



Back at the **RANCH**

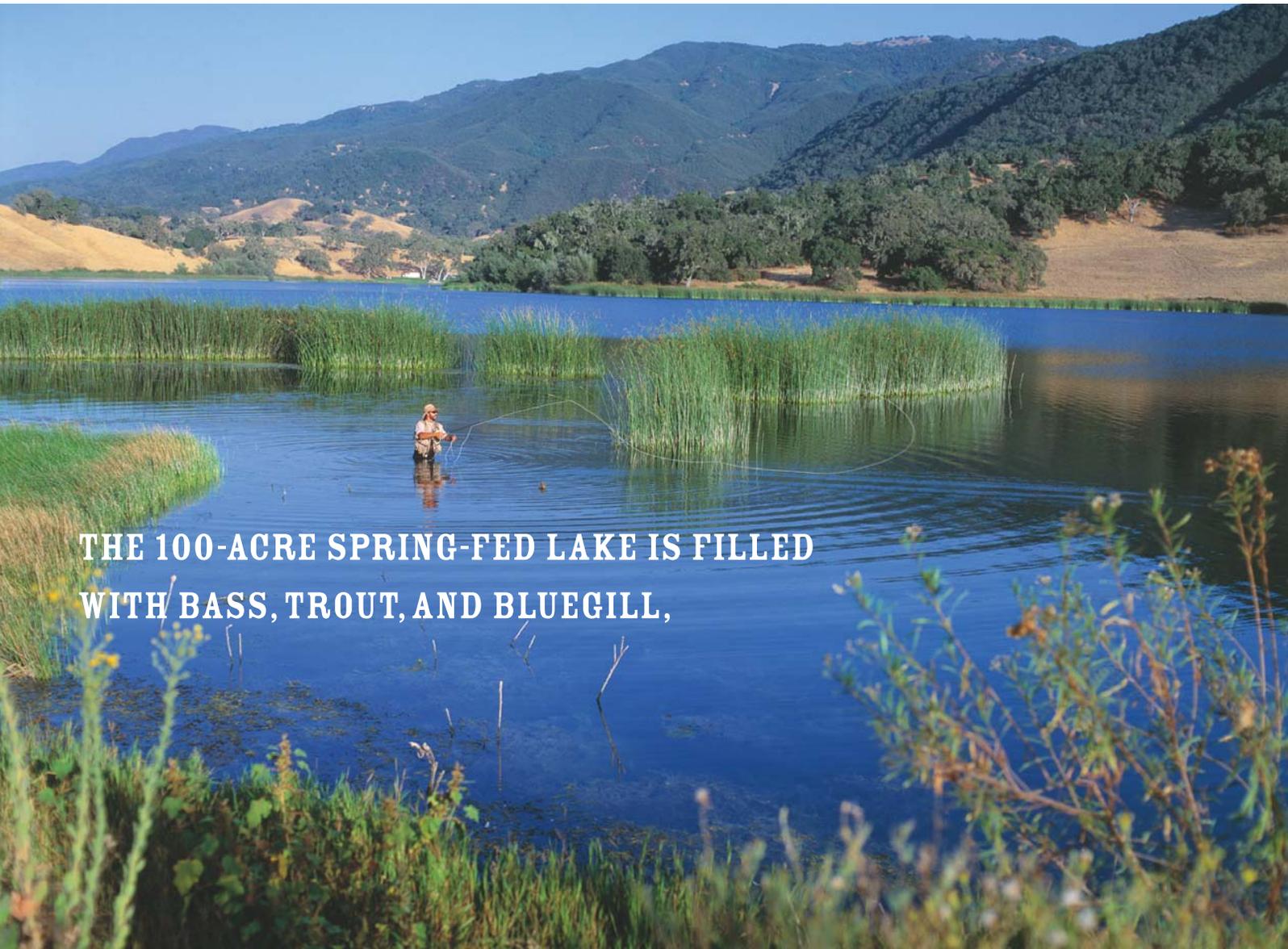
RELAX THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY AT THE ALISAL

By Leslie A. Westbrook Photographs by xxxx



Perhaps the hardest decision for guests at the **historic** and much-loved Alisal Guest **Ranch and Resort** in Santa Barbara County's Santa Ynez Valley, is deciding what, or what not, to do. At The Alisal, named for the **sycamore groves** that surround it, you can ride a horse; go fishing; pet farm animals; play golf or tennis; **eat, drink, and listen** to a cowboy croon over a campfire breakfast; or just **lounge by the pool**. For many visitors—myself included—the most important part of staying at The Alisal may just be learning how to **relax, unplug** from televisions and telephones, and **appreciate nature**.

