemakers are redefining  
the simple life.

*Text and photographs by*  
**Christopher Bagley**





Last summer, in the weeks after choreographer Fatima Robinson moved from Los Angeles to the idyllic country town of Ojai, she thought she was adapting well to rural life. Every morning she awoke to a magnificent view of the Topatopa Mountains, which loom over the citrus orchards just beyond her property in one of Southern California's great unspoiled valleys. When one of her new neighbors gave her six healthy young hens, her boyfriend hand-built what had to be the town's coolest chicken coop—a sleek and minimalist cube.

Then, one night, Robinson was awakened at 3 A.M. by a terrifying clamor of squawks and squeals. A hungry black bear was in her yard, ripping the cage apart. “He opened that thing like a can opener,” Robinson recalls. “And he ate every one of my chickens! I was devastated. Before that happened I was feeling like a total farm girl, very proud of myself. I guess I still have a few things to learn.”

Despite the run-in with the savage side of her new hometown, Robinson remains a fan of Ojai. And she's got plenty of company. At a time when legions of pandemic-fatigued urban dwellers are looking to flee to the bucolic refuge of their dreams, the destination has become an unusual sort of hot spot, brimming with the kind of small-town realness so hard to find in much of California. Thanks to a steady influx of artists and designers and other creative types—and to the fact it's just 90 minutes from Los Angeles but adjacent to thousands of acres of Los Padres National Forest—the town offers a hard-to-resist combination of simplicity and sophistication.

Tiny Ojai (pop. 7,500) has always been something of an insider's sanctuary, existing on its own special frequency. It was first inhabited more than 10,000



years ago by the Chumash people, whose *alchuklash*, or shamans, revered the powers of the valley, which they regarded as a spiritual vortex. In 1922, Jiddu Krishnamurti, an India-born mystic and philosopher, moved to town; Aldous Huxley eventually followed, teaming up with Krishnamurti and Theosophist Annie Besant to create a progressive private school called Happy Valley. While the five-star Ojai Valley Inn and its pristine golf course catered to the resort crowd, the chaparral-covered hills lured all sorts of esoteric healers and hippies and, more recently, a steady stream of boho weekenders and day-tripping Instagrammers.

Some of Ojai's most committed fans have been coming here since they were kids. Eric Goode—the New York hotel and nightlife impresario who's now best known as a conservationist and filmmaker (last year he codirected the Netflix hit *Tiger King*)—spent part of his childhood hiking and rattlesnake-spotting with his parents in the nearby backcountry. We meet up at his 52-acre ranch, Twin Peaks, a century-old spread in Ojai's lusciously scenic East End, where the palms, agaves, and native oaks seem to have been planted by a divine hand. In 1989, Goode bought his first property nearby and started the Turtle Conservancy, a nonprofit for endangered tortoises that oversees a breeding and research center in Ojai. At Twin Peaks he's restoring the estate's Mission



Revival Spanish-style cottages and stables to create the ultimate live-work-play compound, complete with production offices for his film projects.

Every weekday, a private chef cooks lunch for Goode's staffers and other members of what he drily calls his "cult" of resident friends and family (the newest members of which include model Carolyn Murphy and creative director Serge Becker, who relocated from Manhattan with his wife and two kids). Goode, along with two partners, also bought one of the town's oldest hotels, El Roblar. He hopes to complete renovations and reopen it by the end of this year. As he beefs up his portfolio of Ojai properties, Goode—whose New York projects have included the Bowery Hotel and the Waverly Inn—stresses that he's proceeding slowly and carefully, determined not to fancify the place too much or upset the town's delicate native-newcomer balance. "It's probably good that there still aren't many great hotels here," he says.

Even among Ojai's hip younger crowd, there's as much excitement these days about composting as about cocktail bars. Two recent arrivals, sisters Maeve and Rory McAuliffe, are about to open a locavore restaurant that they hope will become the

go-to hangout that residents have been craving for years. Rory's Place will have a raw bar and a wood-fired grill, along with pay-what-you-wish nights featuring surplus and imperfect produce from local farms. Maeve, a veteran of buzzy Gjelina in Venice, says she's seen an explosion of interest in Ojai ever since the pandemic hit. "Suddenly all our friends started texting us: 'So, how's Ojai? Any cute houses for sale?'" (Short answer: Not many. Realtors are getting used to all-cash, sight-unseen offers.) The fact that Ojai pretty much shuts down at 9 P.M. doesn't seem to bother anyone, young or old. When I ask the McAuliffes who else in town I should meet, they're quick to mention their favorite holistic shepherdess, a woman called Cole who recently moved down from Northern California.

