

River Ranch Lodge embraces laid-back



The River Ranch Lodge's patio is along the Truckee River. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Susan Wood

ALPINE MEADOWS – There's something about running water when it's time to chill and go with the flow of life.

And that flow may involve a cold drink on a warm summer day with picturesque surroundings.

That's a key reward involved in a stay at the River Ranch Lodge on Highway 89 about 3 miles north of Tahoe City. The small, 19-room cozy lodge is situated right on the Truckee River. It's hard to imagine getting any closer.

And now is the time to go if one enjoys the experience of leaning over the short stone wall from a riverside table as if diving into the water. It's not crowded now, which is unusual.



The bar and restaurant are inviting.

The Truckee River rafting companies have ceased operations because of the drought's effects on the region's iconic, windy river. The water level is low and getting lower to accommodate Lake Tahoe in the ebb and flow of the climate and environment.

So on a sunny, summer Sierra weekend afternoon, it's actually easy to get a table on their famed bar deck.

"We've definitely felt the effect (of less guest traffic). Normally, you couldn't come walking up to this bar and get served right away," bartender Jake Clinton said.

Others have also witnessed the change.

"That's the first thing we noticed when we got back to Tahoe. There were no rafts," said Kristine Schug, as she was pouring her Sonoma County Winery's Sauvignon Blanc for Homewood's Farm-to-Peak dinner earlier this month.

On any given Tahoe summer weekend, hundreds of people end their Tahoe City raft floats on the River Ranch deck, cramming the outside bar and food stand known for its River Rum Punch and mountain of gooey nachos.

On the Sunday morning during our stay, a morning hike starting a few miles up the road near the Alpine Meadows Ski Resort brought us much bang-for-the-buck scenery. It whet our appetite for a few mojitos, a beer and French fries on the deck with friends Roni and Brenda. The drinks were refreshing

and the fries hit the spot after having hiking snack food. (Of course, some would say French fries are a snack. To the four of us, they are a mandatory food group that's become an after-exercise ritual.)

I noticed the mound of not-your-average cheesy nachos order whiz by and briefly schemed about ruining my upcoming dinner scheduled in the formal dining room.

The smell of Tahoe pines blended with the different scents coming from the kitchen. Glasses were clinking at the bar. And the sun glistened on the rapids rolling over the rocks on the river next to our table and in the calm swimming hole. The night before, the patio provided a beautiful super-moonlight evening when we had the place and the adjacent low docks to ourselves – AJ included.

Life is good at the River Ranch Lodge. It's a perfect launching pad to many activities for those who want to do more than sit on the deck or docks, even though that's an attractive option.



The Truckee River is calm and shallow just before the

lodge.

Location, location, location

Beyond the nearby hiking trails west in the rugged Granite Chief Wilderness that gives Squaw Valley one of its famed backdrops, the River Ranch is plopped right between the meandering bike trail that follows a historic railway and the river where many people take their own inner tubes or small rafts.

The recent closure of the commercial rafting operations has given the Truckee River Taxi Co. a boost in business because floaters need a ride back to their vehicles.

“We can even fit dogs in here,” shuttle driver Derek Watson pointed out, looking back in the van where he’s crammed up to 10 inner tubes. The cost is \$15 a person. The service is filling a gap in a creative way, much the same way the River Ranch has planned events like pool parties to pique the interest of Tahoe summer enthusiasts.

“If anything, I think a lot of people are looking for a place to go swimming,” River Ranch Lodge General Manager Rob Curtis said of guests who stay or drop in to eat, drink and dunk in the adjacent watering hole.



Rooms have a Tahoe-feel to them.

The inn, built in 1888, was once a stopping off point for railway traffic. A landmark sign is embedded on a rock next to the bike trail near the lodge to remind guests of its historic past. Once called the Deer Park Inn, the structure was demolished following its demise during the Great Depression and rebuilt in the 1950s to accommodate dignitaries during the 1960 Olympic Games at Squaw Valley about a mile away.

Through the years, some hints of its history remain intact. Ten tennis courts from more than a half-century ago are still situated behind a few monstrous summer homes across the river from the lodge.

Nowadays, rooms in the quaint lodge are not swank or polished – but that's part of their charm. The evolving renovations and upgrades made by private owners since the 1970s have provided what is needed to truly relax and enjoy the surroundings. Each room is comfortable, spacious and comes with basic amenities, but be mindful the Internet is slow for those needing that service. The mountain motif such as the bedspread and chair upholstery, light pine wood paneling, old cross country skis on the wall, log-cabiny bed frame and coat hanger along with tasteful wood-framed pictures reminds guests where they are staying. (Note: collected pine cones and fake wreaths are a little over the top in being imitation cute.)

The bathroom is small, but serves its purpose. I especially enjoyed using the wall heater and imagined how comfortable this would be for a winter stay. (Another note of improvement for housekeeping: the towels are rough and smell chlorinated.)

That aside, the place has its own unique qualities. We laughed at the notion of opening our window at the cushy easy chair in the room to order drinks in Room 11. It butts up behind the bar. Modest guests may want a different room or run the risk of flashing people bellied up to the bar facing the windows. One of the busy bartenders smiled and pointed out the window screen as inhibiting that ordering idea.

But that was all in good, laid-back fun.

The staff at the River Ranch Lodge is extremely accommodating. One front desk clerk even printed out the hiking map I emailed to her when I failed to find mine.

The good service spans from the front to the back, where a friendly wait staff scurries around the elegant dining room. A giant stone fireplace behind the indoor bar was a reminder winter is not far away. The menu has been updated to include Skuna Bay salmon and Cervena elk, but vegetarians may want to partake in a mix of appetizers and sides. (I probably could have been satisfied with that plate of nachos earlier if not for enjoying the ambiance of the dining room with a river view.)



The couscous is quite good.

The tomato-bisque soup was not the best part of the meal, as it tasted like someone just poured a can of tomato sauce in a bowl. The couscous entrée with what seemed to be a hint of saffron was good, despite the squash blossoms being nothing special. Nonetheless, the beets were perfectly cooked. Plus, the wilted greens were a tasty accompaniment.

The heirloom tomato salad plate presentation was beautiful. The burrata cheese represented a nice creamy alternative to the usual mozzarella cheese. However, the tomatoes themselves

didn't seem as fresh or sweet as they could be in the height of their season. The friendly waitress returned to tell us the tomatoes came from Sacramento Valley, and not a farmers' market. From that, it wasn't surprising that the bread Kae and I really liked originated from "random food distributors".

The wine list was vast, with some Sierra Nevada foothill varietals mixed with Napa and Sonoma favorites. We were pleased with a really good Zinfandel from Amador, the land of Zin.

It stands out when a hotel guest is able to stroll to a nice restaurant instead of a chain eatery or driving somewhere.

And here at the River Ranch as in many places in Tahoe, a diner may see a variety of people of different ages and attire. One man donned a tank top, while a family came in dressed for the occasion.

Dinner entrée prices range from \$19 to \$34. Room rates on the weekend start at \$132 per night, with some accommodating dogs.

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If you go:

River Ranch Lodge

2285 River Road (corner of Alpine Meadows Road and Highway 89)
530.583.4264.