

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

SUMMER ESCAPES



BACK IN THE SADDLE

Ranches across the idyllic Santa Ynez Valley are courting visitors with culinary events and sophisticated stays. Trish Reynales gets a taste.



The horse barns at Rancho San Julián, a family-owned farmstead in Lompoc, California. (TOM RAFALOVICH)

WHEN IT COMES to eating and drinking, I could give up almost anything, except red wine and grilled beef. Both of those are practically in my blood. On my mother's side, my great-grandfather Alex founded a meatpacking operation in Idaho in 1918. On my father's side, Abuelo Eduardo's wine company in Colombia also dates back more than a century. I'm pretty sure it was because of this heritage that I wound up living in Santa Barbara, with its storied ranches and vineyards.

In recent years I'd noticed that a handful of spots in the Santa Ynez Valley—about 40 miles north of my home—had branched out into hospitality with events and accommodations, which piqued my curiosity about how ranch life in the area has evolved. While Santa Ynez has long attracted celebrities in search of bucolic escapes (President Ronald Reagan, Bo Derek, and Pink among them), the valley has seen an influx of urbanites, high-end boutiques, and even a Michelin-starred restaurant.

One of the latest names to stake a claim in the area is the L.A.-based home, fashion, and beauty entrepreneur Jenni Kayne, who grew up riding horses at her godparents' property in the valley. Her **Oak Essentials** (oakesentials.com) skin-care line has star billing in the spa treatments at the **Inn at Mattei's Tavern**, **Auberge Resorts Collection** (aubergeresorts.com; doubles from \$950), an old stagecoach stop in Los Olivos that opened this year as a hotel.

As Kayne tells it, it's the gentle climate and natural beauty—rolling hills punctuated by sycamores and valley oak trees—that's increasingly drawing people to the valley. "It's one of those places that you get to and your shoulders drop. The community is down-to-earth and low-key; it's more about the farms and the animals."

Last summer, I recruited my friend Patty to join me in experiencing modern ranch life at three standout spots.

THE CLASSIC DUDE RANCH

A herd of glossy black cows basked under California live oaks as we arrived at **Alisal Ranch** ([alisalranch.com](https://www.alisalranch.com); doubles from \$1,025). The 10,500-acre homestead is appointed with western-inspired furnishings and wood-burning fireplaces. We spent the afternoon besting each other in sporting activities—Patty triumphed on the archery range, I won at pellet-gun shooting—before we took a horseback ride through the hills.

Smoked ribs and other barbecue favorites are big draws during Alisal's seasonal rodeos and cookouts, but Patty and I were craving steak-house classics, so we opted for the old-school formality of the Ranch Room restaurant. We ordered New York strips and paired them with their private-label Syrah from Stolpman, a vineyard about 15 minutes away. To my surprise, the steak's provenance was less local. Rather than relying on Alisal's own stock, which wouldn't supply enough during peak occupancy periods, the chefs bring in humanely raised meat from farms in other states, including Idaho and Washington. Instead, the kitchen imbues its menu with a sense of terroir through local ingredients like produce from Roblar Farms.



Elizabeth Poett, the seventh-generation owner of Rancho San Julián

THE COWGIRL'S RETREAT

Elizabeth Poett is the seventh-generation steward of **Rancho San Julián** (theranchtable.com), a 14,000-acre estate in Lompoc that her family has worked since 1837. After years of drought and a decline in beef consumption, ranchers—including Poett—have turned to tourism, branded products, and the entertainment industry to boost their bottom lines.

In addition to introducing an online store to sell goods like San Julián honey, beeswax candles, and T-shirts, Poett hosts dinners and other culinary events. She also stars in the Magnolia Network's popular *Ranch to Table* cooking show, which gives her the opportunity to share her way of life with an even broader audience. "We want people to understand a bit more about agriculture, to appreciate it, and to experience the history of this place," she told me.



the firepit at Folded Hills, in Buellton



horseback riding at Alisal Ranch, in Solvang.

The gatherings Poett hosts at San Julián are focused on that goal, too. We were among 80 guests from across the country at one of her solstice dinners, at which she served fluffy corn bread with San Julián honey, a kaleidoscope of edible flowers with vinaigrette, mounds of herbed new-potato salad, juicy apricot-glazed grilled chicken, and an aromatic 2020 Malvasia Bianca from her neighbors at **Lepiane Wines** (lepiانewines.com). Poett seemed a natural emcee as she floated from picnic table to picnic table in a yellow calico dress, chatting about baking and cow-calf operations—and passing on her love of ranching to generations to come.

THE FORWARD-THINKING FARM

To round out our adventure, Patty and I visited **Folded Hills Winery, Ranch, & Farmstead** (foldedhills.com), a 600-acre spread near Buellton run by Andrew Busch. We first popped in to the cowboy-chic tasting room inside the original homestead—outfitted with leather chairs, a fireplace, and wood paneling—to sample small-batch wines and cheeses, including a complex 2021 Clairette Blanche we sipped with a Central Coast Creamery goat Gouda. Next, we wandered across the road to a rustic outbuilding to shop for pork, lamb, and other goods.

Along with vineyards and orchards, Folded Hills grows organic row crops, and its farmstead stocks everything from fresh spinach and kohlrabi to sun hats and lavender diffusers. The adjacent ranch portion of the operation is home to a hillside of pastured sheep, plus a kid-friendly barnyard where visitors can mingle with Kunekune pigs, alpacas, and rescue animals, including a mini Jersey cow named Peaches.



LOCAL FINDS

Shoemaker and former Tumi creative director George Esquivel has worked hands-on with every artisan at his namesake brand, which is guided more by craft traditions than current trends.

Esquivel (georgeesquivel.com) offers both ready-made and made-to-order boots, sneakers, and slides, as well as bags, wallets, and other accessories—all produced by hand at Esquivel House, his recently opened atelier in Downtown Los Angeles.

— JALYN ROBINSON

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TOM RAFALOVICH; MELISSA GIDNEY/COURTESY OF FOLDED HILLS; COURTESY OF ALISAL RANCH; COURTESY OF ESQUIVEL ■