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Willow Creek, California Tourism Analysis

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HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY

Willow Creek, California Tourism Analysis



Report by:

REC365 Travel Industry Management
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Project overview

Our primary objective with this study is to introduce and recommend different strategies for the city of Willow Creek to increase tourism post-Covid-19. After extensive research, the report below outlines various opportunities that the Recreation 365 class, Tourism Industry Management, believe will help Willow Creek in their efforts to attract their target audience, millennials.

Willow Creek Tourism Research

Willow Creek is a beautiful place surrounded by amazing natural features that are perfect for the outdoor enthusiast. Not only are there the mountains, rivers, and one of the most beautiful scenic drives in the country, Willow Creek is also a hub for amazing outdoor activities. Six Rivers National Forest, the Trinity River, and the Hoopa Country are all nearby.

To conduct background research, the research team (see below) followed a three-step process which included:

- investigating tourism in the Willow Creek area as told through artifacts archived at Humboldt State University Special Collections
- visiting Willow Creek to meet with people involved in the local tourism industry, including a member of the Chamber, a fishing guide and raft guide. Despite it being the middle of February, the Bigfoot Museum was also opened for the team to explore.
- researching a variety of websites, social media posts and related literature.



From left to right:
Matthew Gerber
Elizabeth Locher
Annika Slattery
Caitlyn Taylor-Walker
Mandy Hackney
Kyle Abelli-Amen
Nash Parker

Special thanks to the REC 365 Research Team

SWOT Analysis

This SWOT analysis divides Willow Creek Tourism into two components: internal issues (strengths and weaknesses) and external issues (opportunities and threats).

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location specific knowledge of locals and other actors involved with the tourism industry • Abundance of natural resources/Natural setting • Easy river access at multiple points • Climate and weather • Variety of local attractions • Boutique hotel and vacation home offerings • Remote location for now and a post-Covid world 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information available online about the area is limited • Aesthetic appearance in some areas of the community • Public restroom but no locking mechanism • Dining options lack visibility • Lack of affordable lodging options • Lack of information on lodging
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community involvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentivize involvement • Town clean up days • Big Foot Scenic Byway • Recreation Activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guided hikes • Foraging • Geotagging • Diversification of dining/food options • Create better web presence • Ecotourism lodging 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overuse and environmental degradation in some areas • Aging population • Negative reviews online • Seasonal influx of visitors • Target market (millennials) have less money to spend

Target Audience Analysis

Who are the millennials (Gen Y)?

A millennial, also known as Generation Y, is a person reaching adulthood in the early 21st century. Millennials live at home with parents longer, have more debt and delay starting a family. Millennials value work and education over family. Millennials also value immediacy, planet saving, and autonomy.

How are millennials different from other generations?

In comparing millennials to other generations, we can look at both younger and older generations.

Gen Z – born 1995-2015

- Internet access at a young age, never known a country not at war, heavy users of mobile devices, want to avoid the struggles of financial debts of previous generations

Gen Y (Millennials) – born 1980-1994

- Born during the explosion of the internet, favor streaming options over cable, this generation is entering the workforce with massive student debt which leads to the delay of major life purchases such as a house or marriage, less brand loyalty than previous generations, prefers access over ownership because it's more affordable, supports the use of hybrid technology for more eco-friendly products

Gen X – born 1965-1979

- Born at the end of the Cold War, heavy TV and Facebook users, considered to carry a heavy debt load

Baby Boomer – born 1944-1964

- Baby Boomers are named after the post WWII baby boom, highest consumers of traditional media, considered one of the wealthiest generations

What do millennials want from a vacation?

Willow Creek is a quaint mountain town, boasting a number of unique attractions for millennial visitors to explore. Though in order to understand why Willow Creek might appeal to a millennial audience, we must first understand their travel motivations.

Millennials are typically associated with unique, authentic, and hands-on vacation experiences with opportunities to be in the outdoors. According to a study conducted by the Outdoor Industry Association, millennials spend more time outdoors than other groups. Millennials have gained a deeper appreciation for the outdoors and what it has to offer. Outdoor recreation is a great way for this group to connect with friends to enjoy the outdoors. For these reasons, Willow Creek has potential to become a 'hotspot' for millennials vacationing in the area.

