

# Valley

*state of mind*



John Lazer/Staff Photographer

The Valley is as much a state of mind as it is a place. And once you've lived here, you wonder what all the slams from "the other side of the hill" are about. It's filled with communities where healthy children are brought up, businesses are still growing and the beach is just a few miles away.

Culture, diversity, real life  
flourish on this side of the hill

BY MICHELE MILES GARDNER

**T**HE San Fernando Valley is constantly portrayed in the media — and by those who dwell on “the other side of the hill” — as nothing more than a sun-baked wasteland of mini mall-strewn streets under a tangle of wires and smog. The place where only illiterate meth addicts, porn stars and frosted-haired simpletons would choose to live, where cuisine no more exotic than canned ravioli can be found, and where the suburban sprawl is consuming us Valley dwellers under its mass, oozing over us until we suffocate beneath it, rendering our brains (what little brain matter we have) useless.

The Valley, the critics repeatedly tell us, is making us all fat, dull, stupid and soulless.

Thanks to the critics, now I know why it is that the moment I purchased my midcentury Valley ranch home, I no longer wanted to walk anywhere or read anymore. I've come to realize that the only culture I'm exposed to is the piped-in Muzak version of the Beatles' “Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds,” which I hum as I troll the supermarket aisles in a zombie-like daze, piling my cart with processed foods.

# GARDINER: No canned cheese

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These criticisms of the San Fernando Valley have been going on for a long time. Journalist Greg Palast once said of living in the Valley during the 1960s: "We had this sense that there was a bright city over the hill. Cross Laurel Canyon and you entered the city of the winners. We were in the planet of the losers."

Ouch!

Then there's ex-Valley resident and actor Robert Redford, who has been quoted as calling the Valley "oppressive." Yikes! This isn't Cuba.

We live in California, where people around the world dream of living. And here, in the Valley — near beautiful beaches and under an almost constant sun — we're surrounded by mountains, not a fortress.

But I understand wanting to move beyond a childhood community. While I loved

growing up in San Francisco, the chilly weather and fog wasn't for me. I craved the Southern California sun I enjoyed as a kid on family vacations. We'd stay with friends in Malibu. There, I first learned of the Valley.

While walking along the beach, I saw "Vals go home" spray-painted on a cliff. My Malibu friend told me it referred to people who live in "the Valley." And the way she said it gave me the idea "the Valley" wasn't a nice place. But I considered that the beach locals were marking their territory, calling sides, the way I did with my sister in our family car's back seat on road trips.

Eventually, I left San Francisco and planned to live as close to the beach as possible. Which is how, on a blistering August day in 1985, I moved into an apartment in Reseda. It was as close to the beach as I could afford.

With Frank and Moon Zappa's "Valley Girl" lyrics stuck in my head, whenever anyone

asked where I lived, I'd barely mumble — not wanting to be pegged as a "Val."

The Valley wasn't the beach. It was hot. But my apartment did have a pool. A plus. And I spent every free hour at the ocean anyway.

Soon, I came to expect the blast of heat which welcomed me as I neared the top of Topanga Canyon toward home after a day at the beach. I'd drive down palm tree-lined Ventura Boulevard — passing neon-lit liquor stores, coffee shops and carwashes — all swooping angles and optimism, radiating the California vibe.

Once married, my husband and I made our Valley status official. We bought a ranch-style home. Our brains hadn't shrunk from the heat. The housing prices were relatively affordable. And — all right, I'll admit it — we liked the Valley and planned to raise our child here ... on purpose.

We're not alone. Even as mortgages rise, the middle and

working classes, as in the past, still come to the Valley to raise families. But today the area is more ethnically blended than ever. According to a report from Pepperdine University's Davenport Institute, "The Valley is not only as diverse as the rest of Los Angeles, but in some ways more so."

See! You'd never know that by the way Hollywood portrays us.

While the Valley has changed over the decades, the stereotypes haven't. And, unfortunately, there are critiques much worse than "Vacuous Vals" being slung around. For instance, when the Valley tried to secede from Los Angeles, opponents claimed our drive for independence was class- and race-based. Since I live here, and know otherwise, I'd sooner believe "Encino Man" won an Oscar than we're racists. But it's easier to perpetuate tired rants than it is to look further, isn't it?

I expect people will continue to blather that we have

no culture or diversity. But we know what we've got. Green pockets of rural life. Horse communities with trails and stables. Pierce College's cow- and sheep-dotted rolling hills and vegetable farms. Local parks — Malibu Creek Park, Stoney Point and Balboa — for hiking, rock climbing, biking or exploring. Many farmers markets, theaters and festivals. An arts district and an antique row.

So let those outside the Valley believe we dine out by spraying canned processed cheese into our mouths as we sit in frayed lawn chairs in our weed-strewn backyards. Then we'll have our array of exotic cuisines to ourselves.

Three of the top five restaurants in all of Los Angeles are right here in the Valley, according to the 2007 Zagat Guide. And I have my own favorites minutes from my home: Taste of India for delicious Navrattan Korma, Bale Valley for tasty Vietnamese soup, Cavaretta's Deli for subs and Follow Your Heart — a

funky little natural-food market and café, which reminds me of my family's hippie days in San Francisco.

All of this, and so close to lush canyons — Topanga, Malibu and Kanan — which smell of sage and are wonderful to drive over with the car's top down or windows open, and lead Valley-dwellers to one of the most beautiful coastlines in the world.

Over the years, my state of mind has changed toward the Valley. The younger me believed anything of interest was "over the hill." But once I made an effort, I discovered there's plenty to appreciate about the Valley.

And rather than a soulless sprawl, I've found this place is home to all types of people with souls intact, who (as far as I know) don't consider mini mart beef jerky haute cuisine.

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