

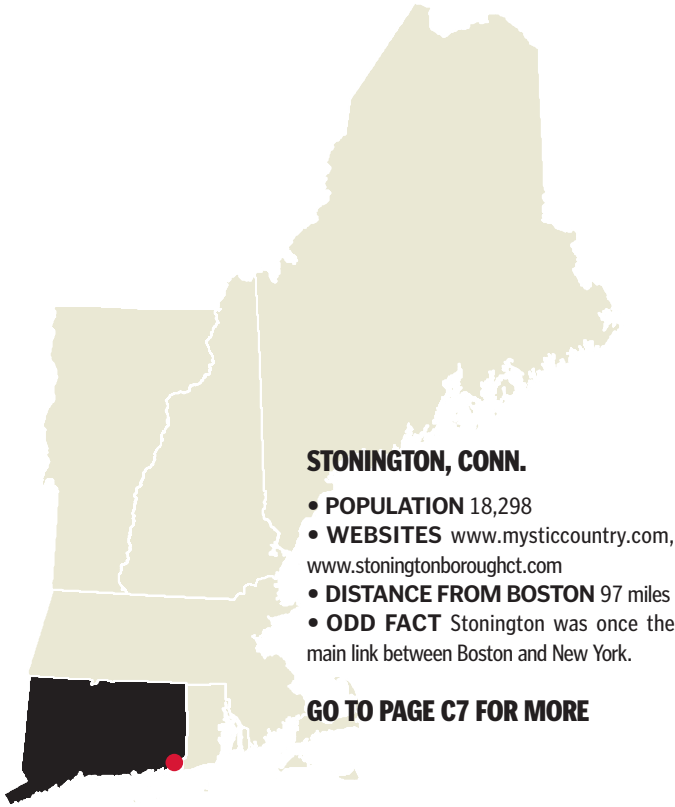
Travel

CLOSE-UP ON STONINGTON, CONN. | BY KARI BODNARCHUK | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

SEE WORTHY

SHOPPING AND DINING CHOICES ADD TO PLEASURES OF QUIANT FISHING VILLAGE

Nestled in the southeastern corner of Connecticut, Stonington stretches from the Rhode Island border to the Mystic River, but at the heart of it is a narrow, finger-shaped peninsula that forms the state's oldest borough. • Stonington Borough has a long sea-harvesting history and is known for its whaling and fishing industries, which once attracted Portuguese fishermen to its shores. The borough is anchored on its northern end by Dodson Boatyard and the town dock, home to the state's only commercial fishing fleet. On its southern tip is the Point, with its small but pristine beach and views across Little Narragansett Bay to New York and Watch Hill, R.I. And in between is a walkable village of well-maintained 18th- and 19th-century buildings, with most of the shops and restaurants located along one-way Water Street, the backbone of the village. • Visitors to Stonington aren't wooed by Mystic Seaport to the west or the state's casinos, just a short drive north. They come here to eat well, take in the sea, poke around the shops and galleries, and relax and explore. Here, fresh fish is sold on the honor system at the town dock.



STONINGTON, CONN.

- **POPULATION** 18,298
- **WEBSITES** www.mysticcountrny.com, www.stoningtonboroughct.com
- **DISTANCE FROM BOSTON** 97 miles
- **ODD FACT** Stonington was once the main link between Boston and New York.

GO TO PAGE C7 FOR MORE

FUEL

With its working waterfront and renowned local greenhouse, the borough boasts restaurants that offer fresh seafood (it's known for its scallops) and veggies year-round.

Noah's (113 Water St., 860-535-3925, www.noahsfinefood.com, entrees \$10.95-\$24.95), in the middle of the village, is known for its fresh flounder and fettuccine with homemade pesto.

For the best sunset views, slip behind the Inn at Stonington, where you'll find **Skipper's Dock** (66 Water St., 860-535-0111, www.skippersdock.com, entrees \$19.95-\$26.95). From this restaurant's large dining room and sprawling deck, which overlook the outer harbor, you can enjoy traditional seafood dishes with a French flair (try the bouillabaisse Harborview and locally harvested lobsters).