In addition, millennials are looking for authentic and unique experiences while traveling and are interested in immersing themselves in the local culture. Commonly, they are not interested in the one vacation that fits all that tourism companies have been marketing for years. They want to go where not many people have been before, especially locally. Next,

not only do they want to immerse themselves in that area's culture, but they want to go out and seek some sort of self-discovery. And lastly, they want easy internet access so everything is social media-ready.

According to a 2014 Harris poll, "More than 70% of millennials would rather spend their money on experiences rather than stuff" (Mya, 2020). The great thing about millennials is they generally aren't interested in going to resorts, taking cruises, or looking for tourism packages from travel agencies. First, because generally Millennials have limited funding. Second, because Millennials have realized that local areas around them are precious and deserve to be fully experienced. In general, local outings are less expensive, easy to prepare and execute, less stressful, offer more time for self-reflection all while supporting the local economy. Additionally, a lot of people tend to be unaware of their local treasures and culture. Local outings provide an opening for a truly authentic exploration and understanding of the local culture. This is something that Willow Creek can capitalize on.

What types of marketing campaigns will be most attractive to millennials?

When looking into the best ways to market to millennials, we found that they seem to favor indirect advertising such as social media influencers as opposed to TV, radio, and magazine ads. This means that they are more likely to react positively with an advertisement featured on various social media sites. This could come in many forms!

One simple way is through a social media post from the Willow Creek Instagram account describing an upcoming event, or even highlighting the natural beauty of the area.

Another popular way of using social media marketing is utilizing influencers. A recent study by the Digital Marketing Institute found that 49% of consumers depend on influencers for product recommendations and 67% of marketers promote content with the help of influencers. While there may not be an abundance of influencers in Willow Creek, it is always a good idea to ask visitors to tag any social media posts with a hashtag representing Willow Creek (see below in Marketing Examples). Millennials and college students are often more willing to check out unique spaces that they have seen other people go to and enjoyed themselves at. In a survey conducted by Booking.com, "44% of Millennials confessed to feeling envious when looking at friends' vacation pictures, and around 30% admitted to traveling so that they can post their own pictures of their vacations" (Thompson).

Another interesting way to advertise to millennials is using videos. A recent study outlined that Millennials are more likely to positively interact with video ads via social media outlets rather than a newspaper or TV ad (Friedman, 2017). This can be implemented on the Willow Creek Instagram by filming a series of short videos showing some of a natural beauty of the area or asking locals to describe what they love about the area.

Another way that Willow Creek could attract millennials is to have a viral photo opportunity spot. A good spot for this would be the Bigfoot statue outside the museum. There could be a contest where people post their photos with the statue to try to win a donated prize

Millennials trust and engage in social networking sites. They use it to research trips, to make informed decisions and to share their personal experiences with the rest of the world. All this being said it is still never a bad idea to post an ad in the college newspaper or newsletter to reach college students and millennial aged college students specifically.

What does Willow Creek have to offer Millennials?

Willow Creek is the perfect place to hit the road and find a unique adventure. Millennials and college students can find their vacation needs met in Willow Creek. We considered Bigfoot, outdoor recreation, local culture, and dining and lodging options available.

Bigfoot – While there is an abundance of information about the local legend that has given Willow Creek it's notoriety, there isn't much information about the town itself on the website or available for visitors at the Visitor Kiosk. The team was interested to learn that the first non-native people that inhabited this area were Chinese immigrants coming to mine the surrounding lands. This is where the original name for the town, "China Flat" came from. The town changed to Willow Creek in 1915.

There have been Bigfoot sightings in all 49 states, excluding Hawaii. A vast majority of these



sightings have been concentrated in the Humboldt Country area. For many of the local tribes such as the Siskiyou, Hoopa, and Yuki, Bigfoot is prominent in their lore. Every year the town of Willow Creek comes together during Labor Day weekend for BigFoot Daze to celebrate the big hairy guy who we all know. During this family friendly event there are fun competitions that include the best Bigfoot call, logging competitions, watermelon eating competitions, a town softball game and much more. Visitors can also watch the town parade before the day wraps up with an ice cream social. This event has been a staple in the community for over 60 years. In order to gain a more holistic understanding of the town's history, visitors must visit the local Bigfoot Museum. This museum opened its doors in

1988, and not only provides a wealth of information about Sasquatch, but the town as a whole too.

