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# Sonoma County-style Farm Stays

Hidden gems offer a taste of the 'simple life'

by **Kimberly Kaido-Alvarez**

Photos by Loren Hansen

**S**onoma County has been a favorite getaway spot for Sacramento, San Francisco and other Bay Area city folk since the 1890s. A slower pace, small-town country charm, wide open spaces and the Russian River resort area can be a magnet for those looking to rejuvenate the spirit, worn down by what seems to be an endless cycle of daily hustle and bustle. A weekend or occasional escape to Sonoma County from the thriving metropolises not so far away was a tradition back then that continues today.

The concept of a farm stay is a new local niche that capitalizes on Sonoma County's natural beauty and agricultural roots. The idea is that a little digging in the dirt, getting back to nature, and a severe slowing down might be

more enjoyable for some people than a schedule booked with sightseeing and events to attend. "Meaningful, balancing, healing"—these are some of the words visitors choose to describe this type of a vacation that might feature a healthy dose of down-home fun. Harvesting vegetables, collecting eggs from a chicken coop, communal cooking, bonfires and board games could be what farm-stay guests desire.

## A taste of West County life

Spirit Hill Farm in Sebastopol was built with that theory in mind. Proprietress Carolyn Yates is behind the creation of the unique getaway, one of the few farm-stays in West Sonoma County. She holds the property in high esteem and credits the land for helping "save her." From what,







you might ask? The story goes something like this: “My world became my job, and I thought about it 24/7,” explained Yates, a successful executive who works in the South Bay. “When what you are working on affects so many other people, it can become the center of your life. And although my job is very intellectually stimulating, I became disconnected from the pace of nature.”

Yates found herself yearning for that connection that adds so much more meaning to life. Memories of childhood days on her grandparents’ ranch in the Sonoma County town of Windsor flooded her mind. “Those were some of the best times of my life,” she said. Simple pleasures like collecting fresh eggs from chickens, falling asleep to the sound of croaking frogs and playing Yahtzee with family and friends made their

people and is available for those looking for the farm-stay experience.

Although the entire farmhouse was impressive, my favorite rooms were the kitchen and a little bungalow reading-nook room. I pictured myself snuggled up there on a warm summer afternoon with a few favorite books. A daybed with plenty of pillows beckoned; the ceiling was all wood and I felt like I was in a modern-day hut. Vibrant is really the best word I could use to describe that little room.

“They worked around the original bones to preserve the character of the original family home,” Robinson said. When he greets guests, Robinson said he can help plan a visit, arrange for a wine tasting or a massage at the main house. The original farmhouse was built in 1909 and was

care; I felt like the property was just waiting for someone to breathe new life into it. Turns out, I was that someone.”

### Gathering & Eating

There is an incredible openness to the kitchen at Spirit Hill Farm. “We’re hoping guests use the house for communal gathering,” said Robinson. The kitchen is a big part of that and the gift of a little olive oil pressed from the olive trees on the property is an invitation to start cooking and eating with friends or family. A spacious island and a professional stove, along with a view of the garden from the windows, set the stage.

“We try to entice them to look around and take advantage,” said Robinson as we strolled past strawberry, squash and tomato



Carolyn Yates, proprietress of Spirit Hill Farm

mark, and it became crystal clear what was missing. The quest for just the right farm in Sonoma County was on, and Spirit Hill Farm became a reality for Yates in the spring of 2016.

“For me, it’s not just a country house, it’s a ‘thin place’—a place where the physical and spiritual worlds come together. Where ‘the distance between heaven and Earth collapses,’ as the ancient Celts first conceived it,” said Yates, who added that the property has the ability to “jolt you out of whatever rut you’re in.”

Yates lives part-time at the Spirit Hill Farm property. Jeff Robinson is the property manager and led me on a tour of this one-of-a-kind location with a main house and multiple cottages. The house sleeps eight

occupied by some of the first settlers in Green Valley. A series of renovations were made to the historic farmhouse throughout the years but the original architecture of the family home was preserved, Robinson said. The style is rustic yet modern.

Niko Preovolos of Dwellingpoint Design is the mastermind behind the most recent Spirit Hill Farm renovation and many of its design elements. “He’s one of those Renaissance guys who can do anything,” said Yates.