On the northern tip of the borough, **Boom Restaurant** (194 Water St., 860-535-2588, www.boomrestaurant.net, entrees \$11.50-\$26.50, closed Tuesdays) overlooks the inner harbor and Dodson Boatyard, and offers sesame seed-encrusted yellow-fin tuna and lobster ravioli, among other seafood favorites, in a casual setting. Duck quesadilla is one of chef Carlos Cassar's innovative lunch creations. Dining solo? Enjoy your meal in the sectioned-off bar area that won't leave you feeling on display.

In addition to several eateries and an inn, Water Street has at least nine galleries and antiques shops.



PHOTOS BY TOM HERDE/GLOBE STAFF

REST

Stonington's few inns are sprinkled around town, from the heart of the village to an outlying, woody residential area. If you're coming to connect with the sea, there's no better place to take in the town's watery surroundings than the upscale **Inn at Stonington** (60 Water St., 860-535-2000, www.innatstonington.com, fall rates \$155-\$395), which overlooks Stonington Harbor. During happy hour each night, visitors can sit on the back deck with complimentary wine and cheese and watch boats plying the harbor.

The **Orchard Street Inn** (41 Orchard St., 860-535-2681, www.orchardstreetinn.com, fall rates \$160-\$195), located within walking distance of the village and shops, has two cheery rooms in the main house, along with a guest cottage, all newly renovated.

For something a little more secluded, try **Another Second Penny Inn** (870 Pequot Trail, 860-535-1710, www.secondpenny.com, fall rates \$111-\$219, pets under 40 pounds welcome by advance arrangement), a 1710 Colonial farmhouse surrounded by five acres of gardens, fields, and forests, 2½ miles north of the borough.

PLAY

As you would expect, play time will keep you close to, if not on, the water here. From March through November, you can rent a kayak from **King Cove Outfitters** (926 Stonington Road, Route 1, 860-599-4730, www.kingcoveoutfitters.com, rentals \$28-\$60), just a mile east of the borough on Route 1, and explore Wequetequock Cove and Little Narragansett Bay, or launch from half a dozen other spots around town.

Captain Darin Keech takes guests of the Inn at Stonington on two-hour day sails or sunset cruises on his 39-foot sailboat **Poet's Lounge** (860-287-7956, www.bandofhumans.com, \$180 for up to six people).

DuBois Beach (\$10 per family, \$5 per individual, no charge after 5 p.m.) next to the Old Lighthouse Museum at the end of Water Street is a family-oriented, sandy beach that's sheltered from the surf and has shallow water and a lifeguard on duty during the summer.

Hikers and birdwatchers converge at the 1,013-acre **Barn Island Wildlife Management Area** (860-536-1216, www.dpnc.org) at the end of Palmer Neck Road, five minutes east of the borough off Route 1. Here, 4 miles of trails meander past salt marshes interspersed with patches of oak forest — ideal for a fall foliage stroll — and offer stunning views of Fishers Island Sound in Little Narragansett Bay. The trails are also perfect for cross-country skiing come wintertime.



Thanks to the borough's working waterfront, lobster is available in restaurants and seafood shops.

PARTY

Local resident Anne Henson puts it succinctly: "Restaurants are pretty much our nightlife." Locals and visitors gravitate to **Water Street Cafe** (143 Water St., 860-535-2122) for a nightcap, cappuccino, or late-night meal (the kitchen serves until 10 p.m. on weekdays and 11 weekends). **Noah's** draws mellow crowds on Friday nights for its live acoustic guitar music. And in the summer-time, the deck at **Skipper's Dock** is the place to go to mingle with boaters and take in those fabulous sunset views.

SPEND

Water Street has at least nine one-of-a-kind galleries and antiques shops, not to mention at least four realtors, in case you're in a big spending mood (plan on \$2.5 million and up for a waterfront view).

Boathouse Antiques (145c Water St., Bailey's Alley, 860-535-4714) sells old oars, charts, books, antiques, and folk art, in the alley between the Brick Gallery and Grand & Water Antiques.

People come from around New England to shop for inexpensive, good-quality silver jewelry at **A.K. Dasher** (141 Water St., 860-535-1774), which imports pieces from 11 countries, including Italy, Mexico, India, Indonesia, Thailand, and Nepal.