Outdoor Recreation – The Willow Creek region is already a popular 'step-off' point for many vacationers looking to explore the Six Rivers National Forest, and the banks of the Trinity

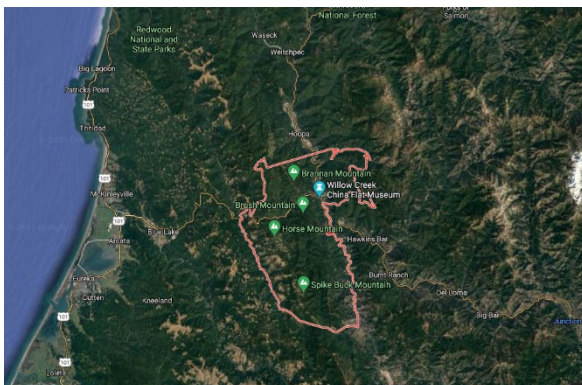
River. The region also has many tent camping and RV park options, allowing for even greater access for short-term Millennial visitors. Attractions such as Kimtu Beach, Big Rock, and the myriad of Forest Service roads to explore are incredibly appealing to the Millennial audience. Millennials tend to hold a special passion for the environment and the outdoors, so they'll want to visit Willow Creek to see these natural beauties. With the ability to participate in Rafting, Disc Golfing, Hiking, Swimming, and 4x4 adventures, Willow Creek is overflowing with different recreational activities for millennial visitors to enjoy.

Local culture – The Hoopa Valley is nearby, which is home to a rich and vibrant Indigenous culture to learn about. The region is full of interesting history, which may also help market to a wider audience who may be interested in the history of the area. As well as noted above, Bigfoot Days offers a distinctive way for these visitors to experience the community of Willow Creek.

Dining/Lodging – The Willow Creek area has a wide variety of dining options, and is home to a majority of the businesses in the region. Additionally, Willow Creek is known for its rich agricultural scene. As many millennials prefer an organic, farm to table diet, Willow Creek's restaurants may easily be able to cater to this lifestyle. Many millennial visitors may be drawn in by the variety and inexpensive nature of the dining scene of Willow Creek. There are a number of restaurants and wineries that appeal to a millennial palette -- namely Winnett Vineyards, Sentinel Winery, and Dogwood Estate Winery. Increasing the exposure of these options, in the form of a 'Wine Country getaway' may enable an increase in target audience numbers. In addition to tent and RV site, there are a number of unique lodging options for friends, couples, or families to come to stay and enjoy the local area of Willow Creek.

Opportunities for Willow Creek

Based on our research we have identified a number of opportunities that Willow Creek might pursue to increase tourism to the area.



Location

Ideally, the way a community brands itself for tourism reflects current and potential options for tourism in the community, helps the visitor create an image of the destination in their mind and ultimately works to create a psychological, emotional and motivational link between the community and the visitor (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2012).

Currently, Willow Creek markets itself as a destination to enjoy “River fun in the Mountain Sun”. This slogan includes a unique selling point for Willow Creek and also includes a motivational message that addresses characteristics of the destination; easy access to rivers, mountains, and warmth. One way to extend this existing brand is to further capitalize on the central location of Willow Creek by ensuring potential visitors are aware of the distances between the community and other sites of interest. For example, National Parks, forests, lakes, coastal beaches that are relatively close.

Connections to Community College and University students

Willow Creek lies roughly 45 minutes away from one of the largest coastal populations on the Northern California coast. Fortunately, Humboldt State University (HSU) and College of the Redwoods (CR) brings thousands of new students to the area, who are ready to find new adventures in the area around the county.



