

SANTA MARIA VALLEY *California*

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND
VISITOR & CONVENTION BUREAU

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FROM STRAWBERRIES TO STALLIONS, LAVENDER TO LUFFA, NATURE'S BOUNTY NOW UNVEILED ACROSS SANTA MARIA VALLEY

New Ranch & Agriculture Tour Packets Take Groups Behind The Scenes

SANTA MARIA, CA—Here in the heart of California's Central Coast, nature's bounty is evident at virtually every turn, with vineyards and strawberry fields unfurling over rolling hills, and picturesque ranches unfolding along country roads. Yet there is even more than meets the eye in the Santa Maria Valley, as revealed in the new "Santa Maria Valley Ranch & Agriculture Tours" complimentary reference packet available to groups free through the Santa Maria Valley Visitor & Convention Bureau by contacting gina@santamaria.com or calling 800-331-3779 ext. 815.

Where did all the wild horses go? How is produce prepared for shipping? What is the secret to Santa Maria Style Barbecue? These are just some of the intriguing questions answered by the behind-the-scenes group tours detailed in the new reference packet, which is bursting with the freshest information on tours, prices, and contacts for more than 15 unique group-oriented attractions.

"The Santa Maria Valley boasts an extraordinary diversity of farming and ranching experiences, many of which have opened their doors to group tours in response to increased interest in culinary tourism and eco-tourism," said April Tunnell, manager of the Santa Maria Valley Visitor & Convention Bureau. "Our new packet makes it easy for groups to see what's available, and to make some magical discoveries at our local farms, ranches and wineries."

One such discovery is the **Return to Freedom American Wild Horse Sanctuary** in Lompoc, a 310-acre ranch established to save the American Wild Horse. The sanctuary is also home to Spirit, the stallion used as an inspiration and model for the artists and animators during the making of the 2002 DreamWorks animated film *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*. Ninety-minute "Sanctuary Tours" (\$20 per person requested donation) and three-hour "Wild Horse Walking Adventures" (\$50 per person requested donation) include horse demonstrations and talks on herd dynamics, social structure and survival. Tours take place April through October on the first and third Saturdays of each month. Advance reservations are required. Visit www.returntofreedom.org for more information.

Another "cool" experience is **Agro-Jal Cooling** in Santa Maria, where groups of up to 30 people enjoy tours of this extraordinary produce cooling and preparation facility. Owned by the Maldonado family, local farmers for more than 40 years, Agro-Jal Cooling exhibits the pride and technique in growing, packing and shipping produce from the field to the table. Tours are free, and availability depends on timing of harvest schedules. For information, call (805) 348-3600.

Meanwhile, **The Luffa Farm** in Nipomo is a small, family-run operation and one of the few growers of luffa in the United States. Visitors learn that luffa is a natural non-abrasive sponge that is hand-tended and harvested daily. The luffa plants are at their best late spring through October, but the farm is open year-round on Wednesdays through Sundays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The Luffa Farm can accommodate small group tours, and advance reservations are appreciated. Visit www.theluffafarm.biz for more information.

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Just minutes from downtown Santa Maria, **Rancho Miranda** is a lush 10-acre horse ranch nestled among rolling hills, orchards and vineyards. Visitors to the estate enjoy a tour of a working horse ranch and stables with more than 30 breeds; blacksmithing demonstrations; a five-acre Garden Event Center with arbors, gazebos and flower gardens; and cooking demonstrations on the technique and history of the famed Santa Maria Style Barbecue. Group tours are available on weekdays from May through September. Cost varies depending on number of participants. Visit www.rancho Miranda.com for more information.

At **Euforia Flowers** in Nipomo, guests learn how more than 70 colors of long-stem roses are grown and selected. They also visit the packing shed, where they see the cooling and hand-grating processes for the crop, and how roses are packaged and shipped all over the world. Tips on caring for home-grown roses are also shared. Private tours, averaging 40 minutes, are available year-round, Monday through Friday, for groups of 15 to 40 people. Tours are free as long as groups buy a total of at least \$50 worth of roses. Fresh-cut roses are available for purchase straight from the cooler for \$7 per dozen. Advance reservations are required. Visit www.euforiaflowers.com for more information.

In nearby Santa Ynez Valley, two farms showcase the magic of lavender, which is used to make everything from potpourri to soap, essential oils to culinary accents. **Clairmont Farms** in Los Olivos features six acres of organically grown lavender, where planting and design are modeled after traditional French methods. The best time to visit is May through October, when the lavender is in bloom, but the farm is open year-round. Tours are free and can be customized for groups of up to 60 people. Visit www.clairmontfarms.com for information.

Luvland Farms in Santa Ynez, owned by famed entertainment journalist Rona Barrett, also showcases the art of lavender cultivation and distilling. Group tours are scheduled on a case-by-case basis, and a donation to the Rona Barrett Foundation is requested. Visit www.luvlandfarmslavender.com or www.missronaslavender.com for information.

Strawberry fields seem to truly go on forever in the Santa Maria Valley, and **Naturipe Berry Growers** is one of the country's oldest and largest marketers of fresh strawberries and strawberry products. Groups of 30 or more are invited to take free tours of fragrant fields and to enjoy a behind-the-scenes glimpse into farming operations, harvesting, production and cooling facilities. Advance reservations are required. Visit www.naturipe.com or call (805) 310-9064 for information.

The Santa Maria Valley's world-class wineries also offer groups a memorable and informative taste of the region. **Cottonwood Canyon Winery & Vineyard** offers guided group tours of its wine caves—the first such caves built in Santa Barbara County—while **McKeon-Phillips Winery** welcomes groups of 20 or more to experience a wine and food pairing class led by vintner, artist and chef Ardison Phillips. Visit www.santamaria.com and click on “Visitor Info” for more information on local wineries.

In addition to the “Santa Maria Valley Ranch & Agriculture Tours” reference packet, the Santa Maria Valley Visitor & Convention Bureau also provides information on accommodations, meeting facilities and other group-oriented services

“We have something for groups of all shapes, sizes and interests,” Tunnell said. “Our farm and ranch tours are really just the tip of the iceberg.”

Serving the greater Santa Maria Valley in the heart of California's Central Coast, the Santa Maria Valley Visitor & Convention Bureau is a nonprofit association that facilitates local tourism and provides information on the region's many attractions and visitor services. Famed for its fine wines, natural wonders, agricultural heritage and flavorful barbecue, the Santa Maria Valley offers a broad range of cultural, sporting and historical experiences. For information on lodging, dining, tours, attractions and events, please contact the Santa Maria Valley Visitor & Convention Bureau at 800-331-3779, or visit www.santamaria.com

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