The Velvet Mill (22 Bayview Ave., 860-535-1050) displays the work of more than 20 craftspeople and artisans, who sell pottery, restored furniture, paintings, and glassworks, and host an open house twice a year.

Stop in at **Tom's News and General Store** (133 Water St., 860-535-1276) for your pick of local and national newspapers, basic grocery supplies, souvenirs, and the latest gossip.

On your way out of town, stop at **Stonington Seafood Harvesters** (4 High St., 860-535-8342) by the town dock, where a local fishing family, the Bomsters, sells fresh scallops, lobster bisque, mussels, and more on the honor system. "If you want to go down at midnight and buy fresh fish, you can," says Shannon Graham, a waitress at Skipper's Dock. And if you don't have the right amount, "there's even a tray with change."

DO

A one-mile **walking tour** of the historic borough takes you up and down Water and Main streets, with several short detours, and by stately old homes and commercial buildings that showcase the Greek Revival, Colonial, and Federal styles. A walking map is available at inns and shops around the village, or from the Stonington Historical Society, located in the **Captain Nathaniel B. Palmer House** (40 Palmer St., 860-535-8445, www.stoningtonhistory.org, only open Thursday to Sunday afternoons, May through October; \$5 admission gets you into the house and the Old Lighthouse Museum). This little-known treasure is tucked away on the other side of the train tracks, about a mile outside of Stonington Borough.

If you're a history buff or a lover of lighthouses, plan to spend time at the **Old Lighthouse Museum** (7 Water St., 860-535-1440), 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., May to November, \$5 for adults, \$3 for children 6-12), a stone building down near the Point with an eclectic display of historical memorabilia. The first government-operated lighthouse in Connecticut (1823), this building was moved in 1840 to its present location and now houses maritime artifacts and weapons from the 1814 Battle of Stonington, when local residents drove away a British fleet. Climb the lighthouse tower for views of the harbor and three states.



The Stonington Historical Society is located in the Captain Nathaniel B. Palmer House on Palmer Street.

Connecticut vintner's contentment grows along with his vines

By Kari J. Bodnarchuk

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

STONINGTON, Conn. — For Nick Smith, inevitability and serendipity brought about one of his biggest life changes. Smith, who spent years working on Wall Street for London merchant bankers, decided to pull the plug on his financial career in 1984. He resigned as director of a British merchant bank because of the “continual deterioration of ethics on Wall Street,” and within two years started Stonington Vineyards, in a pastoral setting that’s miles from the city in geography and feel.

“With some tongue in cheek, starting the vineyard was a solution to a midlife crisis,” says Smith, who runs the winery with his wife, Happy. “I had a consummate appreciation of wine,” he adds, not-

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If you go . . .

Stonington Vineyards

523 Taugwonk Road
Stonington, Conn.
860-535-1222

www.stoningtonvineyards.com

Directions: Stonington Vineyards is about 97 miles or 1¾ hours from Boston. Take Interstate 93 south to exit 1 for Interstate 95 south and follow I-95 south through Providence, eventually crossing into Connecticut. Take exit 91 for Stonington Borough/North Main Street and go right. Continue for 2.2 miles, following the blue Wine Trail signs, and look for the winery, with its long dirt driveway, on your left.

ing that he was a member of a Washington, D.C., wine group for three years in the '60s, “but I didn’t know anything about growing grapes.”

It was by chance that Smith’s interest in Stonington was rekindled. On the way home from a family trip to Massachusetts, he stopped off in Stonington to show his daughter the area where he grew up, on a nearby island at the mouth of the Mystic River.

It was also by chance that Smith’s father happened to send him a Yankee magazine column shortly thereafter, about a 58-acre Stonington property for sale. That property soon became the site of Smith’s new winery.

Smith constructed a new winery building in 1989 and upgraded an existing building, turning it into a tasting room and art gallery, with storage cellars underneath for the finished wines. Over time, he increased his grape crop from a couple of acres to 11 acres. Now, Stonington Vineyards is one of the three largest wineries in the state — out of 19 — and sells 6,000 cases of wine a year.