Millennials, the target audience this report is focused on, are within an easy drive of Willow Creek to the east or west. Multiple community colleges, universities and networks of young professionals such as Lost Coast Rotaract in Eureka are potential places to build stronger and unique connections to promote Willow Creek as a destination. In particular, we see potential

in exploring more ways to work with HSU and CR due to both proximities to Willow Creek and the dramatic difference between the climates and geography of the coast and the inland areas.

Already, many of these students know about the “River fun in the Mountain sun” they can experience in the summer by visiting Willow Creek. However, this does not address the hundreds of other college students who do not stay in Humboldt County during the summer. By the time these HSU and CR students are tired of winter rain and cloudy skies, Spring Break is just around the corner. Promoting Willow Creek as an easy, short vacation for students to spend spring break is something that would resonate with these populations. Not only are college students seeking some warmth, fun, and relaxation at this time, a majority of them also work part or full time and are largely unable to take off the entire spring break period for a vacation.

Willow Creek could partner with student clubs, Center Activities, or other recreation groups at HSU or CR to promote Willow Creek as a destination during the school year, perhaps even organizing day and overnight trips with groups of students including transportation, lodging/camping and activities. This would establish Willow Creek as an all-season destination that can be easily accessed at any point in the semester in the minds of HSU and CR students.

In addition to promoting Willow Creek as a vacation destination, there are other opportunities to explore related to service or volunteer trips that are popular with college students. Multiple student clubs exist at HSU that involve community service (All Clubs, N.D.). Considering our recommendations on aesthetics below, there is potential to partner with HSU and CR student clubs to engage students in a service trip to Willow Creek. A weekend trip could be combined with a town clean-up, a town maintenance day, or a community art project partnered with Willow Creek High School students for example.

A sure-fire way to engage with college students is to offer advertising deals! While we note that most lodging rates are already low, if local businesses decreased rates for college students or offered student deals this may show that they are welcome in the town. Advertising these rates, accompanied pictures of some these beautiful locations could be a great way to get millennials and college age students interested.

BigFoot

Bigfoot Trail: <https://www.visitcalifornia.com/road-trips/the-bigfoot-scenic-byway>



The Bigfoot Scenic Byway starts in Willow Creek and has the potential to be a big draw for tourists. Greater advertising of this as well as perhaps a sign that says "The Bigfoot Scenic Byway Starts Here" would bring more attention to the bigfoot history of the town. As noted earlier, the Bigfoot Museum in Willow Creek provides a great viral photo opportunity spot to highlight for visitors.

Willow Creek has a long history of Bigfoot sightings. These sightings and their locations are listed in the museum in Willow Creek. A pamphlet the visitors could pick up in person or download before their visit with these locations and trail directions to get there could encourage visitors to become Bigfoot enthusiasts and travel to Willow Creek.

Accessibility and Aesthetics

An important aspect of tourism and attracting tourists to a certain area is aesthetics and accessibility. Willow Creek is a small, beautiful town with a mountain-esque feel, but there are some areas of concern. The team came up with a few places that could get a little extra loving to help attract more tourists and improve the experiences of Willow Creek residents. First with the accessibility aspect, the team thought that there could be better parking access to the popular river spot known as Broken Bridge, as well as, the Tish Tang campground. Revamping the parking areas to these places creates a welcoming environment for visitors and residents alike. Next, we suggest that the aesthetics of the public restroom in town be fixed up and maintained daily during times of high usage. To keep costs low, we advise that a program is created with the community. The program could be a senior project for high school student or a non-profit organization to maintain the public restroom. Lastly, we advise that all Willow Creek and local businesses provide access to the internet. The town could provide list of local businesses that offer free WiFi with services, or offer a spot with free internet access that could be sponsored by a local business or individual. Of course, not all of these suggestions are under the power of the community of Willow Creek to change which is why local connections are important.

Local connections to develop and cross promote tourism

In order for small rural towns like Willow Creek to strengthen their economies, provide a better quality of life, and build on local assets; they should connect with neighboring towns like Salyer and Hoopa to help develop tourism and cross promote local attractions. Additionally, promoting the filming of movies and/or hot spots for Bigfoot sightings across the area could link the regions.

