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DAVID S. MULLALLY /Special to The Herald

The new pool with an infinity-edged hot tub at Carmel Valley Ranch is a power spot of soothing relaxation.

CARMEL VALLEY RANCH

Transformation accomplished

Linda Mullally

Away We Go



If you go

- For information on holiday promotions and packages to enjoy our community's newest playground experiment go to www.carmelvalleyranch.com or call 625-9500. Look for star gazing, bird watching and honey harvesting on the resort's expanding activities roster.

The ranch's farmer, Mark Marino, right, explains his organic gardening methodology to Linda Mullally.

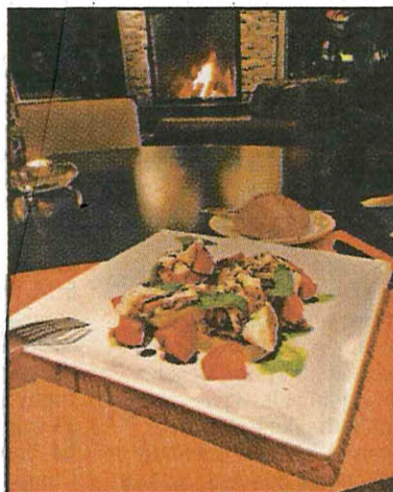
The chatter about a Hyatt family member's transformative plans for Carmel Valley Ranch sounded promising but ambitious. Like an old-timer, I had often shuddered at the sight of Carmel Valley Ranch's Monopoly board clutter, but when Noah Rolland, Carmel Valley Ranch's dapper and dynamic new programming and membership director, invited David and I to give a "pet tourism" talk to launch the "fireside chat" series, I drove up the valley with an open mind.

The buzz about a mega makeover of the tennis center into the "River Ranch" activity club was no hype. A park-like setting frames nine

resurfaced courts, two of which are joint-friendly clay. I was thrilled to see Rick Manning, a friend from my John Gardiner Tennis Ranch era and the most charismatic people magnet with the grace of a gazelle, involved in the resort's tennis program.

The new heated salt water Junior Olympic pool is a jewel surrounded by a children's splash zone, playground, game room, bocce ball court and an innovative fitness center to keep up with the popular exercise trends and classes. The most intriguing workout since the Pilates craze seems to be TRX suspension training. I spotted the strange frame contraption on the basketball court where a very tightly-toned female instructor was introducing strapped-up volunteers to body weight maneuvers for strengthening core muscles some of us never knew we had.

The locker rooms, appointed with spacious showers, steam rooms and grooming amenities, weren't too shabby either.



The Restaurant at the Lodge serves fresh, seasonal fare in a cozy ambiance.

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Gas fire pits warmed a couple of conversation clusters overlooking the facility and backdrop of green hills. By next spring, the historic building currently being restored above the pool lawn will house the poolside Café.

My last memory of the hotel under previous ownership was dinner in Citronelle serving overpriced food in a bland ambiance. As we approached the lobby I was stunned by the exterior physical changes. The front of the lodge had been expanded with floor-to-ceiling glass, inviting the oak canopy and signature tree swing into the airy lobby almost seamlessly. A subtle, soothing cascade of water channeled along the exterior wall set the tone for the resort's energetic metamorphosis.

In the bar side Restaurant at the Lodge we soaked in the views of the golf greens at the foot of the hills wrapped around the burgeoning vineyard slopes and the reflection of the blue pool terrace behind us. As we studied the limited but creative seasonal menu, I turned to David and said "this feels like a place we would stumble across on a road trip and never want to leave."

Curious to find out if Carmel Valley Ranch, as an upscale family- and pet-friendly resort with a penchant for nature, was vision or mirage, we returned a few weeks later for an overnight. We arrived in the morning with Donatello, our labradoodle guest, and set out on an exhilarating four-hour hike from the "Huff and Puff" trailhead toward Garland Park's Snively's Ridge. The autumn splendor in the sun had "ridge picnic" written all over it!

On the return, David grabbed his tennis gear and headed down to River Ranch while "Donnie" and I inquired about early check-in. Although the reception was warm and accommodating, guest orientation landed somewhere between laid back and loose, leaving me to knit an uncertain course

from the parking lot along the pathway maze to our room. We were off to a shaky start when I opened the door to discover I was ahead of housekeeping. Tired and whiny, I dialed the front desk. The valet was expedited to my rescue with a key to a new room and Donnie's VIC (very important canine) amenities (bed and bowls). Our privacy pod was representative of the 129 recently upgraded suites. Generous spaces with cathedral ceilings, luxurious bathroom, separate living room, plush furnishings with flat screen/Blu Ray entertainment amenities.

Irritation quickly dissipated as I surrendered to the creature comforts and the beckoning deck lounge with a languorous Donnie at my feet. The sun was melting over the horizon when I decided to stretch with a few pool laps and a soak in the infinity hot tub before my massage treat. One of the resort's more astute improvements was sacrificing a pod of five guest rooms to create the elegant 10,000-square-foot tree-top spa, Aiyana (Native American for "eternal flower"), warmed by natural wood ceilings, fireplaces in co-ed relaxation lounges and private outdoor terraces that embrace scenery and serenity. Spa savvy guests will appreciate the ultra sterilization features of the manicure/pedicure salon, deluxe heated massage tables and the "garden" theme treatment menu. As a student of the knuckle to muscle school of sports massage, I enjoyed my shop talk with a veteran therapist as much as the orange blossom oil spritzing.

I returned to the room, all tensions from earlier glitches erased from my psyche, ready for a zest of Zen on a tour of the two-acre organic garden. Mark Marino gave us an overview of the methodology that blends aesthetics with seasonal beds of edible vegetable, fruit and herb varieties that inspire Chef Tim Wood's creations, pointing to the grape vines and lavender that enhance the symbiotic harmony nurtured by bee hives. In a short time, agriculture, viticulture and apiculture have become the catalyst for a partnership in sustainable healing land-use

at Carmel Valley Ranch. The charismatic farmer with a 30-year poetic connection to the earth, 15 of which were at Earthbound Farm, referred to mounds of dirt as "chocolate cake compost," comparing the sunlight-filtered chard leaves to stained glass art. Marino summed up the essence of a bountiful garden with "if you give them sun, boundaries (eco liners and appropriate fencing) and water (water efficient Israeli irrigation system), plants will do all the work."

Palates stimulated by this farmer's exuberant and appetizing tour, we stopped by the room for a quick wardrobe change on the way to dinner. The fireside Restaurant at the Lodge remains the focal dining venue, and I hope that when the main dining room makes its debut next year, it will display some of the same charming characteristics that make the bar lounge eatery such an inviting gathering place.

I feasted on the luscious butternut squash soup, moist flaky mahi mahi and too many fresh-baked rolls. The garden tomato salad and fresh harvest of yellow beans seemed an especially succulent complement to David's porterhouse entrée. Strawberry crowned pound cake à la mode was divine decadence!

Satiated senses and distended waistlines didn't stop us from joining a few guests and the youthful family of staff for late-night nostalgia roasting marshmallows and lip-smaeking s'mores around the poolside wood-burning fire pit. At that moment beneath Carmel Valley's starlit sky, hiking boots, golf shoes, floral mist massages, creative cuisine and campfires seemed like a natural blend of ingredients to create a fresh brand of restorative, playful vacation experiences in this unique magnetic 500 acre haven.

Linda Mullally, a Monterey resident, inspires readers to get on the go and experience our world's bounty of natural and cultural wonders. She and husband David, a local attorney, share their passion for travel, hiking and dogs through articles, books, photography and as cruise hosts.