Although muddy overalls remain one of Ojai's most pervasive style statements, around town you'll run into plenty of people who surely have fabulous wardrobes stashed away at home. Fashion editor Lawren Howell, who works for *AD*, settled in



From left: Fatima Robinson at her property in Ojai's East End; one of the resident goats at Thacher House; fashion editor Lawren Howell.









Right: Eric Goode at the Turtle Conservancy in Ojai. Below: The Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts. Opposite: Kelley McDowell at home.



bones of a classic hacienda; it's packed with their whimsical collections of Mexican and American antiques and folk art—vintage *luchador* masks, Inquisition-worthy chandeliers, monkey sculptures, and mezcal jars.

If Ojai has an aesthetic patron saint, it's Beatrice Wood, the pioneering ceramist and Dada figure who lived here from 1948 until her death five decades later at age 105. A disciple of Krishnamurti and a onetime lover of Marcel Duchamp, Wood wore pink saris and layers of thick silver bracelets even while throwing the pots and chalices that she finished with her signature opalescent glazes. Her former studio, its shelves piled with jars of dyes and oxides, survives as a small museum that's a must-see.

For some artists, Ojai's main draw is not its cultural heritage but its lack of unwholesome distractions. Painter Brian Calvin, who shows with galleries like Almine Rech and Anton Kern, found a studio space in an unmarked warehouse across the street from the town veterinarian. "I just wanted a place where the pace was slow and nobody cared who I was," Calvin says. Ojai does have a couple of appealing contemporary art spaces, including the Porch Gallery, which occupies two floors of an 1874 farmhouse and gets its heaviest foot traffic on Sunday mornings, when the farmers' market is held next door. Co-owner Heather Stobo notes that local businesses get most of their revenue from out-of-town visitors, but those visitors are the types who crave authenticity above all. "So the idea is to accommodate tourists in a way that doesn't seem like we're accommodating tourists," she says. Rigid zoning laws prohibit chain stores, and all new businesses are strictly vetted for their impact on traffic and crowds.

Ojai's throwback old-California vibe was the main thing that lured West Hollywood interior designer Nathan Turner, a former Malibu habitué. With his partner, Eric Hughes, who is also

six years ago with her husband and three kids; at their spiffed-up Craftsman, the family now spends even more time barefoot than they did at their previous home near Venice Beach. For Anne Crawford, another stylish L.A. transplant who's worked with brands like Rick Owens and Roger Vivier, Ojai's unpretentiousness is the whole point. "Every now and then I'll pull a wild designer piece out of the closet," she says. "And then I'll say, 'Nahhh,' and put it right back." But she does often wear her Rick Owens platform work boots to clomp around the 100-year-old barn on the citrus farm she and her husband, Dudley DeZonia, bought in 2019.

When it comes to the Hollywood crowd, Ojai has a way of weeding out those who arrive with romanticized notions of the simple life. "Lots of big celebrities have moved here over the years, but few have stayed," says Goode. (Among the quitters are Ellen DeGeneres, Anthony Hopkins, and Reese Witherspoon.) Kelley McDowell, an interior designer who's married to one of Ojai's longstanding celebs—British actor Malcolm McDowell, a local fixture since the 1980s—jokes that some stars become disappointed by the lack of paparazzi. "They find that they don't get enough attention, and they realize Ojai is not for them," she says. "Here it's really about doing your own thing at home." The McDowells' 1920s house abuts the Ojai Valley Inn's golf course and has the





Clockwise from left:  
Inside a cottage at  
Thacher House; a  
sunset sound bath  
at Fatima Robinson's  
house; Anne Crawford  
in her barn.

## Ojai Essentials

Where to stay, dine, and shop on your next trip.

### STAY

Spread across 220 scenic acres, the historic **Ojai Valley Inn** ([rooms.ojavalleyinn.com](http://rooms.ojavalleyinn.com)) has been the area's top resort since the 1940s; new offerings include an ambitious culinary events program and a renovated spa. For a more rural vibe, book one of the four cottages at **Thacher House** (cottages from \$700; [info@thacherhouse.com](mailto:info@thacherhouse.com)), set in a wooded canyon ten miles from town, where the owner raises livestock and makes his own cheese. The eagerly-awaited El Roblar hotel, from Eric Goode and partners (including Ramin Shamshiri of L.A. design firm Studio Shamshiri), will reopen early next year on Ojai's main drag.

### EAT

**Farmer and the Cook** ([farmer-and-the-cook.com](http://farmer-and-the-cook.com)) is a health-food mainstay offering a range of organic Mexican dishes. The creative Italian menu at **Nocciola** ([nocciolaojai.com](http://nocciolaojai.com)) features stellar

handmade pastas.

