

# AUTUMN LEAVES AND C

San Diegans in search of an old-fashioned autumn can always fall back on North County

BY ROBIN KLEVEN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN SIMPSON

**I**N SAN DIEGO, AUTUMN IS A STATE OF MIND. Fall eases into town on its own time, borne on a Santa Ana wind today, a cold, crisp dawn tomorrow. It defies our need to rearrange the drawers, with sweaters in the front and tank tops in the back. It teases us with jeans and sweatshirts one day, khaki shorts and sandals the next.

No gaudy blaze of orange and crimson foliage, no crush of camera-toting leaf peepers, no shopping for new winter coats. No fanfare, not much frost.

In San Diego, fall arrives in small, familiar increments. Children who raced for the ice-cream truck a month ago move slowly, inching back to class with two steps forward, one step back. Around the neighborhood, the scent of wood smoke starts to drift from dormant chimneys. The sunsets move a little farther to the south. Daylight Savings ends. We think about checking the pilot light in the furnace, put it off another couple of weeks.

But for some, these little signs are not enough. East Coast refugees, Midwest transplants, even

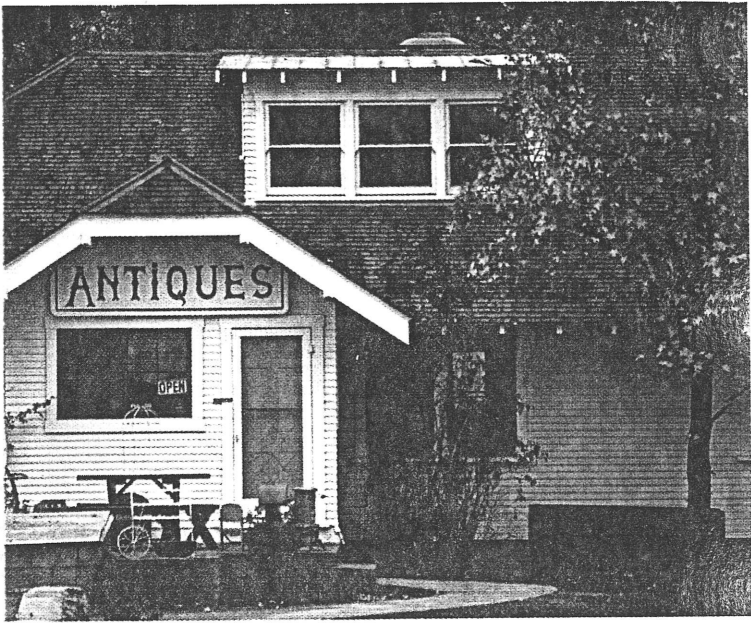


nostalgic natives sometimes crave a bigger dose of autumn fever.

Time to head north—to San Diego's North County, that is—to seek out the changing of the season like so many hungry trick-or-treaters.

Julian bears the brunt of our migrational urge, overflowing with cars and flatlanders until it seems Main Street itself may buckle and cave in. Let the others eat pie; we'll slip off to an apple orchard. It sounds like heresy, but consider the rewards: Elbow room. A sip of just-pressed cider. A carpet of rich red fruit beneath trees turned golden by an early cold snap. Inhaling mountain air instead of gas fumes.





Come to Calico Ranch for a taste of autumn and a charming chaser of philosophy.

“People judge apples the way they judge people—on their appearance. We should judge both by their internal qualities.” So says Conrad Young, ranch proprietor. Around the last day in September, he opens his 60-year-old apple orchard to the public, who pick Red Delicious, Calico Romes and Spartans. These are apples grown the old-fashioned way, with all the blemishes and flavor nature has to give.

“I tell people to pick out the ugliest ones,” Young says—and a sweet lesson comes with that first bite. Because unlike the waxed and vacuous super-beauties at the grocery store, these hardy fruits that undergo the vagaries of soil, weather and water actually taste like apples.

Beyond the public picking orchard lie 30 additional acres and more than 100 varieties of apples, some famous, some obscure. Fujis, Jonathans, Courtlands, Macouns. The latter are grown especially for the dispossessed among us. “Courtlands and Macouns,” Young says, “I grow those for Midwesterners. Anyone from back East knows these apples.”

Autumn spirit is cheap and strong here on the mountain. A bag of apples costs a couple of bucks. The rising afternoon breeze;

the sight and sound of turkeys rummaging through windfall fruit—these are free.

Down the mountain, in Santa Ysabel, the faithful stand in line for loaves of bread and memories. Dudley’s Bakery, mother lode of baked goods, tempts customers this time of year with pumpkin pies. Nearby stands of sycamores fade from green to gilded ocher, their hand-shaped leaves just right for pressing in a book. The steers are getting plump. The horses’ summer coats are turning woolly.

