

Osmosis: A sanctuary for the mind and body



Relaxation comes in many forms at Osmosis in Sonoma County.

By Susan Wood

FREESTONE – Like a child within, tears rolled down my face as I listened to the sentimental music through headphones while lying wrapped in a robe resting in a hammock enveloped by nature.

I was smitten with surprise and awe that I could be so moved by my setting – and in one single chunk of my day, the nastiness of a tumultuous world left me. It was only replaced by beauty, goodness and peace.

Indeed, there is something naturally spiritual about this

Sonoma County haven called Osmosis.

The Field of Hammocks, a fairly new amenity at the Japanese-inspired day sanctuary, granted me the opportunity of something I rarely do – to just be.

It helped to immerse myself in a state of relaxation after enjoying a massage. On the 5-acre grounds, a guest may opt for one of a number of different types of massages in either the main building or in the pagodas. I chose the latter as something entirely new to me. The small, tasteful shack sits above the river nestled in the lush greenery that provides a safe haven to many songbirds.



Pagodas offer a more remote, secluded setting for massages. Photo/Susan Wood

My senses were enhanced by the prospect of receiving the 75 minutes of healing touch from therapist Cari. As for my other senses, I chose lavender for aroma therapy.

It was warm that day, so the hut remained the perfect temperature. When the mercury drops, the small heater in the

room provides comfort along with a super soft face pillow.

And with the changing of the seasons, the end of drought would be especially inviting to those receiving or giving therapy in the pagodas. They have tin roofs, providing sound therapy when it rains.

Cari noted that Thursday through Saturday remains the busiest time in the week for Osmosis, with many coming from Sebastopol. The sanctuary offers memberships, with discounts for return customers, and hosts events that add even more goodwill to this tiny farm community a few miles from Occidental.

What's different in the last few years has been the steadiness of the clients through all the seasons.

"There's been no seasonal slowdown," she said.

Apparently, many are finding their way back to this innately spiritual place.

And appropriately so, according to the therapist.

"Osmosis found me," Cari said. She admitted her "workplace" of sorts is "the best job I've ever had" – especially when nature takes over.

"I love it when they go crazy," she said softly of the birds chirping outside. The hut is full of windows, so I had no trouble hearing them.

That's not the only wildlife she's encountered in the few years she has worked there. She saw a bobcat in the creek bed while having lunch on the patio. (Guests may opt for a box lunch filled with organic ingredients from a local, student-supported garden if they make a day of it between sessions.)

During my lunch, I saw a deer lying still across the creek bed. It looked as much at peace as the clientele who have

walked through the bamboo, koi-pond anchored meditation garden and walking path.

Osmosis celebrated its 30 years in business last year with a fond look at its modest beginnings. Founder Michael Stusser's love of meditation took him to Kyoto, Japan, in the 1980s to apprentice in traditional landscape gardening. He developed a passion for blending ecological sustainability with Zen meditation through healing practices.



Tranquility abounds throughout the grounds at Osmosis.
Photo/Susan Wood

Stusser turned his quest into reality in 1984 when he built a cedar enzyme bath with lumber recycled from a chicken coop on his friend's ranch in Sebastopol. A year later, he built a few more on his own property in Freestone. Today, the biomass cleansing remains popular – a surefire way to heat up the body in the cold winter months.

The spa menu has evolved through the efforts of 80 employees in this modest-looking complex. Retreats like What Truly Matters, wind and music-infused fundraisers and more services including a “forest bathing” treatment and other seasonal specials have been added over the years.

The tranquil grounds, which also include a mile-long nature trail, are covered with plants that are intended to provide a nurturing influence.

And sometimes with healing, there’s heartbreak.

Osmosis recently lost one of its founding influences – Zen priest Steve Stucky, the sanctuary’s longtime landscaper.

An altar is being erected to honor and embody the work of Stucky – with walking meditation instructions to experience the full magnitude of the Osmosis Day Spa Sanctuary.

With the urging of silence to clear the mind, the card at the altar will open with:

“Take a few long, slow and deep breaths. As you exhale, let go of all tension and let your attention flow deep into your belly, legs and feet.”

It will end with: *“You can feel truly at ease with yourself. If you can take one peaceful step, you can take two. If your steps are peaceful, the world will have peace.”*