**Rory's Place** ([rorysplaceojai.com](http://rorysplaceojai.com)) showcases Ojai's superb local farm products; it sits across the street from El Roblar, which will have two eateries from L.A. restaurateur Warner Ebbink.

### SEE

Closed due to COVID-19, the **Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts** ([beatricewood.com](http://beatricewood.com)), which showcases the late ceramist's works and her studio, hopes to reopen later this year. **Porch Gallery** ([porchgalleryojai.com](http://porchgalleryojai.com)) has an appealing program of contemporary exhibits and events. For shoppers, **Cattywampus** ([cattywampuscrafts.com](http://cattywampuscrafts.com)) has a smart mix of high-end crafts, yarns, and vintage Japanese trinkets. **In the Field** ([inthefieldojai.com](http://inthefieldojai.com)) offers everything from antique belt buckles to shearling ponchos. And **Bart's Books** ([bartsbooksojai.com](http://bartsbooksojai.com)) sells new and used volumes from a maze of outdoor shelves.

a designer, Turner bought a small house in town with the intention of quickly renovating and selling it, but the couple surprised themselves by staying. "Ojai really reminds me of the Napa Valley when I was a kid," Turner says. With the Pacific Ocean just 15 miles away, the town also offers easy access to top-notch seafood: Turner is on the text-alert lists of several local anglers, so he knows whenever there's a good catch of Santa Barbara rock shrimp. Lately while making his rounds he's been running into more and more L.A. transplants: "It's always like, 'What are you doing here?'" "Um, I live here now." "Really? Me too!"

If you ask around about the downsides of life in this supposed Shangri-la, the talk will eventually turn to climate change, which is drastically compounding the region's vulnerability to forest fires. Every resident has a terrifying story about the massive Thomas Fire in 2017, which burned for days on both sides of the valley and came close to wiping out the entire town. As the flames crept closer to the Turtle Conservancy's facilities, Max Maurer, who works with Goode, gathered a crew to pack about 200 live creatures into storage containers. They fled up Highway 101 in a caravan of trucks and trailers while calling around to find someone who could safely shelter the panicked reptiles. Finally they took refuge in the basement of the







city hall in Atascadero. Maurer's recollections of the fire are a blur of orange skies, scorching heat, and palm trees whipping in the wind. "It felt like being inside an intense hurricane, but instead of rain it was all sparks and embers," he says. In the end the turtles all survived, as did Goode's property, even though the flames licked the perimeter walls. Up the street, two houses burned to the ground.

Of course, fires have been a part of the natural cycle in California for millennia, and the land itself has always recovered. This resilience is evident at Earthtrine Farm, the ten-acre property of Robert "B.D." Dautch, where the harvest on the day I visit includes eight types of basil along with ripe persimmons, edible weeds such as purslane, and bunches of marigolds. Dautch is a specialist in organic greens and culinary herbs whose stand at the Ojai farmers' market tends to have the longest lines; local chefs often come to Earthtrine to pick up their produce orders. If they see an extra ingredient in the field that they want, Dautch will happily walk out and harvest it for them on the spot.

Asked about the pros and cons of the current surge of interest in Ojai, Dautch bemoans the spike

in housing prices, but otherwise he has no gripes about the newcomers. "They tend to be interesting people," he says. "And whether they're here for the farms, the spiritual stuff, or just to be surrounded by nature, everyone's coming for good reasons."

As for that spiritual stuff, the influx of urbanites has done nothing to dispel Ojai's reputation as a haven for consciousness pilgrims and alternative healers. Gong circles and new-moon breath-work retreats abound. Some of these activities sound absurd, until you try them. On one of my last nights in town, Fatima Robinson invites me over for an outdoor "sound bath" at her house, orchestrated by Geneviève Medow Jenkins (the founder of the wellness events group Secular Sabbath) and the musician Rhye. As the sky slowly turns from blue to pink to purple, guests sprawl on the rugs and pillows that Robinson has scattered beside the pool. Eric Goode and Serge Becker are there, along with a French ex-fireman who introduces himself as a spirit consciousness guide and Human Design teacher. Someone else tips me off to which nearby hot springs are ideal for 'shrooming trips. Then Rhye and two others sit at their keyboards and begin improvising some ambient grooves.

Don't some of these people have to wake up early tomorrow to feed the goats? Yes, but for now everyone lies back and gets ready to watch the stars emerge, as the beats hypnotically blend with the sound of the swallows circling overhead. ☪