But Preovolos also has a soft spot for the farm. “I was so taken by the property I didn’t really think much about the condition of the house,” he said. “It needed a new well and a new septic system. And the blackberry patch needed to be cut back. But I didn’t



plants in the garden. Beyond that were apple trees and to the right was a two-story wooden hen house, where free-range chickens hang out, clucking and scratching at the dirt. The “working girls” produce about three eggs a day, so making an omelet is an easy option for those out-of-shape in the kitchen.

Yates said the whole property was thoughtfully designed to create ‘experiences’ wherever you go. “From the views framed by smartly-placed windows to the paths that lead you from building to building and space to space, and plantings that offer distinct scents and sensations as you pass by them,” she said.

A highlight of Spirit Hill Farm is the number of gathering spaces or hideouts,





Full House Farm, Sebastopol

depending on how one puts them to work. Lounging spots with comfy outdoor furniture, a fireplace, interesting plants and outdoor dining spaces promise enchanting evenings. Decorative eclectic lanterns adorn the pathway that leads to a grand finale of sorts: a saltwater pool and spa. “It’s pretty magical at night,” admitted Robinson.

#### Farm Stays from Sebastopol to Guerneville

There are other farm stays in Sonoma County, but not many.

Each of them is unique, offering something different to those visiting the region in this new way. Here are the ones we discovered.

##### Full House Farm.

Established in 1999 in Sebastopol, Full House Farm was one of the first farm-stays in the area. Featuring 23 acres of mostly wild land, among the creatures that guests might see on walks are deer, raccoon, bobcat, fox, hawks and turkey vultures. The farm offers a 3-bedroom house, cottage or trailer. Privacy was a priority when creating places for guests.

“It’s very hard to find what we offer,” Cole said. “Visitors have said they’re grateful for the wide-open space. You aren’t crammed in next to someone else.”

Hiking through the oak groves and meadows of the property is an option

for guests. Dairy goats and chickens also call the ranch home and visitors have the opportunity to learn about sustainable living, micro-farming and organic food. **Full House Farm** also offers leadership coaching with horses. There’s plenty to do besides simply meeting horses and goats—looking for eggs in a hen’s nest and eating farm food also are at the top of guests’ to-do lists.

“It can be a great introductory moment for those who haven’t been around animals.

It’s a soft introduction,” said Cole. Educational tours, which end with a tasting, are also offered—with overnight guests getting a half-off deal.

##### Sabor Mexicano Farm.

A historic farmhouse, the Colonel Armstrong, built in 1892 sleeps up to 12 adults and three children and also qualifies as a “farm-stay” experience. Third-generation farmer Jorge Saldana started the 130-acre farm in Guerneville

to supply his restaurants with an abundance of fresh, flavorful and healthy produce. He’s the founder of Cancun-Sabor Mexicano restaurant in downtown Berkeley and Tlaloc-Sabor Mexicano in the financial district of San Francisco.

“It was my dream to create healthy Mexican dishes and I wanted to grow my own organic food,” said Saldana. “That way you know exactly what you are getting.”

A chef of 27 years, his passion and

appreciation for “Mexican food done well” started at a young age while watching his father grow food and his mother (also a chef) transform those ingredients into a wide range of dishes. “Like cooking, to see food grow is magical, and the two just go together,” he said.

“Inside the house is every tool you need for cooking. We’ve prepared it for those who love to cook,” explained Saldana. A large outdoor oven, grills and an open fire will likely call out to chefs and cooking enthusiasts as well. Access to the edible landscape that features an array of seasonal vegetables, herbs, spices and fresh eggs is also a bonus for visitors.

The working farm and hiking trails through the oaks and redwoods are just a few highlights for those visiting Sabor Mexicano Farm in Guerneville, within walking distance of Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve. “The nature that surrounds the place makes it very unique,” said Saldana, who described the property as secluded and private, yet close to the little river-beach town of Guerneville.

Diversity is what Sonoma County is known for: it’s been described as a collection of villages with distinct character. Just when you think you’ve seen it all, another hidden pocket presents itself begging for exploration—and this keeps people coming back again and again for real, genuine and meaningful discoveries. The way I see it, the farm stay is just another buried gem revealing more of what Sonoma County is now all about. **SD**

#### RESOURCES

**Spirit Hill Farm,** Sebastopol  
707-823-6900  
spirithillfarm.net

**Full House Farm,** Sebastopol  
707-829-1561  
fullhousefarm.com

**Sabor Mexicano Farm,**  
Guerneville  
sabor.two22.co