

CHARMED IN CHAMA

HIGH IN THE SOUTHERN ROCKIES OF NORTHERN NEW MEXICO, TROUT STALKER RANCH REJUVENATES THE LAND WHILE PROVIDING A REFUGE FOR GUESTS TO REJUVENATE THEIR SPIRITS.

BY SUSAN L. EBERT

W

hen you come to the fork in the road, take it.—Yogi Berra

Berra's words ring in my ears as I follow the winding ranch road past Trout Stalker Ranch's main gate, following my texted instructions to turn right at the fork in the road. I've already been startled by the vintage Highway Patrol car alongside the ranch road, its rooftop lights and headlamps flashing at my approach, so I'm not completely surprised when the fork in the road turns out to be, well, a giant fork. It's just an example of the whimsical appreciation of the

arts that's woven into the fabric of Trout Stalker Ranch.

Ashlyn Perry, who co-owns Trout Stalker Ranch with her husband Dan Perry, helps me unload my gear from the sturdy 4x4 Jeep I've rented in Albuquerque earlier that day, and we clamber up the steps to the wide deck of the Beck Cabin, which will be my base for the next few days.

"The wildlife viewing from this porch is amazing," Ashlyn says. "You can often see vast herds of elk drifting through, as well as deer and an incredible variety of birds." I comment that wild turkeys are a spirit animal of mine, and as if on cue, a flock of wild Merriam's turkeys, numbering 30 or more, ambles into view in the Chama Valley below us, their spectacular plumage glinting in the afternoon sun.

A good omen, indeed. Over the course of the next few days, I would marvel at hundreds of elk flowing through the valley, as well as more wild turkeys, white-tailed and mule deer, fox, myriad bird species, and shimmering wild trout feeding in the river.

THE ACCIDENTAL RANCHERS

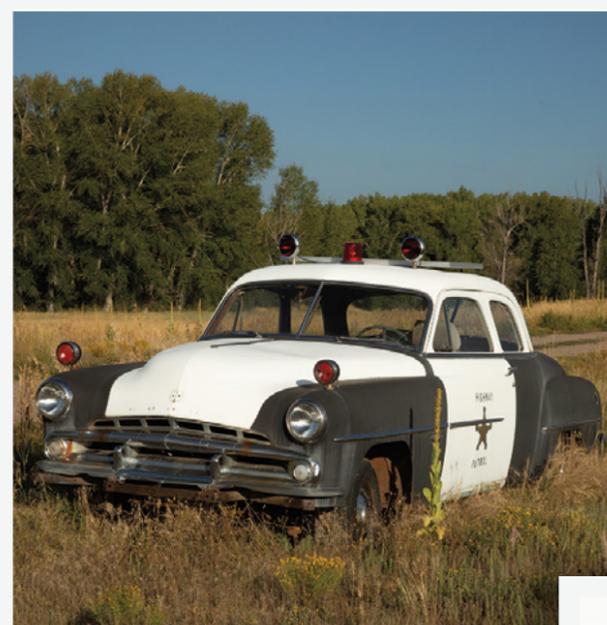
Ashlyn and Dan, Texans who came to New Mexico by way of Santa Fe, originally bought 335 acres in 2011 along the Chama River, as a getaway and fly-fishing retreat. But when they learned that a real estate magnate was planning to purchase a large tract along the Chama River for a development of "ranchitos" with an airstrip, golf course, and country club, they reached a decision point—a fork in the road, so to speak—that would forever change the course of their lives.

"This is great habitat for a lot of threatened species," says Dan. "All of this, all along the river bottom, would have been destroyed. It would have pushed the wildlife out of this area." The couple determined to purchase the land themselves to prevent that from happening—while protecting more than 1,000 acres of their 1,500-acre holdings from development in perpetuity with a conservation easement.

The Perrys didn't limit themselves to only protecting what was behind their ranch fences, however.

Sunset view from the deck of the Beck Cabin at Trout Stalker Ranch.





"In 2012, we started the process of getting the Chamita cleaned up through a partnership with then-New Mexico Governor Susana Martinez's administration," Ashlyn says, "to get capital outlay for Chama to build a new wastewater treatment facility, which took three years to build. As of 2017, clean water started flowing down the Chamita!"

