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Oil of Olé

Now that California's olive oil has begun to outclass some of the once-dominant European varieties, there's no better time to take an olive tour of the lush and romantic Napa and Sonoma valleys. / By Sara Settegast Hare / Illustration by Karen Greenberg

McEvoy Ranch / The west Marin County hills glisten with more than 18,000 olive trees, all Tuscan varieties. With 80 acres under cultivation on 550 acres, McEvoy Ranch is the country's largest producer of estate-grown and -bottled certified organic olive oil.

The vision of Nan McEvoy, heir to the *San Francisco Chronicle* publishing dynasty, McEvoy Ranch profits from a long growing season in the cooler western hills not far from the Marin coast. The extra-virgin, cold-pressed oils produced at the ranch are rich in vitamin E, antioxidants, and "good" fats. And the flavors are fabulous—they are nutty, sophisticated oils.

The few who can snag an appointment for a tasting and tour are in for a singular treat. Once a modest dairy farm, McEvoy Ranch is now a magnificent place: The grounds are studded with eclectic buildings like the Chinese-style pagoda that serves as the "dining pavilion." A replica of a Victorian mansion exudes country charm, as do a smattering of fountains, gardens, and barns best suited to the gentlewoman farmer. Pointy Italian-cypress trees punctuate the landscape, and just about everywhere you turn, silvery olive trees shimmer.

Inside the tasting room, visitors view the olive press and maybe catch a glimpse of the fabulous kitchens and outdoor

hearths, designed with lavish entertaining in mind. *The Olive Harvest Cookbook*, cowritten by McEvoy Ranch chef Gerald Gass and published by Chronicle Books (\$35), is for sale in the gift shop along with soaps, beauty potions, and foods made with olive oil.

McEvoy Ranch also operates a retail location at the Ferry Building, the legendary food emporium on the Embarcadero in San Francisco.

5935 Red Hill Road, Petaluma. Tours by appointment only. Tel: 707-778-2307 or 707-778-0128 or mcevoyranch.com