

## LONG MEADOW RANCH 'MUCH MORE THAN WINE AND OLIVES'

BY MATT VILLANO

It began like any other tasting in the Wine Country. First I swirled, circling my tiny glass on the counter so the precious golden nectar would coat the sides. Next I sniffed, inhaling until scents of earth and citrus wafted to my nose. Finally, I sipped the elixir, swished it around in my mouth and swallowed.

Flavors emerged immediately. First it was wheatgrass, then butter. Gradually, I picked up a faint spiciness, a surprise that forced me to cough. Until that moment, I had never tasted olive oil without water and a hunk of fresh bread. But on this sweltering day at Rutherford's Long Meadow Ranch, I was experiencing the wonders of an oil shooter.

"This oil comes from some of the oldest olive trees in the Napa Valley," explained Lydia Damian, the ranch's hospitality director and the one administering the taste test. "The olives are related to the picholine olive from the Provence region of France, and the cuttings were likely brought to California by ship around (Cape) Horn."

The tasting and history lesson came after a 90-minute walkabout, a brief immersion into the life of a certified organic farm. Under the leadership of owner Ted Hall, the ranch produces everything from organic wines and olive oils to grass-fed beef and hormone-free eggs. The tours are a way for Hall to share his sustainability efforts with the world.

Long Meadow offers a number of tours. The most popular is given in a Pinzgauer, a renovated, open-air Austrian army vehicle with three axles and six wheels. My tour, billed as a hiking tour, involved a bit more effort, as Damian led me and a couple from Maine on a short and easy walk around part of the ranch's 650 acres.

Our tour began at Rutherford Gardens, an organic farm across



Highway 29 from the Grgich Hills winery. Wandering through the gardens, Damian pointed out rows of heirloom tomatoes, hundreds of garlic stalks and a strawberry patch. Then we stopped under the canopy of a giant fig tree. Fresh figs hung from the branches like Christmas ornaments.

Fifteen minutes later, after a short drive up a windy, private road, we arrived at Long Meadow Ranch. We piled out in front of the winery, a rammed-earth building built into the side of the Mayacamas Mountains. From the front patio, which doubles as a crush pad for grapes in September and olives in November, I could see east for miles.

Damian led us around the back of the winery, up a stone drainage ditch to a gently sloping parcel of Merlot grapes. After touting the virtues of pesticide-free enology, she talked up a practice known as dry farming, which vineyard manager Frank Leeds uses to nurture the vines. The result is a heartier, healthier ecosystem.

"We'll give these guys a little bit of water in the beginning, but for the most part, we want them to dig deep into the ground to find it on their own," Damian said. "If you blast your vineyard with water,

you're inviting unwanted pests that can ruin your vines."

Farther up the hill, we followed the path to a klatch of trees with short and stubby green leaves. This was an olive orchard. In the shadow of a tree, Damian explained how farmers use compost as fertilizer for the trees and employ clover

cover crops to provide nitrogen and control erosion. Past a field of Sangiovese grapes, the olive lesson continued down the hill, in front of another orchard with dozens of trees. Hall discovered this grove by accident soon after he bought the land in 1993. With a little research, he learned that the original owner, E.J. Church, received a land grant from President Ulysses S. Grant.

Not surprisingly, this orchard is named Prato Lungo, Italian for "long meadow." While the olives from these trees have been linked to France, experts in Spain have been unable to determine what species they are. Damian said these pros test the olives the same way forensic scientists might test a suspect's DNA.

Whatever they are, these little green orbs sure make tasty oil. After introducing us to some Appaloosa horses and red wattle pigs, Damian took us back to the winery and showed us the hulking Pieralisi olive press from Italy. Then we hit the tasting room, where the extra-virgin goodness from Prato Lungo made me cough with glee.

As if delicious olive oil weren't enough, Damian had prepared other goodies from the farm for us

to try, including cheeses, organic strawberries and grass-fed beef carpaccio. To wash it all down, we sampled three varieties of organic Long Meadow Ranch wine: Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon and a table wine named Ranch House Red.

The tour of Long Meadow Ranch ended with a peek at the fermentation tanks, all of which are powered by solar energy. As we headed back toward the parking lot at Rutherford Gardens, Ora Aselton, one of the folks from Maine, summed up what I, too, found most appealing about the experience.

"The story of this place is about so much more than wine and olives," she said. "I don't know another winery in Napa that can offer that."



### LONG MEADOW RANCH TOURS:

Rutherford Gardens, 1796 S. St. Helena Highway (Highway 29, just north of Highway 128), Rutherford. Daily tours at 10:30 a.m. \$35 to \$50 per person. Reservations recommended. (707) 963-4555, Ext. 161; [www.longmeadowranch.com](http://www.longmeadowranch.com).

Matt Villano is a freelance writer.