While working to enhance the land and the four miles of the Chama and Chamita rivers flowing within their property's boundaries for fish, wildlife, and birds, the Perrys learned that adding Southern bison and utilizing rotational grazing to mimic the natural migration of buffalo herds could also help heal the land, as the bison aerate the soil with their hooves, fertilize it with their manure, and stimulate the emergence of healthy young growth of native grasses. In addition, they've added Scottish Highland cattle (bred to withstand cold winters) and Mangalitsa pigs that grow thick, woolly coats. They raise heritage turkeys for meat, and chickens to provide fresh eggs. Utilizing organic farming methods, they grow their own hay for the ranch's livestock.

"We quickly coined the term 'accidental ranchers,' as we realized we knew nothing about ranching when we started out," says Ashlyn. "We immersed ourselves in ranching and holistic land management to see how we could improve the land for the animals, for the people, and for the future."

As the Perrys nurtured the rivers and the land, it steadily began to heal. Birds returned in great number; the ranch's birding list now includes more than 200 species. The Chama and Chamita rivers, once too warm and unoxxygenated to hold fish, chortle merrily over rocky runs and lie cold and still in deep pools, creating blue-ribbon trout streams holding slick rainbow and brown trout.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: One of Trout Stalker's Scottish Highland cattle; the vintage Highway Patrol car on the main road; trail riding into the Edward Sargent Wildlife Management Area; a gigantic "Fork in the Road," a bison calf with its watchful mama; one of the ranch's heritage turkeys; Ranch Manager Brittany Wallace leads a trail ride; ribeye steak at Local Restaurant (also owned by the Perrys); and Dan and Ashlyn Perry with their dog, Rowdy.

ON THE RANCH

Trout Stalker Ranch offers several different guest accommodations; all stellar, each unique. The Beck cabin and the Nova cabin—two sleek completely off-grid, solar-powered guest cabins—overlook Lake Dos Hermanas, a stocked lake on the western side of the ranch. Each has two ensuite bedrooms and banks of oversized windows that allow for panoramic vistas over the lake, valley, and mountains. Another lodging option, The Loft—an ultra-modern three-bedroom house—nestles up to the Chama River and includes amenities such as a wood-burning stove, media room, and full laundry. All three include fully equipped kitchens.



Fill your days with a plethora of fee-based à la carte outdoor activities. Lead Fishing Guide Kelley Ruppert, who also serves as the ranch's hospitality manager, can "hook you up" with half-day or full-day fly-fishing excursions on the ranch, as well as off-ranch guided fishing expeditions. Trail rides, led by Ranch Manager Brittany Wallace, range from an hour-and-a-half on-ranch ride to an all-day backcountry excursion into the adjacent 20,209-acre Edward Sargent Wildlife Management Area. You can also schedule time on the shooting range or book a guided birding hike.

Naturally, free opportunities abound as well; opt for the hour-long complimentary farm tour, led by one of the Perrys or Livestock Foreman Trisha Rohs, to learn more about the bison and other farm animals, the acequia-irrigated grasslands, and the regenerative land practices employed so that agriculture can work hand-in-hand with enhancing wildlife diversity. Simply roaming the property with camera or binoculars can provide hours of delight, as the ranch comprises several different zones (aquatic, dry uplands, riparian woodlands, and wetland meadows) each with its own community of wild inhabitants—including a mountain lion I watched bound across the valley in pursuit of prey.

Above all, Trout Stalker Ranch is a working laboratory of sorts, demonstrating all that can be accomplished when folks work harmoniously with wildlife, agriculture, livestock, and water management and with each other. The results of this healing, restorative process is evident throughout the ranch's holdings and flows through Ashlyn and Dan to each member of their welcoming staff.

INTO TOWN

Difficult as it might be to set foot off the ranch, knowing that Trout Stalker Ranch Chef Matt Wallace is also the executive chef at Local, a restaurant just two miles up the road in the delightful village of Chama (population 998), will coax you to venture into town. Local, also owned by the Perrys, features Wallace's New Western farm-to-table cuisine in a restored building on Chama's main drag, Terrace Avenue. A large wood-fired pizza oven anchors the open kitchen, while the airy dining area reflects the Perrys' eclectic modern-meets-Old West style. Wallace expresses his craft in everything from the handmade pizzas to exquisite steaks and fresh-caught fish, and his imaginative "campfire crumble" of wood-smoked peaches and crumb topping, served in a small cast-iron skillet and crowned with homemade vanilla gelato, elevates campfire cookery to a triumph.