Agricultural Tourism

Winery tourism is very economically beneficial for rural towns, and the wineries in Willow Creek have provided very limited information online, where millennials will start to research their trip. We suggest that Willow Creek works with the local wineries to update their websites, or possibly create a Winery Trail/tour. Possible connections with neighboring wineries in Salyer and/or Hoopa can also be beneficial.

- Winnett Vineyards
- Miles Garrett Wines
- Sentinel Wines
- Cavaletto Vineyard Estate (Salyer)
- Dogwood Estate Winery (Salyer)

Legal cannabis tourism is another opportunity that the state and county are looking to for growth in visitors in a post-Covid world. Cannabis production in Humboldt county has an international reputation and has potential to encourage visitors to stay longer. While the potential for communities is great, a concern for some communities related to promoting

cannabis tourism is continuing to maintain a family-friendly atmosphere. However, there are examples of towns capitalizing on cannabis tourism while not changing their communities in undesirable ways.

Examples of ways to package the cannabis tourism product

- Solar Living Institute in Hopland
- Yokayo Ranch event space in Ukiah
- Riverbar Pharms in Fortuna
- Feeling Groovy at Eagle Creek Ranch in Trinity County
- Sol Spirit in Trinity County

Marketing examples

The team came up with a variety of marketing examples that might resonate with millennial travelers.

Bigfoot's Bulletin – Matthew Gerber and Kyle Abelli-Amen

Bigfoot's Bulletin was conceptualized as a small internet advertisement showcasing various recreation opportunities, dining options, and unique attractions of the Willow Creek area. This publication could release a new volume on a monthly, or quarterly basis. Volume 1 of Bigfoot's Bulletin features a piece on the Willow Creek American Viticultural Area (AVA), advice on social distancing while visiting, dining spotlight and a featured local gem. See Appendices for the full publication.

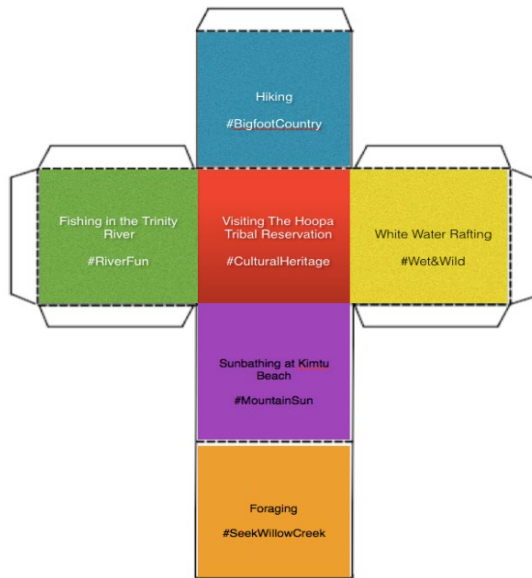
#hashtags

Encouraging visitors to tag their social media posts with hashtags specific to Willow Creek is not only something fun that millennial visitors would like to do, but it also serves as a way to promote Willow Creek through visitor generated content. The team came up with a number of hashtags that could be promoted at the Visitor Kiosk on a flyer, on the Willow Creek website and on all tourism related posts on the Chamber's social media. These hashtags include:

#visitWillowCreek #SeekWillowCreek #WillowCreek #mountainsun #riverfun
#riverfuninthemountainsun #BigfootCountry #BigfootorBust #SeekBigfoot
#InsearchofBigfoot



Willow Creek Activity Dice – Nash Parker and Mandy Hackney



Instructions: Cut along the solid lines, and fold along the dotted lines. Fold the cut-out into a cube, and tape or glue the edges together. Then roll the dice to decide which fun activity to do while in Willow Creek. See Appendices for a larger version.

Conclusions

Overall, the Willow Creek region has potential to transform to the next 'Millennial Getaway' destination of Humboldt County. Not only is the town at the doorstep of some of the most awe-inspiring landscapes in the world, it is chock full of unique activities to get wrapped-up in. From hiking in the mountains and playing in the river, to connecting with fresh, new faces at the annual Bigfoot Days event in late summer, Willow Creek is the place for River Fun in the Mountain Sun.

