

# The New York Times

## Escapes

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### On the Olive Oil Trail, Glass by Glass

By WENDY KNIGHT

**Y**OU need to warm the glass in your hand first," said Ted Hall, the proprietor of Long Meadow Ranch, a 650-acre property in the Mayacamas Mountains high above the Napa Valley in northern California.

Mr. Hall was standing in the ranch's wine cave, a rammed-earth structure that smelled of earth, damp and pure, with a hint of spilled wine. An original Andy Warhol cow print was hanging in the foyer. On the wood bar, Mr. Hall displayed two wine bottles, proper glasses and a tray of cheese.

But this was not the usual event in California's wine country. There's a new addition to today's wine tasting — extra-virgin olive oil. And not just at the Long Meadow Ranch.

The tourist season in Napa and Sonoma runs from May through September. Olives are picked November through January, but most places aren't open to the public during the busy harvesting period. The ideal time to visit olive groves is May and June, when the olive oil from the fall harvest is released.

To get to the town of Napa, you drive north from Oakland up Highway 80 past a seemingly endless string of shopping complexes and onto Route 29, entering Napa from the south. Ducking off the main road into Napa's business district reveals the town's agriculture and mining history in buildings like the Historic Napa Mill along the Napa River (now home to a historic hotel and several retail shops) and Copia, the American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts, an educational center that celebrates the region's agricultural bounty with demonstration gardens and multimedia presentations.

In the town of Sonoma, Highway 116 leads west to the industrial town of Petaluma. The four-mile drive on Red Hill Road from Petaluma to McEvoy winds through Petaluma's residential areas into a landscape reminiscent of Virginia horse country.

The road to the McEvoy Ranch is revealed by a hand-painted sign just past the 19th century Union Schoolhouse. The dirt road leading to the farmhouse's offices traces alongside incredibly steep and vibrant hills. A mechanical

*On olive estates in Northern California, tastings as precise as those for wine.*

The real beauty of the region unfolds a few miles north of Napa in the town of Yountville — with its classically restored brick and clapboard buildings and stellar restaurants — and in the Rutherford Appellation, a fertile valley framed by springtime jade green mountains that turn progressively tawny with summer's heat.

Long Meadow Ranch is in the Rutherford Appellation on Route 29, one of two north-south routes winding through the valley. Tours of the ranch begin at the Rutherford Gardens, the estate's vegetable gardens. A Pinzgauer, a Swiss Army troop carrier, transports guests a few miles north to the entrance of the estate. The "integrated organic farming system" grows heirloom vegetables, grapes for wine, grass for the ranch's Scottish longhorn and shorthorn cattle, and Italian and Spanish olives.

From Napa, the McEvoy Ranch is reached by driving west on Routes 121 and 12 to Sonoma. You'll pass through the Carneros district, where fields of vineyards have supplanted the cattle and sheep that once grazed on this flat, elevated land.

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Back at the farmhouse, guests tour the mill and taste the oils.

"We tell our guests what to look for as consumers," said the tour manager, Jill Lee. "Most people don't realize what they're buying on the shelf. For example, with a Tuscan-style olive oil they would want to look for a fresh, fruity or grassy taste."

Whether the olive grove tours are cultivating sophisticated home chefs or horticulturalists is hard to discern. Linda Cox-Myers, a home-textile entrepreneur from San Francisco, visited the ranch over Mother's Day weekend with eight other family members.

Though she had tried the McEvoy Ranch olive oil and was "duly impressed," she said, she and her husband, who own a weekend home nearby where they've planted 10 olive trees, were "curious to see what they were doing" at the ranch. "We learned a lot about caring for our own trees," she said.

Regardless of their motivations, more people visit the McEvoy Ranch each year. Sixty people toured the ranch in 2002. In 2005, there were more than 500.

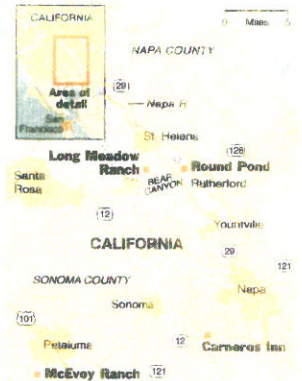
Seeing and tasting aren't the only ways to experience olive oil in wine country. The Carneros Inn offers an exfoliation spa treatment using crushed olive stones and local extra-virgin olive oil. The mixture is gently applied to the body to scrub off dead skin. With warm, damp towels, the therapist removes the paste, which is surprisingly non-oily, and finishes with a light massage using honeydew lotion.

Sure, there are plenty more vineyard-speckled country roads to explore. But the decadent treatment may leave you sidling up to the nearest bar asking for the one delight most synonymous with Napa Valley: a glass of wine, please.

#### OLIVE COUNTRY

**CARNEROS INN** 4048 Sonoma Highway, Napa, Calif.; 888-400-9000; www.thecarnerosinn.com.

This inn's 86 guest cottages are \$360 to about \$1,000 a night. Spa services include an "orchard olive stone and honeydew exfoliation," \$90 for a 45-minute treatment.



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