You'll also want to amble around Terrace Avenue, making sure to browse the collection of top Western designer goods at Dancing Wolf/Red Foxx. If time allows, you can book a half-day or full-day trip on the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, a narrow-gauge steam-powered railroad originally built in 1880 to haul silver from the mines of the San Juan Mountains. The trains run daily from May 23 to October 18, 2020 and climb over the exhilarating Cumbres Pass which, at 10,015 feet, ranks as the highest elevation reachable by rail in the U.S.

However you choose to fill your days outdoors in this 7,800-foot elevation natural nirvana, come nightfall you'll welcome tumbling into the soft sheets in your Trout Stalker bed as coyote song provides the soundtrack to restorative slumber and the harmonious healing vibrating on this magical ranch flows deep into your spirit.

Trout Stalker Ranch: (844) 448-7688; chamatroutstalkers.com.

WOMEN IN RANCHING

Concurrent with my visit to Trout Stalker, the Western Landowners Alliance held "Circle 5" of its Women in Ranching initiative at Trout Stalker Ranch. Now in its fifth year, the first WinR Circle convened in 2016 at Paicines Ranch in California, founded by Paicines' Director of Education and Innovation Sharing, Elaine Patarini. After its first couple years, the WinR program found a permanent home under the umbrella of the Western Landowners Alliance.

In founding WinR, Patarini realized that these women often work in a male-dominated business, in tremendous isolation on vast rural tracts, and without a support network of peers. WinR addresses that need, giving ranch women the opportunity to connect with one another, to foster leadership, to strengthen themselves, and to nurture the next generation of women ranchers.

WinR includes working-lands women throughout the West, and helps them develop a support system of peers. The host ranches move around the country, so that women from different regions can have the opportunity to participate. Each Circle numbers about 20 women, who come together for three days to help create opportunities for leadership and skills development; to build a strong peer network in support of personal growth and self-care; and to promote best-practices land management techniques that sustain whole and healthy lands.

Aiding Patarini with the facilitation of the Circle 5 event were Virginie Pointeau, a Santa Fe-based communications specialist, and Stephanie Holdenreid of Equine Encounters, who led the horse interaction seminars. Instruction included both classroom-based sessions and workshops afield, such as a soil health workshop led by Cathy O'Neill, an Area Resource Conservationist for the Natural Resource Conservation Service. Amanda Fiorino of Wild Earth Medicine led morning yoga sessions and taught attendees how to craft dreamcatchers.

Trout Stalker's own Ashlyn Perry and Brittany Wallace served as both hosts and participants, with Livestock Foreman Trisha Rohs and then-Head Wrangler Carmen Taylor also attending.

Amy Violette, an attendee from Resolana Farms in Coyote, New Mexico, sums up her WinR Circle 5 experience by saying: "Being part of Circle 5 was life-changing. Spending the weekend with like-minded women—hearing stories, sharing resources, and learning from their experiences—has helped me feel more confident as a rancher. I now have a network of 20-plus women I know I can call with anything—ranch or personal. I don't feel so alone out here anymore; I feel heard, supported, and encouraged. It's empowering, and my life will never be the same."

Other attendees came from California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. Participants ranged in age from their twenties to their sixties—each bringing an open mind, a passion for the land, and a burning desire to become the best land stewards they could be. These incredible women—strangers when they first met—would become lifetime friends and professional resources for each other by the time they parted three days later as a result of this profoundly impactful program.

For more information about WinR and how to participate, visit westernlandowners.org/women-in-ranching and follow Women in Ranching on Facebook at facebook.com/WomenInRanchingWLA. **SLE**



OPPOSITE PAGE: Yellow-headed blackbirds are among the more than 205 species of birds that have been sighted at Trout Stalker Ranch. The ranch's goal is to become a Certified Bird-Friendly Ranch through the National Audubon Society.

THIS PAGE: Amy Violette of Resolana Farms, a WinR Circle 5 attendee, shows off her first-ever trout on a fly. Below, the women of Circle 5 gather around the campfire as nightfall approaches.