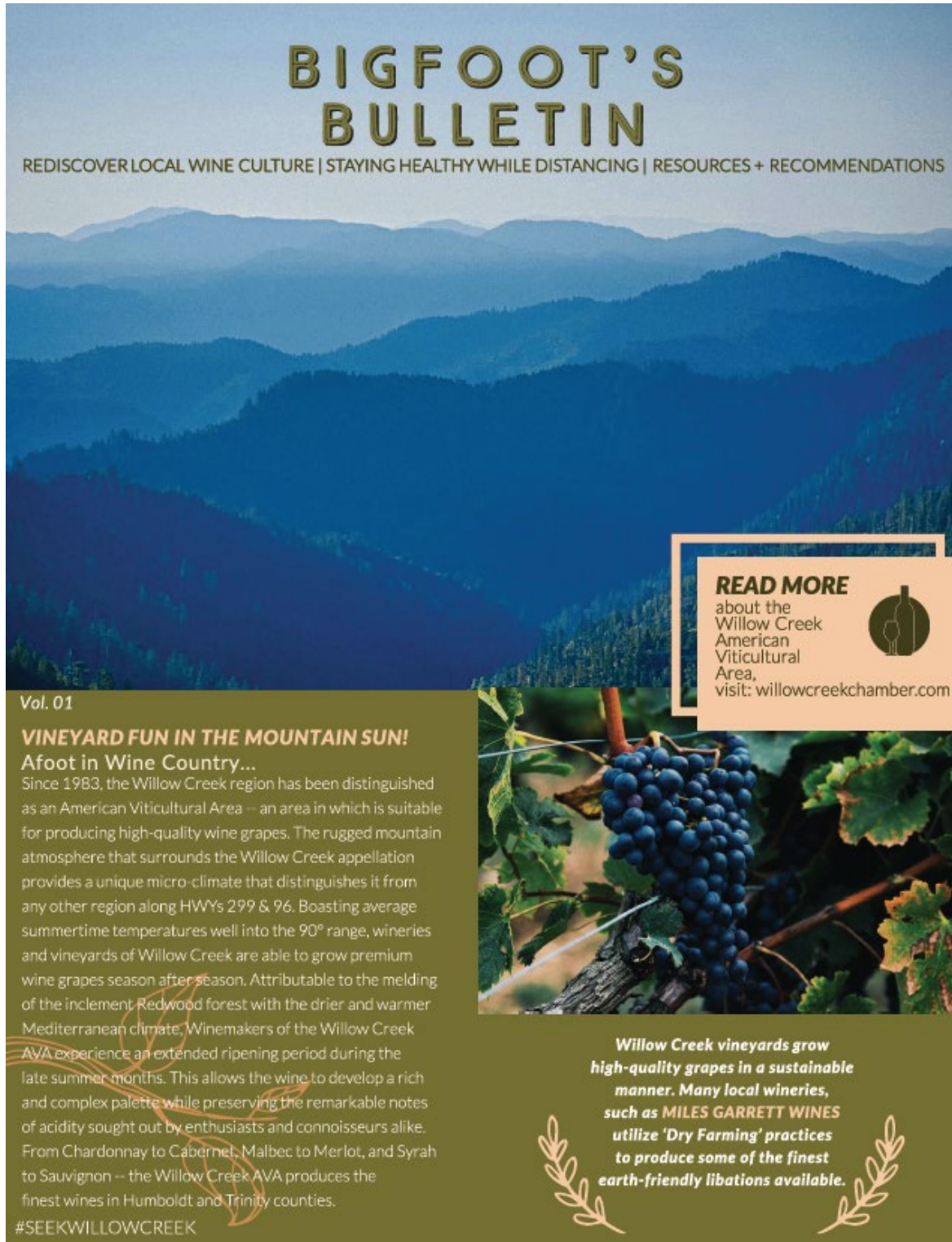
Creating this publication was an interesting and engaging exercise. We would like to thank the Willow Creek Chamber of Commerce, as well as the citizens of Willow Creek for allowing us to work on this project.

