

Napa Valley Register

Connolly Ranch expands its offerings for kids



Chef Michael Chiarello will create a “dirt to dine” feast Sept. 4, at an inaugural fundraiser to support the educational programs offered by Napa’s Connolly Ranch.

The ranch recently became an independent nonprofit when it separated from the Land Trust of Napa Valley. The Land Trust, who still owns the ranch land, leases it for \$1 per year to the newly established Connolly Ranch Education Center.

Bob Pallas, Connolly's executive director and chairman of the board, spoke about the ranch becoming its own nonprofit as it will now get to focus on expanding its menu of educational programs.

"It's been our goal to be a greater benefit to the community," he said.

Some of the changes to programming can be seen in the summer camps and preschool classes at the ranch.

Eileen Gordon Chiarello, wife of Michael, was the first board member to join the newly created nonprofit. She brought both her experience working with educators and creating curriculum as well as that as a mom herself, to the ranch's programs.

The new Dirt to Dine adventure camp "was Eileen's brainchild," according to Pallas. The week-long camp teaches kids ages six to 11 from where their food comes and how it is prepared. Mornings are spent sourcing ingredients — milking goats, collecting eggs, picking berries, harvesting vegetables — while afternoons are consumed by lessons in how to prepare a meal with that day's fodder.

The camp goes a step beyond teaching kids from where food comes from. On day four of the program, "Harvesting Summer Vegetables," campers learn about garden chores and composting. On day two, "Fruit, Seeds, Nuts & Honey," they get a crash course in the basics of beekeeping.

Each day's topic, which also includes "Dairy," "Chicken, Eggs and Broth" and "Grains, Flower and Adobe Oven Pizza," provides an understanding of how to cultivate the food source, how and when to harvest and a way to prepare it.

The afternoons at Dirt to Dine are filled with cooking and baking the morning's foraged ingredients. The staff carries credentials like trained chef, baker, author and education director. Pallas highlights the rarity of having such a dynamic, yet kid friendly, group acting as camp counselors.

Summer camps aren't the only area that have seen an expansion in programming. The preschool, which used to be run by Napa Parks and Recreation, is now in the hands of the team at Connolly Ranch. The ranch has added parent-involved classes such as Sounds of Silence and Natures Play. Both programs are an hour long one day a week.

More traditional preschool programs for children ages 3 to 5 are available as well.

Between revamped camp and preschool offerings and increased field trip traffic, Pallas said Connolly Ranch saw 14 percent growth in visitors last year, equaling about 3,000 guests. As for the reason behind the growth, Pallas hypothesized, "I think word is getting out that our camps are pretty darn fun."

The third component of achieving the ranch's mission to "connect children with nature through farm-based environmental education programs" is hosting student field trips from schools all over the Bay Area. To reach as many kids as possible, Connolly Ranch often subsidizes visits and even transportation costs for schools that can't afford the trip.

Pallas said the ranch depends on donations to cover those costs.

The funds received from Dinner on the Farm with Michael Chiarello will be used to supplement the government grants and profits from day camps and preschool programs.

“The farm-based educational programs at Connolly Ranch are critically important in growing a generation of agriculturally and food literate youth,” Chiarello said. “They deserve our total support as a community, especially given the role the Napa Valley plays in sharing culinary and agricultural traditions with the rest of the country. I’m honored to be involved with Connolly Ranch and its mission.”

Chiarello and his team have created a special menu for the event, which will take place in the gardens of the farm, and will be accompanied by breads and pastries from Model Bakery. Napa Valley wines will be served as local band Silverado Pickups entertains.



Thursday, August 20, 2011