All 10,000 acres of it.



THE 100-ACRE SPRING-FED LAKE IS FILLED WITH BASS, TROUT, AND BLUEGILL,



The ranch has been open to guests since 1946, and it is not uncommon to find three generations of families vacationing there together, as well as others who seek out the resort as a corporate retreat or a romantic getaway, lured by the tranquil early California landscape.

“The place is full of childhood memories for me,” muses 805 resident Brian Hodges, 43.

Every year, when Hodges was a kid, his family would get together with two other families, and the group—six adults and eleven children—would spend a long weekend at The Ranch. Hodges remembers the get-togethers well.

“There was a bingo game every Sunday evening. My dad gave me two dollars, and I worked two cards simultaneously. I won the largest sum of money I had ever witnessed—\$86 all in ones,” which he held in the palm of his little nine-year-old hand. “To this day, I’ve never had the impression of holding more money,” says the now-married father of three. Card and board games at The Alisal are popular family pastimes since there are no phones or televisions in the guest cottages.

I recently returned to the working cattle ranch and resort for the second time. On my first visit (a romantic getaway), I chose to hit the dusty trail on horseback, while my beau opted for tennis. The moment my posse of trail cowboys and girls came upon the sparkling Alisal Lake, I promised myself I would return to the ranch and try fishing and canoeing on that enticing body of water. The 100-acre spring-fed lake is filled with bass, trout, and bluegill, so in advance of my most recent arrival, I booked a fly-fishing lesson with the pro.

My left-handed fishing guide, Jason Grupp (who has been fishing since he was six and carries the first fly he ever tied as a young whippersnapper in his tackle box for good luck) took me out on the lake in a comfy bass tracker boat for a lesson and some “fish talk.” Although the thought of catching a trout for breakfast was tempting, I know better. “Catch-and-release” fishing is not only proper, but the rule here.

Grupp cast his line gracefully through the air and dropped his lure—called a bead head woolly bugger—into the lake. Within 30 seconds, he had hooked a large mouth bass, ready for its close-up. Jason ably removed the hook and set the fish free again.

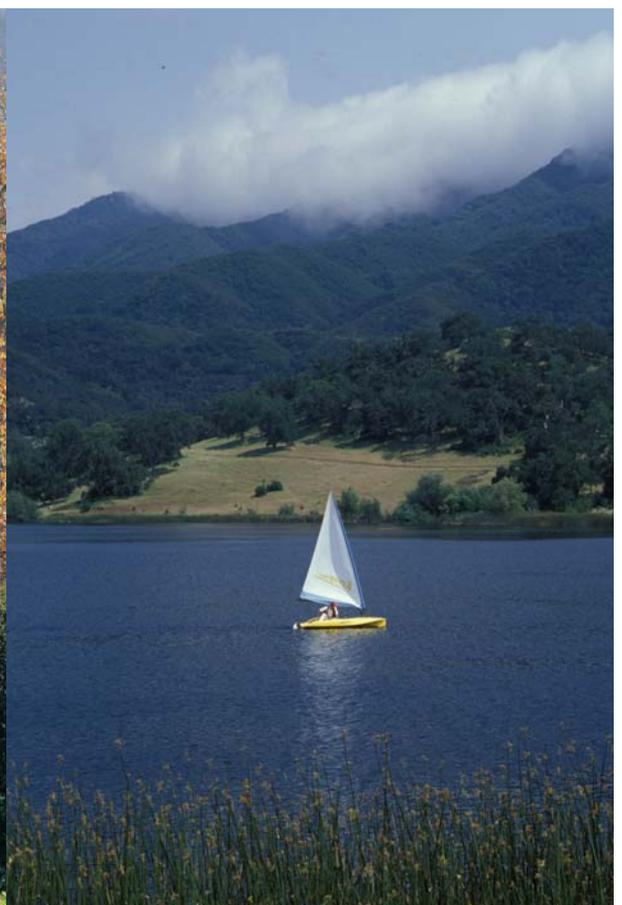
After a few demonstrations, it was my turn. I clumsily wove the rod in the air and cast my line, aiming for the tules in the shallow banks where, Grupp promised me, fish would be looking for food.