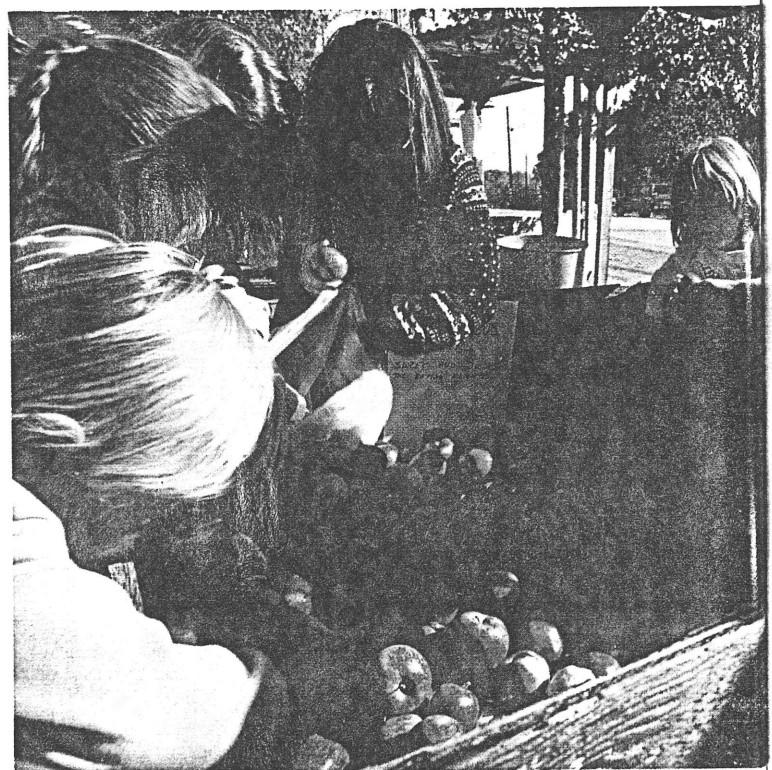
AND ALONG THE BACK ROADS of North County, pumpkin patches sprout like cardboard tombstones before Halloween.

Pumpkins: proof of shorter days and colder nights to come; proof that goblins and fairy princesses are just around the bend. The Great Pumpkin is out there, pumpkin lovers say. To find him, their search leads to fields of burly Big Macs that can reach 200 pounds.

At Bodacious Pumpkins in Fallbrook, the orange behemoths grow on acreage copied straight from Andrew Wyeth. The fields of the roadside ranch abound with gentle giants, lolling on their vines as disbelieving buyers thump their sides. Owner Brian Boren sells brightly colored gourds and corn as well, but it’s the 100-pound-plus pumpkins that capture people’s hearts. These pumpkins are so big, he says, they blow the older farmers’ minds.

In Valley Center, the mighty Big Macs have their fans as well. Visitors to Bates Nut Farm scour the 10-acre patch for bragging rights, to bag the biggest pumpkins they can wrestle into cars or SUVs. They come to see the scarecrow contest with its ragtag lot of entries, and to take their city children on a hayride. It’s a hayride pulled by tractor, not by horse, but any hayride’s still a sign of fall to summer-weary San Diegans.

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The real horses wait at Holidays on Horseback near Descanso, where they work six days a week, with Mondays off, and life is good. The biting flies of summer have moved on. Fallen leaves cushion the trails beneath their hooves. Visitors bring fresh Julian apples. Horses like fall, too.

Ride a steady foxtrotter or quarter horse up past the sage and manzanita, beyond the oaks and meadows high into the pines. October brings days custom-made for a picnic lunch beside a hidden waterfall. The horses graze. The riders stretch their legs. Autumn wraps the afternoon in filtered sun.

Sunlight turns chrysanthemums to brilliant bursts of rust and red and gold at the Wild Animal Park near San Pasqual. Near North County Fair, a Christmas-tree purveyor gets the jump on business in October with a winsome patch of jack-o'-lanterns.

At the local farmers' markets, sweet corn and strawberries move aside for winter squash, persimmons and sweet potatoes. At school carnivals from Del Mar to Escondido, parents run the arcade games their parents ran for them, and costumed treasure hunters still dangle bamboo poles and clothespins for a prize.

Another perfect fall in San Diego. It was right here waiting for you, all the time. ■

### FINDING FALL

**Bates Nut Farm**, 15954 Woods Valley Road, Valley Center; 760-749-3333.

**Bodacious Pumpkins**, 2591 East Mission Road, Fallbrook.

**Calico Ranch**, 4200 Highway 78 at Calico Ranch Road, Wynola (just outside Julian); 858-586-0392.

**Dudley's Bakery**, 30218 Highway 78, Santa Ysabel; 760-765-0488.

**Holidays on Horseback**, 24928 Viejas Boulevard, Descanso; 619-445-3997.

**The San Diego Wild Animal Park**, 15500 San Pasqual Valley Road, Escondido; 619-234-6541.