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SANTA MARIA VALLEY SET FOR SIZZLING BARBECUE SEASON

Distinctive Regional Cuisine Feeds Growing Wine Country on California's Central Coast

New Barbecue Developments Include Downloadable Recipes, Restaurant's 50th Anniversary

Santa Maria, CA—In an age of fickle tastes and culinary fads, Santa Maria Style Barbecue continues to prove that good taste never goes out of style.

Now, with spring and summer on the way, the Santa Maria Valley is once again preparing for a sizzling barbecue season, with one local barbecue landmark, the Far Western Tavern, celebrating its 50th year under the same family ownership.

To help feed this sizzling phenomenon, the Santa Maria Valley Chamber of Commerce and Convention & Visitor Bureau is offering an expanded new version of its Santa Maria Style Barbecue booklet, inclusive of recipes, restaurant recommendations and more. The booklet is available for free downloading at www.santamaria.com/visit/index.html.

"We are definitely entering a new era in culinary tourism, which is generating intensified interest in Santa Maria Style Barbecue," said Gina Keough, manager of the visitor bureau. "Many of the same people who come here to taste our local wines are seeking that same authenticity in their food, that same sense of place and heritage."

The origins of Santa Maria Style Barbecue date back to the mid 1800s, when local rancheros would host Spanish-style barbecues each spring for their vaqueros, or cowboys, as well as family and friends. Under the trees of this serene coastal valley, they would enjoy feasts that included beef barbecued over earthen fire pits.

The traditional cuts are top-block sirloin and tri-tip, a triangular bottom sirloin cut that originated in the Santa Maria Valley. The meat is rolled in a mixture of salt, pepper and garlic salt before being barbecued over coals of red oak, a native local oak species that contributes a smoky, hearty flavor. The menu includes fresh salsa, grilled French bread dipped in sweet melted butter, tossed green salad and slow-cooked pinquito beans, small pink beans that are indigenous to the valley.

Today, Santa Maria Style Barbecue is enjoyed across the region at restaurants, events and celebrations, providing a perfect complement to the wines, strawberries and other locally grown flavors of the Santa Maria Valley.

One of the more famous landmarks for Santa Maria Style Barbecue is the Far Western Tavern in the coastal hamlet of Guadalupe, which was founded by Clarence and Rosalie Minetti in 1958. Today, as it celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2008, the restaurant is still going strong. Clarence and Rosalie remain regulars at the restaurant, but the day-to-day operations are now managed by their three children.

"I think that our restaurant reflects the sense of heritage, family and community that is the foundation of Santa Maria Style Barbecue," says Susan Minetti-Righetti, who also operates Susie Q's Brand, specializing in artisan foods and barbecue seasonings based on local recipes. "At the same time, we are making sure that we keep pace with contemporary tastes in food and wine."

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