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Appendices

Bigfoot's Bulletin (to be displayed online or as a 2-sided flyer)



BIGFOOT'S BULLETIN

REDISCOVER LOCAL WINE CULTURE | STAYING HEALTHY WHILE DISTANCING | RESOURCES + RECOMMENDATIONS


Vol. 01

VINEYARD FUN IN THE MOUNTAIN SUN!
Afoot in Wine Country...

Since 1983, the Willow Creek region has been distinguished as an American Viticultural Area -- an area in which is suitable for producing high-quality wine grapes. The rugged mountain atmosphere that surrounds the Willow Creek appellation provides a unique micro-climate that distinguishes it from any other region along HWYs 299 & 96. Boasting average summertime temperatures well into the 90° range, wineries and vineyards of Willow Creek are able to grow premium wine grapes season after season. Attributable to the melding of the inclement Redwood forest with the drier and warmer Mediterranean climate, Winemakers of the Willow Creek AVA experience an extended ripening period during the late summer months. This allows the wine to develop a rich and complex palette while preserving the remarkable notes of acidity sought out by enthusiasts and connoisseurs alike. From Chardonnay to Cabernet, Malbec to Merlot, and Syrah to Sauvignon -- the Willow Creek AVA produces the finest wines in Humboldt and Trinity counties.

#SEEKWILLOWCREEK

READ MORE
about the Willow Creek American Viticultural Area, visit: willowcreekchamber.com



Willow Creek vineyards grow high-quality grapes in a sustainable manner. Many local wineries, such as MILES GARRETT WINES utilize 'Dry Farming' practices to produce some of the finest earth-friendly libations available.

STAYING HEALTHY WHILE DISTANCING

Now, more than ever, it is important to lead a healthy and active lifestyle. Willow Creek hosts miles of pristine hiking trails, countless access points to the Trinity River, and phenomenal views of the mountains. There is no better place to explore in Humboldt County than Willow Creek! We ask that you utilize these spaces in a safe manner, and maintain physical distance between groups. The North Coast region is home to a fragile, and aging population where wide-spread infections have the potential to harm the greater community. We ask that you please be mindful of others while using beaches or trails, and to keep the size of your group relatively small. It is up to all of us to ensure the health and safety of our communities.

Dining Spotlight

For over 30 years, Willow Creek's **PIZZA FACTORY** has been serving hand-tossed pizza, pasta, sandwiches, and more. All ingredients are prepared fresh, and never frozen!

Order online at willow-creek.pizzafactory.com

or stop on by!

39032 HWY 299, Willow Creek, CA
Open 11am - 9pm Sunday-Thursday,
11am - 10pm Friday and Saturday.

WE TOSS'EM,
THEY'RE AWESOME!



WINERIES

Miles Garrett Wines
655 Peachtree Ln
Willow Creek, CA 95573

Sentinel Winery
2263 Patterson Rd,
Willow Creek, CA 95573

Cavaletto Vineyards
3995 Campbell Ridge Rd,
Salyer, CA 95563

BARS

The Forks Lounge & Bar
38986 CA-299,
Willow Creek, CA 95573

Beer & Wine Bar
39060 CA-299,
Willow Creek, CA 95573

P & J Billiards
39078 CA-299,
Willow Creek, CA 95573



#SEEKWILLOWCREEK

DISCOVER A LOCAL GEM: KIMTU BEACH

Located just outside of downtown Willow Creek, KIMTU BEACH sits on a beautiful bend of the Trinity River, on the grounds of Camp Kimtu. The bend that creates the beach allows for slow-moving water; perfect for swimming, wading, and diving. Grab a sandwich from River Song Natural Foods, and lay down a blanket on Kimtu Beach for a relaxing afternoon picnic.

Need more time to soak up the mountain sun? Luckily for you, the Willow Creek Community Services District maintains 9 tent camping sites, and 2 short-term cabin rentals during the summer season.

Additional amenities of Camp Kimtu include: a baseball field, playground, and open spaces for outdoor activities.

For more information, visit: willowcreekcsd.com/camp-kimtu/

Willow Creek Activity Dice

Instructions: Cut along the solid lines, and fold along the dotted lines. Fold the cut-out into a cube, and tape or glue the edges together. Then roll the dice to decide which fun activity to do while in Willow Creek.