“Strip, strip, strip,” Grupp, a newly married man, yelled to me.

He was referring to putting “movement” on the fly to make it look real to the fish.

Then I caught a couple of fish within the first half hour—the average take is around 30 fish during a 3-hour lesson—and felt most satisfied with my take.

I also took a canoe out (launched with the help of Andy Scalas, one of the lake guides—and ended up turning in circles a few times as Grupp and Scalas offered directions from the banks of the lake. Once I got going in the right direction, I noticed I had the entire lake to myself—if you don’t count a pair of Great Blue heron, their nesting babies, turkey vultures, the fish population, a bullfrog or two, a buck I spotted in the hills, other folks riding past on horseback in the distance, and even the occasional bald eagle passing overhead.





DINING AT ALISAL

There are many places to fill your tummy at The Alisal: The Ranch Room (open for breakfast and dinner); the River Grill and the Ranch Grill (two golf-course-side restaurants) and the Chuck Wagon Grill, a casual poolside venue for burgers.

The Alisal features a Modified American Plan (breakfast and dinner are included in the room rate) and menus are rotated seven days a week, year round, so there's always something new to choose from. Portions are hearty (especially the cowboy-sized breakfasts in The Ranch Room and salads at The River and Ranch Grills), and the food is tasty and straightforward. Service in the bustling Ranch Room, where jackets are required for men at dinner, is friendly, if unhurried.

The wine list is noteworthy and features many Santa Ynez Valley selections. The usual suspects are

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here: Firestone, Foxen, Gainey, and Brander, but some lesser-known winners are also showcased. Kris Curren's 2004 Grenache Blanc is an excellent choice—and Curren's boyfriend Bruno d'Alfonso's 2003 Pinot Grigio from Sanford & Benedict Vineyard also appears on the list. (He's the winemaker for Sanford; she's the winemaker for Seasmoke.) The Alisal's "house wines" come from local vintners Rusack and Lucas & Lewellen.

Be sure to have a drink in The Oak Room, especially when Bill Powell, the Alisal's lovely piano player of 32 years, is tickling the ivories on Tuesday and Wednesday nights. You can even croon to his tunes in

the spacious bar, which Powell refers to as "the best kept secret since the Normandy invasion!"

At the River Grill, where I enjoyed a terrific Caesar salad topped with marinated grilled chicken, dine outside, even if a sign warns: ATTENTION THE PATIO MAY BE SUBJECT TO OCCASIONAL WAYWARD GOLF SHOTS!

Guest cottages are spacious and comfortable. Although the decor is a bit dated, the front porch and wood burning fireplace in each unit more than compensate. For those requiring fancier digs, a couple of the rooms have been refurbished in a more contemporary manner.

Golf and horseback riding are other big draws to the ranch and have brought Sam and Belynda Boyer back to The Alisal for the past 20 years.

"We turn down the lane and we can feel the relaxation wash over us," says Sam, an avid golfer. "The Ranch Course is a great golf course. If you're not careful, that course will eat your lunch!" (For non-golfers, that means the course will gobble up your golf balls and you'll never see them again.)

Sam finds great value in the Round-Up package, which includes a double occupancy room, golf, tennis, fishing, horseback riding (Belynda is a rider), and some meals. "People recognize us—some even remember our names," adds the couple.



One of the best features about The Alisal is the unpretentious, friendly atmosphere. Around the pool, on a breakfast hay ride, on a shuttle to the lake, in the library (where there's a television, internet access, and phones), I met a variety of lovely people ranging from several large families gathered from across the state, a group of executives on their annual meeting, a screenwriter and his family from Los Angeles, a dairy farmer and his wife from New York, and even a pair of actors and their small daughter all the way from London (the Ranch has baby-sitting services as well as lots of kids programs), and numerous couples of all ages, many with tiny children in tow.

No matter your age, family situation, state of work or romance, The Alisal promises to provide life-long memories. Even those traveling solo don't have to feel alone at The Alisal—unless they want to. And chances are pretty darn good that, once you've experienced The Alisal, you will want to return again and again—especially if you win the Friday night bingo game. ■

The Alisal Guest Ranch and Resort is located at 1054 Alisal Road, Solvang, 800-888-4ALISAL, 805-688-6411, or visit www.alisal.com.