“The business has really evolved over the years,” Smith says. “In the beginning, 95 percent of the wine was sold at wholesale to shops and restaurants. Now, 92 percent of it is sold at retail here at the winery.”

Connecticut has two viticultural districts: the Western Connecticut Highlands, from the Housatonic Valley north to the Litchfield Hills, and the Southeastern New England viticultural district, which extends from New Haven to southeastern Massachusetts.

Stonington Vineyard’s proximity



TOM HERDE/GLOBE STAFF

Stonington Vineyards is one of the three largest wineries in Connecticut and sells 6,000 cases of wine a year. It’s known for its Seaport White, Triad Rose, and cabernet franc.

ty to the ocean has a tremendous influence on growing conditions. The warmer winters and cooler summers result in a longer, more consistent growing season, similar in temperature and duration to that of Bordeaux, France.

Stonington Vineyards ferments and ages its wines in French and American oak barrels — giving them a more full-bodied, oaky flavor — and is known for its barrel-fermented chardonnays, trademark Seaport White and Triad Rose, and varietals, such as vidal blanc and cabernet franc.

Winemaker Mike McAndrew joined Stonington Vineyards when it opened in 1987, after working as a retailer and then for a winery in Litchfield.

“I decide what grapes we grow and the style of the wine, but Mike executes making the wine,” says Smith.

Even with the best winemaker, things can go awry. Stonington Vineyards harvests one crop of

grapes each October, and it takes anywhere from three to five days to pick 11 acres of grapes. Last year, after nine days of rain that delayed harvesting, the vineyard lost 70 percent of its crop.

“Sun is the key to making a good grape,” says Jeannie Cronan, retail manager at the vineyard. “It helps the grape produce more sugar, which produces the best wine. If the grapes get too much rain, they get diluted or rot.”

That’s why this year, for the first time, Smith pruned off all of the leaves so the grapes get more sun and dry out. He also installed an electric fence to fend off other threats: deer, wild turkeys, raccoons, coyotes, and foxes.

The vineyard is open seven days a week from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; tastings are held during open hours and 45-minute tours are offered daily at 2 p.m. During tours, visitors learn about the winemaking process, from growing the grapes to bottling the

wines.

“It’s important to me to give people who come here a high-quality educational experience,” says Smith. “The vast number of people who come here don’t know much about wine, but the more they know, the more they drink and use wine.”

Smith commissioned local artists to produce images for the labels. Susan Stephenson painted a beach scene of two Adirondack chairs at Napatree Point in Watch Hill for the chardonnay label; Tom Jennerwein painted a pastoral scene of the vineyard, which appears on the cabernet franc bottles; and photographer Michael Melford shot the image of Ledge Light in New London for the Seaport White label.

Stonington Vineyards hosts three wine festivals a year, in May, July, and October, with live jazz or bluegrass music, food, and vendors, and features exhibits in an on-site gallery. Proceeds from the sale of works in the current exhibit, on show through the end of October, benefit the local Green Pastures Horse Rehabilitation Project, which works to find good homes for abused horses.

“The art gallery gives people another reason to come here,” says Smith. “The idea is we want to make this more of a destination.”

Stonington Vineyards is now one of 19 wineries located along Connecticut’s Wine Trail, which is marketed as two easy-to-drive loops that take people along back roads and scenic byways to vineyards in eastern and western Connecticut. It’s also part of a statewide passport program. People traveling along the wine trail can

get a free pamphlet, called “Passport to Connecticut’s Wine Trail,” which lists all of the state’s vineyards. As they visit different wineries, they can collect a stamp from each one. At the end of October, anyone who has turned in a passport with 14 or more stamps is entered into drawings for all-expense-paid trips to wine regions in Germany, California, and Ontario, Canada.

At least four more wineries are due to open in Connecticut within the next couple of years, including Stonington Seahawk Winery on Route 1, where a 1936 airplane hangar is being turned into the winemaking facility and a grassy airfield will be the site of the vineyards.

“We’re trying to encourage more wineries to open in the state because it gives people more destinations to visit and boosts the state’s reputation as a wine-growing region,” says Smith. “We like to say we compete with each other, not against each other.”

Contact Kari Bodnarchuk, a freelance writer based on Portland, Maine, at travelwriter@karib.us.

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